

OVERALL SCHOOL POLICY DOCUMENT: No. 41 (09/08)

GUIDELINES FOR COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

PARENTAL COMPLAINTS

Problems are likely to arise if parents feel that the school is not open to their concerns. It is better to have a direct complaint to a member of staff than to have parents sharing their dissatisfaction with others. Parents like to feel valued and involved with the school and they should be encouraged to voice their concerns. This is helped where the culture of the school is open and complaints are received in a positive manner.

- Is the school open, listening to parents and pupils?
- Are parents comfortable in contacting the Head, the Housestaff, or other senior staff?
- Are staff comfortable dealing with complaints?

An effective complaints procedure can defuse problems and can provide the school with helpful information. Complaints treated as constructive suggestions can be used to improve standards and may prevent cause for further complaint. Even an unjustified complaint may indicate an area which can be improved.

What constitutes a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem.

A complaint may be made if a parent thinks that the school has, for example:

- done something wrong
- failed to do something it should have done
- acted unfairly or impolitely

A complaint may be made about the school as a whole, about a specific department in the school or about an individual member of staff.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

All complaints need to be handled seriously. A gentle expression of concern, or a simple query, may grow into a painful matter if parents feel that they have been brushed aside. Equally, issues with the potential to become acutely difficult may dwindle and fade if they are handled well at the initial stage.

An unresolved problem may become a festering dispute or a confrontation. Procedures must therefore be in place for appropriate action when a matter remains unresolved or cannot be resolved quickly.

Procedures need to be flexible to handle both formal complaints and the informal raising of issues. It does not seem helpful to attempt to differentiate between “formal” and “informal” complaints. One can easily become the other. Serious issues may be raised in an informal and friendly way, and apparently trivial issues in an adversarial manner. Complaints against members of staff need particularly sensitive handling.

All complaints need to be recorded.

Lines of Approach

All members of staff should be encouraged to deal with parental concerns which lie within their area of responsibility. Staff should be trained in dealing with complaints.

If approached about a matter which lies outside their remit, staff should refer it to the appropriate person and inform the parents.

Matters incapable of resolution at a particular level should be referred to the Head.

Certain parents will wish to go straight to the Head with their concerns, and this should be respected. However, it should be explained that the Head may not be able to respond until he has consulted the staff who can help.

Serious complaints will be shared with the Chairman of Governors by the Head. There may be certain circumstances, such as complaints about the Head, when the parents will need to write direct to the Chairman, whose address should be supplied on request.

Written responses should always be channeled through the Head.

Reducing Anxiety

Because the person who complains may feel vulnerable, the school can reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be handled.

- Complaints will be acknowledged immediately or within five working days. The Head will inform parents what is happening to their concern or complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be received. The issue should be dealt with as quickly as possible.
- The nature of the complaint and what is concerning the complainant should be clear. If this is not immediately obvious:
 - the parents will be given time to explain
 - they could be asked to put their complaint in writing
 - it may be helpful to discuss possible outcomes
- Parents need to feel that their views matter.
- Paradoxically, in some circumstances parents may prefer a response given after 24 hours to one - even the same response - given immediately.

Recording

The school should keep an effective log of complaints and other parental concerns because:-

- HM Inspectors may wish to see the log as evidence of the school's attitude to complaints
- Patterns in the record may indicate a need for action
- The Head should be able to check the log and report on it regularly to Governors

The log should contain the following information:-

- date when the issue was raised
- name of parent
- name of pupil
- brief statement of issue
- location of detailed file
- staff member handling the issue
- brief statement of outcome

- Confidential files on all complaints should be maintained and kept together, cross-referenced with other files as necessary. The files should contain simple but clear notes of all conversations with parents about any source of dissatisfaction. This applies to friendly chats and to telephone conversations, as misunderstandings easily arise. There should be a clear statement of what is concerning the complainants. The notes can be agreed with parents.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important issue for pupils, parents and staff. It is essential that any complaint is treated in a confidential manner and with respect.

Parents often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. If, for example, they wish to discuss a particular member of staff they may not fear that their child will suffer in some way because they have complained.

It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the school's policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their children and similarly that complaints raised by pupils should not rebound on them or on other pupils.

The question of confidentiality should be discussed sensitively and on an individual basis with parents and the school's policy should be carefully explained.

It may be possible to deal with a problem without naming individuals. However, even if no names are given, the source of the complaint may be clear. Depending on the nature of the complaint and on the circumstances, it may be impractical to investigate without identifying the member of staff or the child - it may be in the interest of the child to do so.

Staff members are rightly concerned that they should know about complaints which might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be known only to themselves and to those who have to be consulted. Training should help staff to deal not only with complaints which are made to them, but also to complaints which are made about them. School should be aware of the need to provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made; this should be provided by a colleague who is not otherwise involved.

If there is a question of the child's safety or a possible situation involving the police, the guidance on confidentiality in the West Sussex Child Protection procedure will be followed.

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Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints may be where there is no indication of either name or address, or where the complainants say that they do not wish to be identified. They may come from members of the public, from parents or from pupils.

Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of pupils could be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders to all about the school's expectation.

Parents and pupils should be encouraged to give their names and should be given reassurance on the issue of confidentiality. If they persist in wishing to remain anonymous, it is at the Head's discretion as to what action, if any, should be taken, depending on the nature of the complaint.

Anonymous complaints should be recorded in the log.

Anonymous allegations about child abuse should be handled under the West Sussex Child Protection Guidelines.

Resolution

Sometimes the very acknowledgment of an issue by the school brings relief to parents. Satisfaction for a complainant may come from any of the following:

knowing that changes have been made, and that matters will be different in future

knowing that the school is now alert to a possible problem

feeling that their concern has been considered seriously

an outcome which may be different from the one they sought, but which they perceive to be well-considered

a considered letter

an apology

If time has been needed to consider matters, parents should receive a report letter. This should cover:

- the issues raised
- how the issues were considered
- the people consulted
- the action that is to be taken
- an apology, if appropriate

Intractable Complaints

There may be a small minority of persistent or aggressive complainants who will never be satisfied, whatever the school does. The school may even discover an investigation that the complaint was without foundation or motivated by malice. Nevertheless it is wise to treat all complaints seriously and to follow the procedures.

Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes intractable, it may be due to its nature or to the way in which it was handled, or possibly because the parent perceives the school to have 'closed ranks' against him or her.

There are different stages of action to be taken with intractable complaints:

Referral to the Chairman of Governors

In most cases the procedure will be that the Head refers the matter to the Chairman of Governors and informs the parents that this stage has been reached. However, a situation may arise where the complaint seems to the parent to have been mishandled by the Head. In those circumstances the parent should be able to write direct to the Chairman.

The Chairman calls for a full report from the Head, and for all relevant documents. On the basis of these, the Chairman may decide to call for a briefing from individual members of staff.

As the Chairman starts work on the case, he/she write to the parents, informs them of the action being taken, asks them if they wish to add to what they have said already, and gives a date by which they may expect a full response.

The Chairman may be able to offer a new approach to the matter, and this may satisfy the parents. The Chairman's response should be clear and detailed, and should offer a meeting if the parents remain troubled.

Meeting with the Chairman of Governors

If a meeting is requested, the Chairman offers to meet the parents at a time convenient to them. Those involved are:

- the Chairman of Governors
- the Head and at the most one other member of staff
- the parents

The parents are invited to bring with them a supportive friend who is not involved with the complaint. Legal representation is not appropriate at this stage.

The Chairman, after questioning and listening to the parents and the Head, may be able to find a solution. If this is not possible, and the parents wish to take the matter further, it should be referred to the school's Conciliation Committee, or equivalent.

Referral to the Conciliation Committee

Each school should have in place a Conciliation Committee, or equivalent, appointed by the Governors, even though it may never be used. A possible model would be:

- the Convener is a Governor other than the Chairman
- there are up to four other members, of whom at least two are Governors
- three members, including the Convener, constitute a quorum for an individual case
- members are committed to keeping the proceedings of the committee confidential and to operating in a fair and objective manner - their aim is to conciliate
- in accepting appointment, members accept that they may never be called upon to meet

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The Chairman of Governors, in consultation with the Head, decides when to refer a complaint to the Conciliation Committee, and invites the Convener to call a meeting.

The Chairman has no further involvement until the Convener reports back at the end of the Committee's deliberations.

Meeting with the Conciliation Committee

Those involved in the meeting are:

- up to five Committee members, including the Convener
- the Head, and possibly a key member of staff
- the parents, who are invited to bring a supportive friend, as for the meeting with the Chairman of Governors.

A sufficient amount of time is committed to the meeting, in case it is needed.

The parents and the Head are asked in advance whether there are any papers they would like to have considered at the meeting, bearing in mind the need for all to keep the proceedings confidential. The papers are copied and distributed before the meeting.

The Convener emphasises that he or she is concerned to reach a positive conclusion and invites first the parents, then the Head to speak. After this the Convener encourages questions and general discussion.

The Convener may find it helpful at some point to invite the Head, the parents and their friend to withdraw from the discussion for a time, leaving the Committee alone.

If more time is required, it may be necessary to convene a second meeting. If so, Committee members must commit themselves to attend, as continuity is essential.

If a positive solution is reached, the Convener should summarise the outcome and confirm the nature of the agreement before the meeting disperses. The agreement should be recorded, copied and circulated as soon as possible.

At the end of the Committee's deliberations, the Convener makes a full report to the Chairman of Governors and informs the parents that this is being done. The Chairman would be expected to endorse the Committee's decision.

Further Action

Most independent schools have no other body to which they may refer complaints for arbitration. If a complaint has not been resolved within the school, the parent can choose to go to their own lawyer, to their MP or to the Secretary of State.

The Registrar of Independent Schools has an interest in dealing with complaints in certain circumstances. If a serious complaint is made to the Registrar, he or she will investigate and normally involve HM Inspectors of Schools in finding a solution.

Training

Given the diverse nature of complaints, schools should ensure through training that all staff, including support staff, know how to carry out their responsibilities. Training should cover:

- the complaints procedures
- communication skills, such as listening, questioning and calming
- handling complaints, negotiation and mediation skills
- skills in observing, recording and reporting
- the benefits of handling complaints well and the consequences of handling them badly

In some circumstances, the training for child protection purposes may be appropriate.

This specimen leaflet is designed to explain the complaints system to parents. Copies might be sent out with school handbooks, reports or newsletters - they should be readily available at various points in the school.

Slindon College welcomes suggestions and comments from parents, and takes seriously complaints and concerns they may raise. This leaflet will show you how to use our complaints system.

A complaint will be treated as an expression of genuine dissatisfaction which needs a response.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

We wish to ensure that:

- parents wishing to make a complaint know how to do so
- we respond to complaints within a reasonable time and in a courteous and efficient way
- parents realise that we listen and take complaints seriously
- we take action where appropriate

“How should I complain?”

You can talk directly to a member of staff, write a letter, or telephone. Be as clear as possible about what is troubling you.

Any member of staff will be happy to help. It may be best to start with the person most closely concerned with the issue - for example, to raise house matters with the Housestaff, sports concerns with the Head of PE. They may be able to sort things out quickly, with the minimum of fuss. However, you may prefer to take the matter to a more senior member of staff, for example, the Deputy Head or the Head.

“I don’t want to complain as such, but there is something bothering me”

The school is here for you and your child, and we want to hear your views and your ideas. Contact a member of staff, as described above, or the Head’s Secretary.

“I am not sure whether to complain or not”

If as parents you have concerns, you are entitled to complain. If in doubt, you should

contact the school as we are here to help.

“What will happen next?”

If you raise something face-to-face or by telephone, it may be possible to resolve the matter immediately and to your satisfaction.

If you have made a complaint or suggestion in writing, we will contact you within five working days, to respond to your concerns and explain how we propose to proceed.

In many circumstances, the person you contact will need to discuss the matter with a colleague and consider it further before responding. You will be given a date by which time you will receive a response. If a detailed exploration of the issues is needed, a letter or report will be sent to you as quickly as possible. This will tell you of the outcome of your complaint. It will explain the conclusion, the reasons for it, and any action taken or proposed.

“What happens about confidentiality?”

Your complaint or concern will be treated in a confidential manner and with respect. Knowledge of it will be limited to the Head and those directly involved. The Chairman of Governors may also need to be informed. It is the school’s policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their children.

We cannot entirely rule out the need to make third parties outside the school aware of the complaint and possibly also the identity of those involved. This would only be likely to happen where, for example, a child’s safety was at risk or it became necessary to refer matters to the police. You would be fully informed.

While information relating to specific complaints will be kept confidentially on file, we would point out that anonymous complaints may not be pursued.

Action which needed to be taken under staff disciplinary procedures as a result of complaints would be handled confidentially within the school.

“What if I am not satisfied with the outcome?”

We hope that you will feel satisfied with the outcome, or at least that your concerns have been fully and fairly considered.

If you are not satisfied, the Head will offer to refer the matter to the Chairman of Governors. Alternatively, you may wish to write direct to the Chairman. The Chairman will call for a full report from the Head, and will examine matters thoroughly before

responding. This may result in a positive solution, but if it does not, the Chairman will invite you to a meeting. You may wish to be supported by a friend, but legal representatives would not be appropriate at this stage.

If the meeting does not bring about a resolution, the matter would be referred to the school's Conciliation Committee. It is their task to look at the issues in an impartial and confidential manner. The Committee's Convener will invite you to a meeting. You will be asked if there are any papers you would like to have circulated beforehand. As with the Chairman's meeting, you will be invited to bring a friend with you.

The school recognises and acknowledges your entitlement to complain and we hope to work with you in the best interests of the children and young people in our care.

PUPILS COMPLAINTS

The principles which apply to parental complaints should also be applied to complaints and concerns from pupils.

There are, however, differences in approach. One important difference from the handling of parental complaints is that pupils should be able to raise concerns with any member of staff with whom they feel comfortable, whether it be the form teacher, a member of the support staff or the Housestaff.

In more complex situations, once the matter is resolved, the outcome should be discussed with the pupil by a member of staff. To make sure that is fully understood, a written record may be shared.

Some schools have School Councils at which pupil representatives can raise complaints. At Council meetings issues can be aired and discussed with members of staff. Some schools have less formal arrangements, such as suggestion boxes, so that pupils can express their ideas in writing.

Complaints which appear trivial still need to be handled seriously. Young people may test the complaints procedures on relatively minor issues before finding the confidence to raise something painful, such as bullying.

If the issue is a painful one, or if exploration of it is taking time, a pupil may need support from another pupil or from an adult. Where schools have Independent Visitors, pupils may wish to use them for support.

Complaints, and ways of dealing with them, also need to be explained to pupils. Personal and Social Education programmes can be of use not only in teaching pupils how they may support and act as mentors to others, but also in encouraging them to understand that their views matter.

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES

A LEAFLET FOR PUPILS

This specimen leaflet includes the elements of a complaints system for pupils. It is kept brief so that it can be printed on a postcard. A fuller explanation could be included in the Pupils' Handbook.

Any Problems, Complaints or Suggestions?

If so, the school would like to hear.

How do I make a complaint?

- By talking about it - or by writing it down if you find that easier.
- You can do it by yourself, or as part of a group, or through your parents.

To whom?

- To anyone on the staff.

Does it matter what the issue is?

- No, it can be a big problem or a small one. By discussing it, you may come up with some positive ideas.

What will happen next?

- If possible, the staff member will deal with it in person. If not, he or she will go on your behalf to someone who can help.

Do others have to know?

- If you are worried about confidentiality, tell the staff - they will understand.

Even if you find the issue hurtful or embarrassing, don't worry - it will only be discussed by staff who can help you.