

Reference Request & Provision

SOP · UK · Updated 2026-07-23 · Square brackets are placeholders to replace with your own details.

A reference request and provision procedure is the written process for both sides of employment references — how your organisation collects references before a new starter's appointment is confirmed, and how it responds when another employer asks about a current or former member of staff.

References go wrong in predictable ways: offers confirmed before references arrive, managers improvising glowing or damning references by email, and requests answered without checking who is actually asking. One procedure, with one standard factual reference and named authorised signatories, removes all three risks.

This template gives you a complete, ready-to-edit procedure: the standard reference your organisation gives, step-by-step processes for requesting and providing references, data protection rules, and what to do when something goes wrong.

Purpose and scope

This procedure sets out how [Your company] requests references for candidates and provides references about current and former staff. It applies to all roles and to everyone who receives a reference request, in any format — letter, email, phone, or online form.

When to use this procedure

- Every job offer — offers are always conditional on references satisfactory to [Your company].
- Every incoming request for an employment reference about a current or former member of staff.
- Requests for personal or character references connected to [Your company] in any way.

Roles and responsibilities

- [HR/office manager]: sends and chases all outgoing reference requests for candidates.
- [Named roles only, e.g. HR manager or a director]: authorised to provide references on behalf of [Your company]. Nobody else may respond, including line managers.
- All staff: forward any reference request you receive to [role/inbox] the same day, without answering it.
- [Senior role]: decides anything outside the standard — disputed references, regulated-sector requests, requests during live disputes.

Our standard reference

[Your company] provides a standard factual reference for everyone: dates of employment, job title or titles held, and [any other factual items you choose to include, e.g. confirmation the person resigned]. Salary is confirmed only with the individual's written consent. The same standard applies to every leaver — good, bad, or indifferent — which is what makes it defensible.

Anything beyond the standard reference — opinions on performance, suitability, or conduct — requires the written approval of [senior role] and must be verifiable from records. Personal references by individual staff must be written in a personal capacity, without [Your company] letterhead, email signature, or job title.

Requesting references for new starters

1. Confirm the offer letter states the offer is conditional on references satisfactory to [Your company].
2. Get the candidate's consent and referee details — [number] referees covering the last [period], including their current or most recent employer.
3. Verify each referee independently: use the employer's published contact details, not just a number supplied by the candidate.
4. Send the written request with a short role summary and factual questions: dates, job title, reason for leaving, and [any role-specific questions].
5. Chase after [number] working days; try phone where written requests stall, and record what was said.
6. Log received references on the candidate file and assess them against the role. Refer any concern to [senior role] before confirming or withdrawing the offer under its stated conditions.
7. Do not confirm an unconditional start until references are in or [senior role] has accepted the risk in writing.

Providing a reference

1. Verify the requester is genuine: check the request comes from a real organisation and confirm via its published contact details if in doubt.
2. Check the leaver's file for anything governing references — including any agreed reference wording from a settlement agreement, which must be used exactly.
3. Complete the standard factual reference template, checking every fact against employment records.
4. Exclude opinions that records cannot support, health information, and unproven allegations.
5. Get sign-off from [authorised role] and send marked "Private and confidential — for the addressee only".
6. File a copy of the request and the reference on the employee's record in [system].

Records and data protection

References received and given are personal data: store them in [system] with access restricted to [roles], and retain them for [period] in line with the data retention policy. Share only what the purpose requires, and never disclose a reference received in confidence from a third party without checking current ICO guidance first.

If something goes wrong

If a reference [Your company] gave turns out to be inaccurate, send a written correction to the recipient promptly and record both versions on file. If a former employee disputes a reference, [senior role] reviews

it against the records and responds in writing. If a request relates to a regulated role, check the sector's referencing rules before responding — the standard factual reference may not satisfy them.

Review

This procedure and the standard reference template are reviewed [frequency, e.g. annually] by [name/role], and immediately after any reference dispute. Next review due: [date].

How to use this template

1. Decide the exact contents of your standard factual reference and write it into section four — the value of the procedure is that it never varies.
2. Name the authorised reference-givers and tell every manager the rule: forward, never reply.
3. Add the conditional-references wording to your offer letter template so the two documents match.
4. Check whether any of your roles fall under sector referencing rules and note the exceptions in section eight.
5. Set the chase timescales to match your real hiring pace — references that arrive after the start date protect nobody.
6. File this procedure with your data retention policy and align the retention periods.

Official guidance

- › [ICO — UK GDPR guidance and resources](#)

This template is provided in good faith and for general information — it is not legal advice. Adapt it to your organisation and, where your sector carries specific legal requirements, have the finished document reviewed by a qualified adviser. The live version at <https://trainedteam.com/templates/reference-request-procedure> is kept current; this file is a snapshot.