



Guidance for Supporting Distressed and Vulnerable contacts

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This guidance provides information to support UKRI staff members who may deal with members of the public impacted by UKRI activity and who are very distressed. These contacts may need to be signposted to avenues of support, dependent on their needs and circumstances.
- 1.2 These issues may arise because UKRI has set out its commitment to promoting safe research and innovation environments, which are free from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, bullying, psychological abuse and physical violence, for all individuals that are employed on, participate in, or otherwise come into contact with, the research and innovation activities that we fund. Therefore, members of the public have contacted us and sought our intervention with concerns in their research organisations.
- 1.3 Such concerns may be raised to UKRI via a variety of routes. Whilst a staff member can listen to an individual's concerns, it is not their responsibility to get directly involved with providing support to the individual. This is particularly important where no legal duty of care to that person exists (e.g. allegations of abuse in a UKRI-funded organisation).
- 1.4 There are two existing UKRI policies which relate to safeguarding, which are outlined in this guidance note. The expectation is that this guidance will support staff to understand the existing routes of escalation and where they can seek support internally. This guidance is not intended to remove professional judgment or local expertise in signposting to the appropriate external escalation routes (i.e. to the organisation's Complaint / Grievance process) if staff are able and feel comfortable to.

2. What types of contact might UKRI receive that would fall under the scope of this guidance?

- 2.1 These may be contacts from a broad variety of sources, including (but not limited to):
 - Individuals who wish to lodge a complaint about UKRI or who are unhappy with the outcome of a UKRI process, including complaint handling.
 - Victims of bullying or harassment at an organisation funded by UKRI, complaining to UKRI about the handling or outcome of an investigation and wanting UKRI to intervene;
 - Those who have been abused but do not feel that they can report it to their organisations because they do not feel that they will handle the investigation appropriately and wanting UKRI to intervene because we are seen as independent;
 - Unsuccessful funding applicants (directly to UKRI or to research organisations that we fund) or to the Global Talent Visa process.
 - A distressed contact might be a person who states that they are finding it difficult to cope with their current circumstances (e.g. someone who makes a comment related to hurting themselves or says their experience is causing them upset).

3. Key principles:

- 3.1 All individuals involved in the research and innovation process have a role in creating safe and inclusive research and innovation environments.
- 3.2 As per the [UKRI Preventing Harm \(safeguarding\) in Research and Innovation policy](#), allegations about third party organisations must be made by the complainant to the employing organisation or the appropriate authority. They will be responsible for following their own investigation and disciplinary procedures. However, the organisation may also choose to conduct their own investigation if

appropriate. Whilst UKRI will not investigate, we might determine that wider assurance checks or further follow up is required in 'high' risk cases.

- 3.3 As a guiding principle, concerns must be raised to the right (appropriate) organisation to investigate and support should be obtained from the right body.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

- 4.1 it is important for staff to be able signpost individuals to appropriate processes / policies in a sensitive and supportive manner, if needed. However, importantly UKRI staff are not expected to offer direct support to the individual.
- 4.2 All staff should aim to document concerns in their area of work as part of routine good record keeping. Any record keeping must be made in adherence to the UKRI Data Protection policy [here](#) (i.e. the General Data Protection Regulations outlines six principles which underpin the handling of personal data). This will include making sure records are clear, accurate, timely and secure, concerns being raised with the right teams (as per the below) or information being reported on the Complaints electronic case management system.
- 4.3 HR are the key point of contact for the UKRI Safeguarding policy, which covers safeguarding issues related to UKRI's staff and events.
- 4.4 The Complaint team is the point of escalation for concerns unrelated to UKRI staff or events. They will signpost the person to the appropriate organisation to raise their concerns.
- 4.5 If reference is made to any sort of abuse, danger or self-harm, then please contact the UKRI HR or Complaints (as appropriate) as soon as possible.
- 4.6 Similarly if you are having difficulty managing interactions with an individual, please contact the UKRI HR or Complaints team (as appropriate) as soon as possible.
- 4.7 Line managers will support UKRI staff who are themselves impacted by distressing contacts.
- 4.8 UKRI has avenues of support that its staff can utilise to support their wellbeing.

5. If I am contacted by someone who is upset about something that took place during the course of an event or activity with UKRI involving a child, young adult or vulnerable adult, what should I do?

- 5.1 You must follow the 'UKRI Safeguarding Policy' on the Employment policies link [here](#).
- 5.2 This policy sets out UKRI's duty to protect children, young people and vulnerable adults including those who take part in events or activities either hosted by UKRI, in which UKRI participates, or in any other interactions.
- 5.3 The policy sets out when and how UKRI will act on safeguarding concerns. It explains that UKRI will ensure its employees are supported to meet their safeguarding responsibilities and requirements and with whom concerns should be shared.
- 5.4 This policy covers children, young people and vulnerable adults (a definition of these groups is contained in the policy).
- 5.5 Policy 'Appendix A – Guidance on how to raise or respond to concerns or allegations and disclosures' sets out the procedure to be followed if an employee has received a safeguarding concern.

6. What if I am contacted by someone who has concerns about an activity or staff member in a research organisation or third party organisation we work with?

- 6.1 Refer to the [UKRI Preventing Harm \(safeguarding\) in Research and Innovation policy](#)

- 6.2 This policy focuses on taking all reasonable steps to prevent and address exploitation, abuse and harm within UKRI-funded research and innovation activities.
- 6.3 Allegations of exploitation, abuse and harm must be reported by the complainant to the employing or enrolling organisation of the person against whom the allegation is being made and/or the appropriate authorities. It is the employing or enrolling organisation's responsibility to investigate, not UKRI's, except where UKRI is the employer.
- 6.4 If an allegation is made directly to a member of UKRI staff, we will encourage the individual making the allegation to report it to the employing or enrolling organisation of the individual against whom the allegation is being made, or to the relevant authority
- 6.5 Section 8 of the policy provides that if UKRI identifies a risk of exploitation, abuse or harm relating to an application for funding or a UKRI funded activity through independent means, UKRI will raise concerns with the employing or enrolling organisation. UKRI will work with the organisation(s) to identify an appropriate course of action to mitigate the risk(s).

7. In practical terms, what should I do if I am contacted by a distressed or vulnerable member of the public about another organisation (e.g. bullying and harassment)?

- 7.1 If a staff member receives information from a distressed contact, they may find it useful to follow the below process:
- Listen to the person's concerns. This will help you to understand what is causing the distress, and identify any aspects which are within our remit to respond to.
 - If you need additional internal support dealing with the query, ask the contact if they are happy for you to make notes and pass them on to colleagues. Any record keeping must be done in adherence to the UKRI Data Protection policy;
 - Do not jump to solutions. Your role is not to act as a counsellor or a GP, so please don't attempt to offer advice in relation to health concerns;
 - Explain you will be seeking support from colleagues (Line Manager / Complaints team).
- 7.2 If the concern relates to a member of UKRI staff member or event, please raise the concerns with a member of the HR team. Follow the UKRI Safeguarding policy as per Section 5 above.
- 7.3 If the concerns do not relate to the UKRI staff member but a third party organisation and you feel comfortable continuing to engage with the individual, please advise them that they need to raise their concerns through that organisation's established processes (e.g. Complaints or Grievance policy). Referring the person to the UKRI Preventing Harm in Research page [here](#) for further information.
- 7.4 If the individual is very distressed or refers to abuse (physical, sexual or psychological), then do refer them to the UKRI Complaints team on complaints@ukri.org or email these concerns to the team directly as soon as possible. This approach should also be taken if you are spending significant time dealing with their communication.
- 7.5 The Complaints team will respond to the individual directly, normally within 48 hours.
- 7.6 If you have any significant concerns related to risk harm to an individual / others, then you should contact the above teams (as appropriate) as soon as possible for advice.
- 7.7 Please see below Appendix A - Flowchart showing routes to raise and escalate concerns internally, which summarises this.

8. If I am contacted by a member of the public who is upset and disappointed about a decision that UKRI has made (e.g. A funding decision or Global talent visa outcome), what should I do?

- 8.1 As general principles again for handling difficult contacts:
- Listen to the person's concerns. This will help you to understand what is causing the distress, and identify any aspects which are within our remit to respond to.

- If you need additional internal support dealing with the query, ask the contact if they are happy for you to make notes and pass them on to colleagues. Any record keeping must be done in adherence to the UKRI Data Protection policy;
- Do not jump to solutions. Your role is not to act as a counsellor or a GP, so please don't attempt to offer advice in relation to health concerns;
- Explain you will be seeking support from colleagues (Line Manager / Complaints team).

8.2 If the individual talks about making a complaint, the individual can be referred to the UKRI 'Make a Complaint' page [here](#). You can also contact the UKRI Complaints team for further advice regarding our Complaints process on complaints@ukri.org or if you need support responding to the individual.

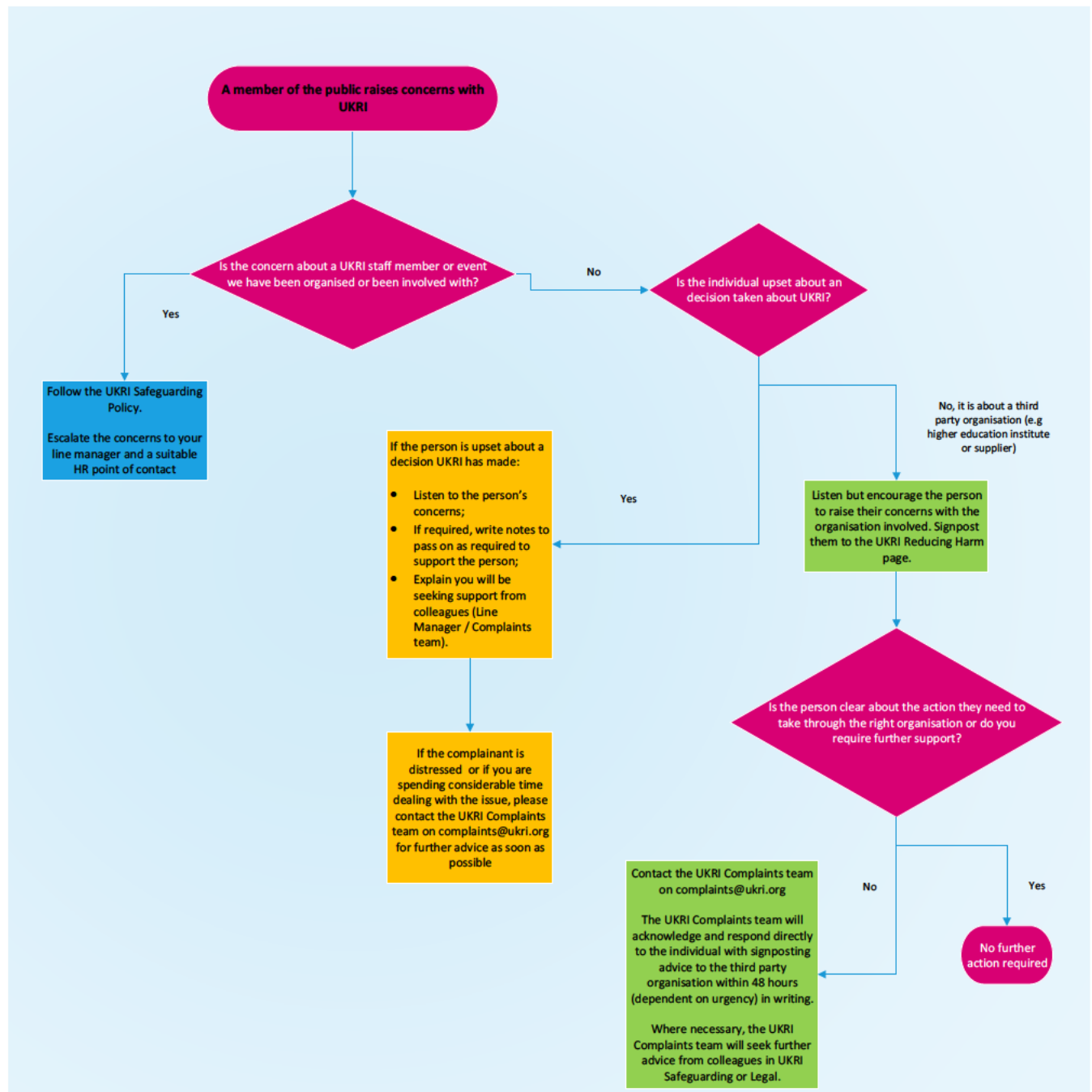
8.3 Of note, certain teams (e.g. funding teams) will regularly deal with upset / unhappy applicants following the announcement of grant decisions, therefore it is worth considering how staff are provided with the required skills to deal with such contacts and something managers should consider in terms of the skills development curriculum for that team.

9. What avenues of support do UKRI staff have if they have found dealing with an individual particularly upsetting?

9.1 You should never suffer in silence. Please speak to your line manager in the first instance and as soon as you feel that an issue is escalating. Often a debrief about a challenging conversation helps.

9.2 UKRI has several avenues of support including but not limited to the Employee Assistance Programme and Welfare Service. A link to further information is [here](#).

Appendix A – Flowchart showing routes to raise and escalate concerns internally



Appendix B – Guidance for the UKRI Complaints team

1 Risk assessment

- 1.1 As part of good risk management, the UKRI Complaints team should identify risk factors using the information conveyed and risk-assess the need for any immediate action that may be required based on the following key questions:
- Is the individual at risk of immediate harm? (i.e. are they in a safe place)
 - Does the person have access to support or advice (i.e. mental health support, national support services (Mind / Samaritans) or counselling)?
 - Is there the potential of significant reputational risk given the issues raised?
- 1.2 If the concern is escalated to the Complaints team, a brief risk assessment should be made to help support the role of the Complaints team. In order to make an assessment of risk, the Complaints member of staff should reference the UKRI Risk evaluation matrix (Annex 1) outlined in the [UKRI Risk Management Strategy 2020-2021](#). This provides a framework to assess the level of risk.
- 1.3 Dependent on the nature and urgency of the issue, advice may need to be obtained from the Legal, Research Integrity or Safeguarding team.
- 1.4 This includes circumstances where UKRI or the associated research organisation has reason to believe that a crime has been committed or that there is imminent risk of harm occurring, a report should be made to the appropriate authority, except in circumstances where there is a reasonable expectation that to do so would cause further harm to the victim/survivor.
- 1.5 If the risk assessment, reflects a lower level of risk, then the member of the Governance team will signpost the individual to the right organisation to raise their concerns to.
- 1.6 Issues related to higher education institutes or universities will reported as part of the agreed schedule of reporting to the Funding Assurance team anonymously.

2 Record keeping

- 2.1 If the concerns relate to an existing complaint and are raised directly with a member of the UKRI Complaints team, then a record of the interaction can be added directly to the electronic Complaints case management system by attaching an email to the case file.
- 2.2 Alternatively, any communication received will be filed as an enquiry on the UKRI Complaints management system, as appropriate.

**Appendix C – Example response from UKRI Complaints to individual
(To be adapted as necessary)**

Dear XX

We are sorry to learn of your concerns. As stated in our Complaints Policy (<https://www.ukri.org/about-us/policies-and-standards/complaints-policy/>), complaints against the actions / decisions made by the organisations that we fund are out of our scope. The University of XX is an independent legal entity and is responsible for dealing with complaints and grievances raised by its staff and students. UKRI is responsible for dealing with complaints made against UKRI staff, or complaints made in relation to the services the organisation provides.

We have not been designated as a prescribed body to escalate your concerns (Whistleblowing) to. Please see Gov.uk link about Whistleblowing [here](#).

This means we are unable to intervene in ongoing processes at the University of XX. We would encourage you to persist in trying to resolve the issues by following the relevant complaints and grievance policies set by the university. You should exercise your right to appeal to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) if you are dissatisfied following completion of the university's procedures. Other options available to you may include the Student Union or ACAS if this is a workplace issue.

Although legally we are limited in our ability to intervene in individual cases, UKRI is working at a systems level to tackle unfairness in research and innovation. Please see details about [here](#).

In addition, although our role does not allow us to intervene directly in individual cases, we do use insights from complaints and enquiries raised with us to feed into our audit programme of universities.

We have treated the issues you have raised in confidence.

Kind regards

UKRI Complaints team
complaints@ukri.org

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