



General  
Osteopathic  
Council

# Investigating Committee Decision-Making Guidance

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# **Investigating Committee Decision-Making Guidance**

## **Introduction**

This Guidance document sets out the statutory duties and regulatory function of the Investigating Committee (IC) in accordance with the Osteopaths Act 1993 (the Act) and the GOsC (Investigation of Complaints) (Procedure) Rules 1999 (the Investigation Rules).

This Guidance has been produced to improve both the quality and consistency of the IC decision-making when determining whether there is a case for the osteopath to answer. In achieving these objectives, the Guidance has been designed to provide a framework for decision-making by the IC but does not impact upon the Committee reaching decisions independently.

The GOsC legislation provides that the IC's role and function is performed in private. The guidance has been designed to ensure that the IC decision making is more fully understood by all parties involved in a fitness to practise investigation, which in turn will enhance the transparency of our procedures.

## **Equality and Diversity Statement**

The GOsC is committed to ensuring that processes for dealing with concerns about osteopaths are just and fair. All those involved in our processes are required to be aware of and observe equality and human rights legislation. Decision-making by the Committee should be consistent and impartial, and comply with the aims of the public sector equality duty.

## **Investigating Committee Constitution**

1. The General Osteopathic Council (Constitution of the Statutory Committees) Rules Order of Council 2009 stipulate that the IC shall consist of a maximum of 15 people who are lay persons and registered osteopaths appointed to the Committee by the General Council. The quorum of the IC shall be five, of which at least two must be lay persons and two must be registered osteopaths.
2. The Council appoints Chairs to chair proceedings of the Committee from the lay members' panel. If at any meeting of the IC, the panel Chair invited to chair the proceedings is absent, the members of the Committee at that meeting may nominate a lay person from among the members who are present, to chair that meeting.

## **Overview of the function of the Investigating Committee**

3. The IC meets in private and its discussions are confidential. The registrant and complainant do not attend the IC meeting nor are they represented at the meeting. Following the consideration of a case the IC can issue one of the outcomes below:
  - conclude that there is a case to answer before the Professional Conduct Committee or Health Committee
  - adjourn consideration of an allegation in order for further investigative enquiries to be undertaken by the Registrar
  - conclude that there is no case to answer
  - conclude that there is no case to answer and issue advice to the registrant.
4. The IC is not a fact finding committee and must only decide whether, in its opinion, there is a case to answer based on an assessment of the evidence and information placed before it. Section 20(9)(c) of the Act establishes the function of the IC. The IC is to investigate any allegation referred to it and to consider whether:
  - in the light of the information which it has been able to obtain and any observations made to it by the registered osteopath concerned, whether in its opinion, there is a case to answer<sup>1</sup>.

## **Conflict of Interest**

5. The IC must ensure fairness in its decision making at all times and the rules prevent a member of the IC considering a case at a committee meeting if it was considered by him/her in their capacity as Screener (a Screener is an osteopath member of the IC who decides if the concern should be referred to the IC). Conflict checks are also completed by committee members in advance of IC meetings so that potential conflicts of interest can be raised and considered by the GOSc in advance of a meeting and/or considered by the Committee at the meeting, following advice from the Legal Assessor.

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<sup>1</sup> Osteopaths Act 1993, section 20(9)(c)

6. Proceedings are considered unfair where there is actual bias, potential for bias or where there is the perception of bias. The test for bias is whether the fair minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, would conclude that there was a real possibility that the Committee was biased.
7. Examples of potential conflicts include:
  - close personal or professional relationship with any of the parties connected to a case which may affect a member's ability to consider the allegation fairly and impartially
  - personal interest in the outcome of a matter.

### **Investigating Committee Decisions**

8. The function of the IC is to determine whether there is **a case to answer**. This involves a consideration of two questions as set out at paragraph 9 below.
  9. When considering whether there is a case to answer, the IC should ask itself:
    - a. is there a **real prospect** of the alleged facts being proved before the Professional Conduct Committee (PCC)/Heath Committee (HC)?
    - b. if so, is there a **real prospect** that those facts would amount to the statutory ground:
      - i. conduct which falls short of the standard required of a registered osteopath (unacceptable professional conduct), or
      - ii. professional incompetence, or
      - iii. ability to practise is seriously impaired because of a physical or mental condition, or
      - iv. conviction (at any time) in the United Kingdom of a criminal offence.
  10. The real prospect test requires consideration of whether there is a genuine possibility of the matter being established by the PCC/HC as opposed to a remote or fanciful possibility.
  11. The IC should consider the likelihood of the allegation as alleged being found proved and the statutory ground being established by the PCC/HC.
- Note:** the particulars of the allegation refer to the separate charges alleged (the allegation being unacceptable professional conduct and /or professional incompetence etc).
12. In relation to the first question, where there is more than one particular alleged, the IC should give consideration to each particular **separately**.
  13. However, when deciding the second question, the proper approach is for the IC to consider whether together ie **cumulatively**, the particulars would amount to unacceptable professional conduct/serious professional incompetence etc.

14. The standard of proof applicable before the PCC/HC is the ordinary civil standard, namely the balance of probabilities and the GOsC has the burden of proving the facts before the PCC/HC.

### **Matters to Consider**

15. When considering whether there is a case to answer, the IC should have regard to the following:
- a. Whether there is a case to answer is a matter for the IC's judgement.
  - b. Each case will turn on its own facts – even if it bears similarities to other cases. The IC must exercise its judgement in each individual case.
  - c. It is not the IC's role to determine whether those facts are proved or to determine that they amount to the relevant allegation – that is the remit of the PCC or the HC.
  - d. The IC should consider each element of the allegation, to see whether there is evidence to support the facts alleged and whether those facts would amount to the statutory ground.
  - e. In applying the threshold criteria, the IC should bear in mind that matters that are not usually capable of amounting to unacceptable professional conduct, should generally not be referred to the PCC.
  - f. The IC should consider the particulars 'in the round' to ensure that they strike the right balance in terms of the case which the osteopath must answer.
  - g. In the unusual event the IC remains unsure about whether it is satisfied that the real prospect test is met, it should favour referral to the PCC.
16. If there are two or more separate allegations against a registrant before the IC (unacceptable professional conduct and health), then the IC should refer the allegations to the appropriate Committee.

### **Public Interest**

17. The IC should take into account the public interest when determining whether to refer an allegation to a hearing. The IC should consider whether the public interest requires that matters are fully and properly investigated and resolved at a hearing.
18. As part of the final stage assessment, the IC should also consider whether it is not in the public interest for the case to proceed further because of a special or sufficient reason. For example, because of the continuing ill health of the registrant; or the registrant appears to have full insight into the alleged conduct and undertaken remediation; or the allegations refer to matters that occurred many years ago.

## **Evidence**

19. The IC should consider all the information and evidence before it and evaluate the material in order to determine whether, in its opinion, this raises a case to answer. In doing so, the IC should not try to resolve significant conflicts of evidence. However, in assessing the weight of the evidence, the IC may take into account that there is other information/additional evidence that supports one version of a dispute over another. A conflict of evidence does not necessarily mean that the allegation should be referred to the PCC. The IC should bear in mind that where there is a plain conflict between the two accounts, either one of which may be correct, and on one account there is a real prospect that the matter could amount to unacceptable professional conduct, the conflict should be resolved by the PCC or HC. However, evidence that is fanciful, irrational, implausible or self-contradictory, as to render it unworthy of belief, may be rejected by the IC.
20. The IC must consider any evidence provided by the registrant before determining whether there is a case to answer. If the registrant has not provided evidence by the deadline but the information is received – the day before, or on the morning of the meeting before the IC considers the case – it is at the discretion of the IC whether to include this information or not. Either way, this should be specifically referenced in the IC's written decision.
21. For reasons of fairness the IC should not consider any evidence which has not been disclosed to the registrant prior to the IC meeting.

### **No case to answer – without advice**

22. If after consideration there is no realistic prospect of either the allegations being found proved by a PCC/HC or the statutory ground being established, the IC should close the investigation case.
23. When determining whether it is appropriate to close without advice the IC may, depending on the individual features of the case, be assisted by a number of factors including whether the registrant has remediated the conduct alleged, and whether there is any apparent insight on the registrant's part so that advice is not required.
24. The IC should be mindful of the impact closing a case can have on the Complainant and should ensure that there is sufficient reasoning to justify their decision-making.

### **No case to answer – advice**

25. There is no explicit power contained within the Act or the Investigation Rules which provides that the IC can issue advice to a registrant. However, in *Spencer v General Osteopathic Council*, Mr Justice Irwin considered there was 'nothing to prevent the PCC from giving advice' to a registrant where allegations have been made out, and which constitute a breach of the Osteopathic Practice Standards (OPS), but where neither professional incompetence nor unacceptable professional conduct is made out. Correspondingly, the IC may offer advice to a registrant in connection with his or her future conduct, performance or practice, where it is appropriate.

26. Any advice given should be relevant to the allegations that are being considered by the IC. The IC may also wish to consider the extent to which admissions have been made by the registrant when deciding whether advice is appropriate. The advice should be designed to ensure future compliance with the *OPS* and should clearly identify where the registrant needs to reflect on his or her future conduct or performance.
27. The IC should carefully consider whether specific advice can adequately deal with the issue. Advice may be appropriate where there is no real prospect of the facts amounting to unacceptable professional conduct or where there are no aggravating factors or there is some evidence the registrant's conduct has fallen below the standards expected of an osteopath but not so far below so that there is a realistic prospect of a PCC making a finding of unacceptable professional conduct.
28. If the IC decides advice is appropriate and proportionate, it should clearly set out what that advice should be. It should form part of the IC reasons for its decision, and be included in the outcome letter sent to the registrant.

**Note:** any advice issued does not affect a registrant's registration status and will not be recorded on the Register of Osteopaths as it is not a formal sanction, nor would any restrictions be placed on the osteopath's registration. However, the fact that advice was issued will become part of the registrant's fitness to practise history.<sup>2</sup>

### Threshold Criteria

29. The guidance on Threshold Criteria for Unacceptable Professional Conduct has been developed to assist the IC when considering whether or not there is a 'case to answer' for matters relating to unacceptable professional conduct.
30. The following are not usually capable of amounting to unacceptable professional conduct and should not generally be referred to the PCC:
- Complaints about note-taking and record-keeping which do not suggest incompetence or negligence of a high degree.
  - Complaints that do not fall within the statutory grounds of Section 20 of the Act.
  - vexatious complaints, where the Complainant:
    - repeatedly fails to identify the precise issue that he or she wishes to complain about
    - frequently changes the substance of the complaint or continually seeks to raise new issues
    - appears to have brought the complaint solely for the purpose of causing annoyance or disruption to the registrant.

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<sup>2</sup> See the GOsC Data Retention Policy



- Complaints that are anonymous and cannot be otherwise verified.
- Complaints in which the Complainant refuses to participate and/or provide evidence in which the allegation cannot be verified or proved.
- Complaints that relate to disputes between registrants and patients about fees or costs of treatment. Provided there is no allegation of dishonesty or intent to mislead.
- Complaints that:
  - seek to reopen matters which have been the subject of an employment tribunal or civil proceedings
  - seek to pre-empt or influence the outcome of other regulatory or civil proceedings
  - are within the jurisdiction of another regulator and should have been made to that regulator
  - complaints that amount to a difference of professional opinion. Provided the opinion is accepted as proper and reasonable by a responsible body of osteopaths who are skilled in that particular area of practice or the opinion is reasonably held and capable of withstanding logical analysis.
- Complaints that relate to employment disputes.
- Complaints about contractual disputes, including arrangements for lease of premises and facilities.
- Complaints relating to business disputes, providing there is no allegation of a breach of patient confidentiality or data protection issues, including:
  - passing off/similar sounding web domain names or trading names
  - patient poaching
  - matters arising from the break-up of a principal/associate relationship.
- Complaints about a registrant's personal life (including divorce proceedings) unless the complaint relates to abusive behaviour, violence or behaviour that brings the profession into disrepute.
- Complaints that have no public protection implications but are made simply on the basis that the Complainant is aware that the other party to a dispute is a registrant (eg boundary disputes between neighbours).
- The following motoring offences, provided that drugs or alcohol are not involved and there are no potential health issues:
  - parking and penalty charge notice contraventions
  - fixed penalty (and conditional offer fixed penalty) motoring offences.
- Penalty fares imposed under a public transport penalty fare scheme.

## **Unacceptable Professional Conduct**

31. Unacceptable professional conduct (UPC) is conduct which falls short of the standard of a registered osteopath. The standards of conduct and practice expected of a registered osteopath are contained in the OPS. The OPS outlines the safe, competent and ethical practice of osteopathy and it will be used as a guide when determining unacceptable professional conduct.
32. When exercising their judgement as to whether the facts found proved amount to unacceptable professional conduct, the IC should have regard<sup>3</sup> to the effect of whether, to an ordinary intelligent citizen such facts, if proved, would convey an implication of moral blameworthiness and a degree of opprobrium.
33. Case law has established the following principles regarding the concept of misconduct:
  - a. A breach of the OPS shall not be taken of itself to constitute UPC. A breach of the OPS is a starting point and is relevant, but it is not determinative of UPC and does not create a presumption of UPC. A breach of the OPS may be significant without making it UPC.
  - b. Not every minor error or isolated lapse will result in a case to answer.
  - c. In determining UPC the critical term is 'conduct'. 'Conduct' is behaviour or the manner of conducting oneself.
  - d. UPC is not a lower threshold than 'misconduct' in other health professions. To reach the threshold of UPC, the unacceptable conduct must be serious.
  - e. A single negligent act or omission is less likely to cross the threshold of UPC than multiple acts or omissions. Nevertheless, and depending on the circumstances, a single negligent act or omission, if particularly grave, could be characterised as UPC.

## **Professional Incompetence**

34. Professional incompetence indicates a standard of professional performance which is unacceptably low. A single incident of negligent treatment would be unlikely to constitute professional incompetence unless it was very serious.
35. Except in exceptional circumstances, professional incompetence should be based on consideration of a fair sample of the registrant's work.
36. A number of factors should be taken into consideration when determining if there is a realistic prospect that the facts would amount to professional incompetence, including:
  - the length of the period of the alleged professional incompetence
  - the number of patients concerned
  - a number of failings/shortcomings which may not be serious individually, but together might give rise to a pattern of incompetence
  - the seriousness of the alleged clinical failings.

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<sup>3</sup> Judicial guidance of Irwin J in *Spencer v General Osteopathic Council* [2012] EWHC 3147 (Admin)

## Convictions and Cautions

37. When an osteopath is convicted of a criminal offence in the United Kingdom, the IC is required to consider whether there is a real prospect that the PCC will determine the criminal offence has material relevance to the osteopath's fitness to practise osteopathy under Section 20 (1)(c) of the Act.
38. The IC should bear in mind the OPS which requires registrants to maintain public trust and confidence in the profession. The IC may conclude that there is no case to answer if it considers that there is not a real prospect that the offence has material relevance to a registrant's practice as an osteopath.
39. While each case is considered on its own merits, there are certain categories of cases that would engage the public interest and it is expected will be referred to a hearing before the PCC:
  - murder, manslaughter or offences against the person
  - sexual offences
  - fraud/dishonesty
  - criminal damage, theft, burglary etc.
40. A caution for a criminal offence or a criminal conviction received outside the UK should be considered as capable of amounting to an unacceptable professional conduct matter if it would be regarded as equivalent to an offence within the UK.

**Note:** If the IC concludes that a conviction has no material relevance to the registrant's fitness to practise as an osteopath, it may determine that there is no case to answer.

## Drink or Drug Related Offences

41. The GOsC policy for alcohol or drug related offences requires that where alcohol or drugs were involved in the commission of the offence there is the presumption that the Council will refer an allegation to the IC under section 20(1)(d) of the Act. A health assessment is not required when two or more of the following factors are present:
  - a. Where the level of alcohol found to be present in the registrant does not exceed:
    - 42 micrograms of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath, or
    - 96 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood, or
    - 128 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of urine.
  - b. This is the first offence involving alcohol or prescription drugs (or failure to provide a specimen of breath) since the registrant was first registered, or the first in the 10 year period preceding the offence now notified.
  - c. There are exceptional mitigating circumstances (for example, the registrant drove a car when over the limit, in a medical emergency)

## **Health**

42. A registrant's ability to practise as an osteopath may be seriously impaired if they are suffering from a physical or mental health condition. The IC will normally be provided with a recent health assessment report when health concerns have been raised. This report should confirm whether the registrant is currently suffering from a condition that, in the opinion of the medical assessor, could impair their fitness to practise. The health assessment report should assist the IC with their consideration as to whether there is a case to answer.

## **Standard of Conduct and Practice**

43. When deciding whether any alleged fact or set of facts may amount to an allegation, the IC should have regard to the standards set out in the OPS. These standards will apply to events that took place on or after 1 September 2012.<sup>4</sup>

## **Adjournments**

44. The IC should adjourn a case when it has insufficient evidence on which to reach a decision. It may also be appropriate for the IC to adjourn consideration of a case when additional concerns are apparent but there is inadequate information to suggest that these concerns have been properly investigated to enable the IC to determine whether there is a case to answer.
45. The IC should set out clearly in its reasons what additional information is required.

## **Amendments**

46. Particulars are drafted at an early stage in what is a dynamic investigative process. The IC should ensure that the particulars of concern are a fair and proper representation of the case. If the IC varies or amends an allegation to a material degree, the osteopath concerned should be given a further opportunity to make observations on the revised allegation before a final 'case to answer' decision is made.

## **Indemnity**

47. Osteopaths are required by law to have appropriate professional indemnity insurance (PII) in place. Section 37 of the Act states that a failure to comply with the appropriate indemnity arrangements may be treated as unacceptable professional conduct.
48. Osteopaths must have appropriate arrangements in place for patients to seek compensation if they suffer harm. The IC should consider whether a registrant had appropriate indemnity insurance during the period alleged and should not be persuaded merely by the fact that a registrant may have ceased working or has since obtained retrospective indemnity cover for the alleged period.

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<sup>4</sup> For events that occurred before this day, the IC should have regard to the Code of Practice (May 2005) and the Standard of Proficiency (2000)

## **GOsC Executive Recommendations**

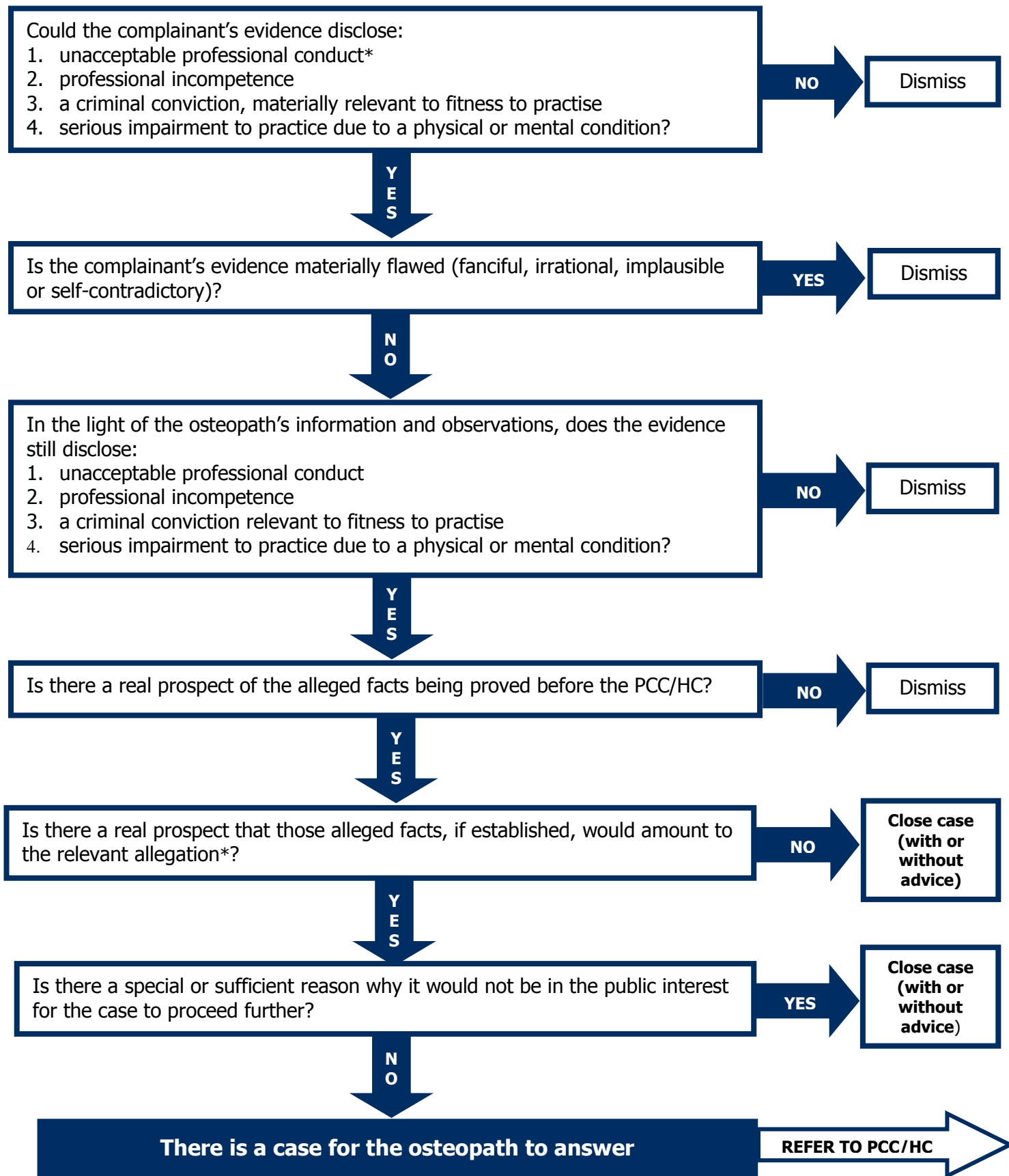
49. Executive (the GOsC Executive means staff who are employed by the GOsC) recommendations are drafted by the GOsC to assist the IC with the consideration of a case. The recommendations may offer a suggestion on how to dispose of a particular case or offer amendments to the particulars of concern. The recommendations are shared with the osteopath in advance of the IC meeting to consider the case. This information is provided as guidance only and is not intended to fetter the independence of the IC. In all cases the IC must exercise its own independent judgement, with appropriate advice from the legal assessor where appropriate, in deciding whether there is a case to answer.

## **Providing Written Reasons**

50. The IC is required to provide written reasons on how it reached a decision in every case. Reasons should be clear and intelligible but do not need to be lengthy or identify each individual piece of information taken into account. Reasons will be sufficient if they explain to the parties in broad terms why a particular decision has been reached. However, simply reciting the real prospect test does not amount to giving adequate reasons. Every decision should include the following:

- the evidence/information the IC took into consideration
- the decision made
- which particulars of the allegation have been referred and which have not
- why the decision was made
- how the decision was reached (including the real prospect test)
- why any advice or material (including the expert evidence) was rejected, if this happened
- any advice the IC received from the legal assessor
- why the IC chose not to follow any guidance and/or the advice of the legal assessor.

## Investigating Committee – decision-making flowchart



\* The Investigating Committee should apply the threshold criteria for unacceptable professional conduct