

Complaints Policy

Chisenhale Primary School



Learning Together for a Better Future

FEBRUARY 2016

Chisenhale Primary School

This complaints policy has been reviewed in the light of the *Best Practice Advice for School Complaints Procedures 2016*, published by the DfE in January 2016. The policy is designed to be helpful to parents and to make the processes clear for everyone involved.

Dealing with complaints – initial concerns

1. Staff and parents need to be clear about the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints. However, formal complaints should always follow the complaints procedure.
2. This policy deals with complaints but the underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally. In most cases the class teacher or the individual delivering the service in the case of extended school provision, will receive the first approach. It would be helpful if staff were able to resolve issues on the spot, including apologising where necessary.

Framework of Principles

1. This complaints procedure aims to:
 - encourage resolution of problems by **informal** means wherever possible;
 - be easily **accessible** and **publicised**;
 - be **simple** to understand and use;
 - be **impartial**;
 - be **non-adversarial**;
 - allow **swift** handling with established **time-limits** for action and keeping people informed of the progress;
 - ensure a full and **fair** investigation by an independent person where necessary;
 - respect people's desire for **confidentiality**;
 - address all the points at issue and provide an **effective** response and **appropriate** redress, where necessary;
 - provide **information** to the school's senior management team so that services can be improved.

Investigating complaints

1. At each stage, the person investigating the complaint will 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 necessary);
 - 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 the interview or arrange for an independent note taker to record minutes of the meeting.

Resolving complaints

At each stage in the procedure the school will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- an apology;
- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again;
- an undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint.

It would be useful if complainants were encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that the school could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence.

An effective procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties. It is also of equal importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

Vexatious Complaints

If properly followed, a good complaints procedure will limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the chair of the GB is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed. If the complainant writes again on the same issue, then the correspondence will be recognised as vexatious and there will be no obligation on the part of the school to respond.

It is important to note however that, should a complainant raise an entirely new, separate complaint, it must be responded to in accordance with the complaints procedure. It is not the complainant who is vexatious; it is the correspondence.

The stages of the complaint

Stage 1 (informal): complaint heard by staff member

It is in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. The experience of the first contact between the complainant and the school can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, if staff are made aware of the procedures, they will know what to do when they receive a complaint.

It would assist the procedure if the school respected the views of a complainant who indicates that he/she would have difficulty discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff. In these cases, the complaints co-ordinator can refer the complainant to another staff member. Where the complaint concerns the headteacher, the complaints co-ordinator can refer the complainant to the Chair of Governors.

Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the complaints co-ordinator will consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the complaint objectively and impartially is crucial.

Where the first approach is made to a governor, the next step would be to refer the complainant to the appropriate person and advise them about the procedure. It would be useful if governors did not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the formal

procedure or be involved at the early stages in case they are needed to sit on a panel at a later stage of the procedure.

Stage 2 (formal): complaint heard by headteacher

The headteacher's influence will already have shaped the way complaints are handled in the school. At this point, the complainant may be dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled at Stage 1 as well as pursuing their initial complaint. The head may delegate the task of collating the information to another staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken.

Stage 3 (formal): complaint heard by Chair of Governors

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response of the headteacher or the complaint is about the headteacher, the complainant will write to the Chair of Governors to request that their complaint is considered further.

Stage 4 (formal): complaint heard by Governing Bodies Complaints Appeal Panel

The complainant usually needs to write to the Clerk to the Governing Body giving details of the complaint and asking that it is put before the appeal panel. The Chair, or if the Chair has been involved at any previous stage in the process, a nominated governor, will convene a GB complaints panel.

The governors' appeal hearing is the last school-based stage of the complaints process and is not convened merely to rubber-stamp previous decisions.

Individual complaints would not be heard by the whole GB at any stage, as this could compromise the impartiality of any panel set up for a disciplinary hearing against a member of staff following a serious complaint.

The governing body will nominate a number of members with delegated powers to hear complaints at that stage, and set out its terms of reference. These can include:

- drawing up its procedures;
- hearing individual appeals;
- making recommendations on policy as a result of complaints.

The procedure adopted by the panel for hearing appeals would normally be part of the school's complaints procedure. The panel can be drawn from the nominated members and may consist of three or five people. The panel will choose their own Chair.

Governing Body Review

- Complaints should not be shared with the whole governing body, except in very general terms, in case an appeal panel needs to be organised;
- If the whole governing body is aware of the substance of a complaint before the final stage has been completed, schools should arrange for an independent panel to hear the complaint. They may approach a different school to ask for help or the local Governor Services team at the LA;
- Complainants have the right to request an independent panel, if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. Schools should consider the request but ultimately, the decision is made by the governors;
- The process of listening to and resolving complaints can contribute to school improvement. When individual complaints are heard, schools may also identify underlying issues that need to be addressed. The monitoring and review of complaints can be a useful tool in evaluating a school's performance. The governing body may wish to consider using complaints and review their handling at regular intervals to inform improvements and the effectiveness of the complaints procedure;
- It is the governing body which determines how often the complaints procedure is reviewed however the department suggests as good practice that it is reviewed regularly; every two to three years is quite typical. This will enable the school to take into account any new guidance issued by the Department for Education or legislative changes.

Responsibility for reviewing the procedure may be delegated to a committee of the governing body, an individual governor or the headteacher.

The remit of the Complaints Appeal Panel

The panel can:

- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part;
- uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
- recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.

There are several points which any governor sitting on a complaints panel needs to remember:

- a. It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so.

No governor will sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it. In deciding the make-up of the panel, governors

need to try and ensure that it is a cross-section of the categories of governor and sensitive to the issues of race, gender and religious affiliation.

b. The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised that the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that his or her complaint has been taken seriously.

c. An effective panel will acknowledge that many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child. The panel Chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial.

d. Extra care needs to be taken when the complainant is a child. Careful consideration of the atmosphere and proceedings will ensure that the child does not feel intimidated. The panel needs to be aware of the views of the child and give them equal consideration to those of adults. Where the child's parent is the complainant, it would be helpful to give the parent the opportunity to say which parts of the hearing, if any, the child needs to attend.

e. The governors sitting on the panel need to be aware of the complaints procedure.

Roles and responsibilities

The role of the clerk

Any panel or group of governors considering complaints be clerked. The clerk would be the contact point for the complainant and be required to:

- set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible;
- collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing (recommended at least five school days in advance);
- meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing;
- record the proceedings;
- notify all parties of the panel's decision.

As best practice, the Clerk will share copies of the panel meeting minutes with all parties involved in the panel hearing, providing a reasonable opportunity for the minutes to be agreed and if necessary, challenged.

It is not unknown for complainants to raise additional complaints because they do not agree with the record of the meeting.

The role of the Chair of the Governing Body or the nominated governor

The nominated governor role:

- Check that the correct procedure has been followed;
- If a hearing is requested, notify the clerk to arrange the panel.

The role of the Chair of the Panel

The Chair of the Panel has a key role, ensuring that:

- the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption;
- the issues are addressed;
- key findings of fact are made;
- parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease;
- the hearing is conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy;
- the panel is open minded and acting independently;
- no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure;
- each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions;
- written material is seen by all parties. If a new issue arises it would be useful to give all parties the opportunity to consider and comment on it.

Notification of the panel's decision

The Chair of the Panel needs to ensure that the complainant is notified of the panel's decision, in writing, with the panel's response (including the reasons for the decision); this is usually within a set deadline which is publicised in the procedure. The letter needs to explain if there are any further rights of appeal and, if so, to whom they need to be addressed. This would be to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

The final stage of appeal is to the Secretary of State for Education.

Complainants should be advised to write to The School Complaints Unit (SCU) at:

Department for Education

2nd Floor, Piccadilly Gate Manchester

M1 2WD

What will the Department for Education do?

If a complaint has exhausted the local procedures, SCU will examine if the complaints policy and any other relevant policies were followed in accordance with the provisions set out. SCU also examines policies to determine if they adhere to education legislation.

However, the department will not re-investigate the substance of the complaint. This remains the responsibility of schools.

If legislative or policy breaches are found, SCU will report them to the school and the complainant and, where necessary, require remedial action to be taken. Failure to carry out remedial actions could ultimately result in a formal Direction being issued by the Secretary of State.

Checklist for a panel hearing

The panel needs to take the following points into account:

- The hearing is as informal as possible.
- Witnesses are only required to attend for the part of the hearing in which they give their evidence.
- After introductions, the complainant is invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses.
- The headteacher may question both the complainant and the witnesses

after each has spoken.

- The headteacher is then invited to explain the school's actions and be followed by the school's witnesses.
- The complainant may question both the headteacher and the witnesses after each has spoken.
- The panel may ask questions at any point.
- The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint.
- The headteacher is then invited to sum up the school's actions and response to the complaint.
- Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues.
- The Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale.

Appendix 1 – Summary for Dealing with Complaints

Stage 1 – Complaint heard by staff member

- Ensure complaints co-ordinator informed of outcome

If not resolved, then escalate to Stage 2 – Complaint heard by **headteacher**

- Acknowledge receipt of complaint
- Write to complainant with outcome of investigation
- Ensure complaints co-ordinator informed of outcome
- Offer escalation to Stage 3 if dissatisfied

If not resolved, then escalate to Stage 3 - Complaint heard by **Chair of Governors**

- Acknowledge receipt of complaint
- Write to complainant with outcome of investigation
- Ensure complaints co-ordinator informed of outcome
- Offer escalation to Stage 4 if dissatisfied

If not resolved, then escalate to Stage 4 – **Governor’s complaints panel** meeting arranged

- Issue letter inviting complainant to meeting
- Issue letter confirming panel decision
- Ensure complaints co-ordinator informed of outcome
- Advise of escalation routes to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and then the Secretary of State for Education

Appendix 2 – Example of a Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the Head, who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

IF YOU HAVE ANY DIFFICULTIES IN FILLING IN THIS FORM , PLEASE CONTACT A MEMBER OF SCHOOL STAFF TO HELP YOU.

Your name:
Pupil's name (if relevant):
Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant):
Address:
Postcode:
Day time telephone number:
Evening telephone number:
Please give details of your complaint.
Are there any witnesses to the complaint?
Are they willing to give evidence on your behalf?
Please state their names and the names of their children (if applicable)
What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint. (Who did you speak to and what was the response)?

What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?

Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.

Signature:

Date:

Official use

Date acknowledgement sent:

By who:

Complaint referred to:

Date:

Annex 3 – Complaints not in scope of the procedure

Our complaints procedure covers all complaints about any provision of facilities or services that the school provides with the **exceptions** listed below, for which there are separate (statutory) procedures.

Exceptions	Who to contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admissions to schools • Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs (SEN) • School re-organisation proposals • Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation 	Concerns should be raised direct with local authorities (LA). For school admissions, it will depend on who is the admission authority (either the school or the LA). Complaints about admission appeals for maintained schools are dealt with by the Local Government Ombudsman.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion of children from school 	Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at: www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whistleblowing 	Schools have an internal whistleblowing procedure for their employees and voluntary staff. Other concerns can be raised direct with Ofsted by telephone on: 0300 123 3155, via email at: whistleblowing@ofsted.gov.uk or by writing to: WBHL, Ofsted Piccadilly Gate Store Street Manchester M1 2WD. The Department for Education is also a prescribed body for whistleblowing in education.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff grievances and disciplinary procedures 	These matters will invoke the school's internal grievance procedures. Complainants will not be informed of the outcome of any investigation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities. 	Providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with complaints about service. They should be contacted direct.

Recording Complaints

Schools must ensure that they comply with their obligations under the Equality Act 2010. It is common practice to ask for complaints to be made by using a complaint form or in writing (see above for the form we use), however the complainant may have communication preferences due to disability or learning difficulties and schools must allow alternative methods of contact:

- A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing;
- In order to prevent any later challenge or disagreement over what was said, brief notes of meetings and telephone calls should be kept and a copy of any written

response added to the record. Where there are communication difficulties, schools may wish to use recording devices to ensure the complainant is able to access and review the discussions at a later point;

- Schools should record the progress of the complaint and the final outcome. The headteacher or complaints co-ordinator should be responsible for these records and hold them centrally.
- Schools should be aware that complainants have a right to copies of these records under the Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts.

Further information can be obtained from the School Complaints

Unit: by calling the National Helpline on **0370 000 2288**

online at:

www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus or

www.education.gov.uk/form/school-complaints-

[form](#) or by writing to:

Department for
Education 2nd Floor,
Piccadilly Gate
Manchester
M1 2WD