



COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Date of Last Review: July 2017
Date of Next Review: July 2018

Complaints Procedure

Context

Since 1 September 2003 governing bodies of all maintained schools in England have been required, under Section 29 of the Education Act 2002, to have in place a procedure to deal with all complaints relating to their school and to any community facilities or services that the school provides.

Purpose

The purpose of this procedure is to provide a robust process for dealing with complaints relating to the school or its employees, including the provision of facilities or services.

This procedure also includes a provision for dealing with vexatious, malicious or repetitive unfounded complaints.

The procedure applies to general complaints made by parents, carers, the community, visitors, volunteers and pupils.

This procedure should not be used for:

- Complaints relating to a statutory duty or power
- Complaints from staff, the schools grievance policy should be applied

Aims of Procedure

The aim of this procedure is to:

- Achieve informal resolution wherever possible
- Resolve general complaints as efficiently and effectively as possible
- Provide a transparent process for dealing with complaints, both formally and informally
- Ensure that all stages of the procedure will be investigatory rather than adversarial
- Ensure that every complaint is heard and handled appropriately
- Deal with complaints in a sensitivity, impartiality and confidentiality
- To allow redress where necessary and provide information back to the School Management team to improve services

Complaints Procedure

The majority of issues raised by parents, carers, the community, visitors, volunteers or pupils, are concerns rather than complaints. This School is committed to taking concerns seriously, at the earliest stage, in the hope of keeping the number of formal complaints to a minimum. The formal procedure will be invoked where initial attempts to resolve the issues are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern wishes to take the matter further.

General Principles

“Complaints” Forms can be provided by school to assist the process by focusing the complainant on the importance of being specific about the nature of their complaint and the need to provide evidence or at least to be able to cite relevant incidents.

The person investigating the complaint (at any stage) should make sure that they:

- Establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved

- Clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved
- Meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is required)
- Clarify what the complainant feels would put things right
- Interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- Conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
- Keep notes of any discussions and meetings throughout the complaint
- Keep the complainant updated and well informed of the progress of the complaint

It should be noted that the School does not allow the recording of any meetings during this process by any party who attends, other than in exceptional circumstances where all parties agree.

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated under this procedure unless there are exceptional circumstances, for example if there were serious child protection concerns or bullying allegations where the school would either involve appropriate external agencies or else conduct its own internal review to test whether there is any corroborative evidence which might trigger a formal investigation.

Complaints must be raised as soon as possible after an incident arises and within 6 weeks of the event being complained of, except in exceptional circumstances.

In advising complainants of the outcome of their complaint it is important to be cautious when providing specific details. To do otherwise may prejudice the ability of any employee complained about to continue in post. The release of certain information might be an obstacle to the fair application of disciplinary/capability procedures or otherwise contravene the employee's employment or data protection rights.

The procedure is designed to facilitate resolution of concerns with the minimum of conflict. Therefore, it is important that the procedure adopted carries confidence of all interested parties so that its use secures "closure" of any complaint or concern.

It is usually unhelpful if a complaint is broadcast to the school community. Therefore the school will make it clear to any person who raises a concern, that the school will treat the matter with a high degree of confidentiality and ask the complainant to do likewise.

Reasonable support and adjustments should be made to support complainants where English may not be their first language, this could include support from a translator. Reasonable support and adjustments should be made to support complainants who have a disability; this could include accepting a complaint verbally instead of in writing or physical adjustments to accommodate an individual into school.

Selecting the most appropriate procedure

The school should have clear procedures for receiving enquiries and complaints and an effective mechanism for "triage", so that they are directed to the appropriate person(s) for resolution.

Where a complaint highlights child protection/safeguarding concerns, a referral to the Schools Child Protection Officer/Designated Senior Leader should take place immediately to enable any action to take place as appropriate.

Only once an outcome of a complaint has been reached and a full investigation has taken place should other procedures be implemented, for example the disciplinary policy.

Informal Procedure

It is in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. As a matter of daily routine, schools receive numerous contacts from parents and other interested parties. Many of these will be resolved simply by providing information or through the arrangement of an informal meeting in order to discuss the matter. Therefore the initial approach will normally be made to the school office, or to the individual member of staff who is likely to be able to provide the necessary information.

Where the first approach is made to a governor or member of the senior leadership team, the first step would be to refer the complainant to the appropriate person and advise them of the procedure. This is to maintain leadership and governor impartiality at the later stages.

The procedure is likely to stop at this stage if the concern has been explained satisfactorily, or a shared understanding has been reached of the issue being raised.

Formal procedure

Where a matter is more serious, or an informal approach has failed to resolve the issue, it may be raised formally as a complaint. This should be done in writing and school will provide the necessary forms to be used.

Stage 1 – Complaint heard by Headteacher

The complaint should be raised with the Headteacher. If the complaint is against the Headteacher then the complaint should be moved straight to stage 2 and raised directly with the Chair of Governors. If the complaint is against the Chair of Governors then the complaint should be moved straight to stage 3 and raised directly with the Governing Body.

Upon receipt of the complaint the Headteacher may arrange a meeting with the complainant to clarify details of their concerns and of the resolution that is being sought. Once the school has this information a decision will then be taken about the need for further investigation. This may involve additional meetings with the complainant to obtain further information.

The Headteacher will wherever possible respond to the complaint immediately, however where this is not possible they will investigate the complaint. Once the investigation is completed then the Headteacher will either respond in writing within 10 working school days or invite the complainant to a meeting to explain the outcome. The complainant will be provided with as much additional information as is possible in the circumstances, while respecting any right to confidentiality of third parties

Stage 2 - Complaint heard by Chair of Governors

If after completion of stage 1 the complaint is still not resolved then the complaint should be raised in writing to the Chair of Governors requesting that their complaint is considered further.

The complaint should be raised in writing within 10 school days of the outcome of stage 1, giving clear details of the complaint, attaching relevant papers.

The Chair of Governors will acknowledge the complaint within 10 school days explaining what arrangements have been made to investigate the complaint and where appropriate provide the opportunity for further discussion between the complainant and the Chair of Governors. The Chair of Governors will investigate the complaint thoroughly, usually within 20 school days.

Once the investigation is completed then the Chair of Governors will respond in writing within 10 school days to confirm that the matter has been investigated thoroughly and appropriate action taken. The complainant will be provided with as much additional information as is possible in the circumstances, while respecting any right to confidentiality of third parties.

Stage 3 –Appeal heard by Complaints Appeals Committee

If after completion of stage 2 the complaint is still not resolved then the appeal should be raised in writing to the Clerk to the Governing Body, asking for it to be put to the appeals panel, normally 3 governors.

The complaint/appeal should be raised in writing to the Clerk to the Governing Body within 10 school days of the outcome of stage 2, giving clear details of the complaint and the grounds for appeal. The complainant should attach relevant papers.

The Clerk will acknowledge the complaint within 10 school days and make arrangements to hold the appeal hearing at the earliest opportunity.

Once arrangements have been made for the appeal hearing all relevant papers and documentation to be relied upon at the hearing will be sent to all parties, at least 5 school days before the hearing.

The governor appeal hearing is the last school based stage and is not convened merely to rubber stamp previous decisions.

The hearing will be held in private and acknowledgement should be given to the difficult circumstances for all involved. Extra care should be given where the complainant is a child.

The hearing is independent and impartial, governors who have had any previous involvement in the complaint or circumstances surrounding it should not be involved. The aim of the hearing is to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. It does have to be acknowledged that the complainant may not be satisfied with the outcome and it may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations.

The complaints appeal panel can:

- Dismiss the complaint in whole or part
- Uphold the complaint in whole or part
- Decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
- Recommend changes to the school systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not occur

Once the panel have reached a decision the complainant should be notified in writing within 5 school days. The letter will include the panel's decision including the reasons for the decision. The complainant will be provided with as much additional information as is possible in the circumstances, while respecting any right to confidentiality of third parties. The letter will need to explain that if the complainant is still not satisfied with the response from the Governing Body then the complainant has the opportunity to progress to stage 4.

Stage 4 – Complaint heard by the Local Authority

The complaint should be raised in writing to the Strategic Director for People Services giving clear details of the complaint, attaching relevant papers.

The Directorate will acknowledge the complaint within 3 working days and they will then nominate an appropriate officer to investigate the way in which the complaint was dealt with, they will not at this stage re-investigate. The Directorate will write to the complainant in 20 working days, explaining the outcome of the investigation. The Directorate will also make contact with the school to advise them of the outcome and, where appropriate, the steps needed to put matters right.

Stage 5 – Complaint heard by the Secretary of State

Where the complaint remains unresolved after going through all the appropriate stages within this procedure then the final stage of appeal is to the Secretary of State for Education.

Complaints should be submitted in writing to:

The School Complaints Unit (SCU) at Department for Education,
2nd Floor,
Piccadilly Gate,
Manchester,
M1 2WD.

The SCU will examine if the complaints policy and any other relevant policies were followed in accordance with the provisions set out and will ensure the policies comply with appropriate legislation. If legislative or policy breaches are found the SCU will report them to the school to take remedial action.

Vexatious, Malicious or Repetitive Unfounded Complaints

The vast majority of complaints are resolved by informal contact. There are occasions, however when the school is required to deal with vexatious, malicious or repetitive unfounded complaints, which cause unnecessary anxiety for the member of staff associated with the complaint and also wastes valuable 'school hours'.

As an example, a persistent or vexatious complaint:

- displays behaviours / actions which are disproportionate, harassing and repetitious;

- seeks unrealistic outcomes relative to the issue being raised and who state that their intention is to persist until that outcome is achieved;
- repeatedly makes the same complaint with minor differences but who do not accept the outcome of any investigation into their complaints.

The inclusion of this section within the procedure is to ensure that those complainants who we deem to be 'persistent or vexatious complainants' are still dealt with fairly, honestly and properly, whilst also ensuring that the service being provided or school staff are not adversely affected.

Before deciding whether it is appropriate for us to apply any restrictions in the way a 'persistent or vexatious complainant' can contact the school, we must inform the complainant in writing or at a face to face meeting why we feel their behaviours or actions are unacceptable. We must also give them the opportunity to change their behaviours within a reasonable timescale before taking any further action.

Therefore, where the complaint is deemed to be vexatious, malicious or repetitive without foundation, the school will reserve the right to inform the complainant that it cannot deal with their complaint and will outline the reasons why, which could include:

- Specific actions are not identified;
- Conclusions are presented rather than actions which require enquiry;
- The concerns relate to historical actions and any evidence which might have enabled an objective investigation of the complaint is no longer available;
- The substance of the complaint has already been addressed under this procedure previously;
- There are no identified potential sources of evidence which might allow the matter to be investigated;
- The complaint is deemed to be malicious in its intent either by the Head teacher or the Governing Body;
- The complaint(s) meet the legal definition of harassment under one of the following acts:
 - The Employment Rights Act 1996;
 - The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974;
 - The Equality Act 2010;
 - Human Rights Act 1998;
 - Protection from Harassment Act 1997;
 - Criminal Justice & Public Order Act 1994;
 - Malicious Communications Act 1998.

Monitoring and Review

The Governing Body and Head teacher will review the operation and effectiveness of the school's complaints arrangements as appropriate.