

KINGSDOWN SECONDARY SCHOOL COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURE

Introduction

We endeavour to work in such a way that pupils, parents/carers, staff, neighbours and partner agencies do not have complaints about our school. However we recognise that from time to time situations may arise in which people are unhappy with us. Complaints are not always easy to define. It is therefore important to keep in mind a distinction between concerns, problems and complaints.

Underlying Principles

The Complaints Policy will be available on the school website and a hard copy sent on request. Contact details of all the people named in this policy including the head of School, chair of governors and the Principal will be regularly updated and available on the website.

Complaints from neighbours regarding the premises or the operation of the school (eg parking issues) should be made to the Principal.

We recognise that nearly always a 'complaint' is a result of a misunderstanding or poor communication. We will always respond quickly and flexibly to issues that are raised with us in many cases resulting in the aggrieved party feeling a formal complaint is no longer required.

When a complaint is made it should be treated seriously and courteously and given the time it requires to be heard. It is important to the school that complainants have confidence in these procedures and know that their case will be investigated impartially.

Complainants should be advised at the earliest possible stage about:

- The scope, if any, for pursuing their complaint and the extent of the procedure for dealing with it
- The way in which the complaint is likely to be handled

Where there are established statutory and other procedures for dealing with a complaint, these will be followed. These guidelines therefore do not cover those matters for which such a procedure already exists such as:

- Exclusions from school
- Special Educational Needs Provision
- Matters concerned with the school curriculum
- Allegations against school staff
- Child Protection issues
- Public examinations

Definition of a Complaint

We regard a complaint as 'An expression of dissatisfaction with our provision or services, with the actions of our employees, governors or policies. A complaint requires an immediate response and, if it is serious or cannot be dealt with immediately, need to be investigated and resolved'.

Complaints can be made about:

- Failure to provide a satisfactory service
- Failure to follow agreed policies or processes (or the lack of such processes where they could reasonably be expected to be in place)
- The conduct of an employee of the Kingsdown workforce or a volunteer engaged by the school

If a person perceives there is a valid reason for a complaint, this must be treated accordingly and an investigation undertake.

For us, the definition of a complaint within the terms of the procedures described here is an expression of dissatisfaction verbally or in writing by parents or carers of children who attend the school.

After initial investigation of a complaint, a decision may well be made to use the discipline, capability or other appropriate procedure against a member of staff.

Anonymous complaints will not normally be considered under the procedure set out here.

The procedure set out in the following pages outlines the stages both formal and informal through which a complaint made against the school will proceed. At all stages, the aim is resolution to the satisfaction of both parties and a mutual understanding of the problems believed to exist in order that improvements can be made where necessary.

Where agreement and resolution cannot be reached, the aim of the procedure is to ensure that all parties are treated fairly and equitably.

Conciliation or mediation between school and complainant can be considered at any time within the informal or formal stages as set out in this guide.

A written record of all complaints and their outcomes will be kept in the complaints folder in the administration office. This will include confirmation of what stage the complaint was resolved (1) Preliminary Stage or (2) Panel Hearing. A copy of this record will also be sent to the complainant.

1. The First (Preliminary) Stage

Dealing with Concerns and Complaints Informally

1.1 Guidelines

1.1.1 It is hoped that all complaints and concerns will be resolved as early and as

informally as possible. Parents and carers need not only to be listened to but also to feel that they have been listened to. The underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. Nevertheless, anyone receiving a complaint should ensure that a record of the complaint and its outcome is maintained.

- 1.1.2 The vast majority of concerns and complaints can be resolved informally. There are many occasions where concerns are resolved immediately with the teacher, school secretary or Head of School, depending on whom it is parents or carers first approach. Parents must feel able to raise concerns with members of staff without any formality, either in person, by telephone or in writing. It may, on occasions, be appropriate for someone to act on behalf of the parent or carer.
- 1.1.3 It may be unclear as to whether a parent or carer is asking a question or expressing an opinion, rather than making a complaint. Similarly, a parent or carer may want a preliminary discussion or be seeking clarification of an issue in order to decide whether he or she wishes to take the matter further.
- 1.1.4 We will inform our workforce that they have the right to advice or representation from their trade union at any stage of the complaints procedure once it becomes clear that a complaint is being made about a member of staff.

1.2. Procedures

- 1.2.1 Parents and carers should be given an opportunity to discuss their concern with the appropriate member of staff who will clarify the nature of the concern or complaint and reassure them that the school will hear the concern or complaint and attempt to resolve it at the earliest stage. The member of staff may explain how the matter or incident arose and the issues connected with it. It may be helpful at this point for the parent or carer to identify what outcome is expected.
- 1.2.2 The member of staff will need to respond appropriately, taking into account the status and seriousness of the complaint. Hopefully, the matter can then be resolved immediately.
- 1.2.3 If the member of staff first approached cannot deal with the matter immediately, then they should make a clear note of the date, the name and contact address or telephone number given by the complainant. The Head of School should be informed accordingly.
- 1.2.4 All members of staff should be aware of the procedure for referring a complaint to the staff member having responsibility for the area about which a particular concern has been raised. They should also ensure that when a referral has been made, this is followed through.
- 1.2.4 Where the concern relates to the actions of the Head of School , the complainant should be advised to contact the Principal. Where the concern relates to the Principal the complainant should be advised to contact the Chair of the Governing Body who may hear the complaint him/herself, delegate it to another member of the governing body or convene a Governors' Complaints Panel comprising three members of the School's Governing Body.

- 1.2.5 The member of staff dealing with the concern or complaint should make sure that the parent or carer is clear about what action, if any, or monitoring of the issue has been agreed, putting this in writing if this appears to be the best way of advising the complainant clearly about the resolution of the matter.
- 1.2.6 In instances where no satisfactory solution has been found within 10 school working days of the complaint having been made, parents or carers should be given clear information both verbally and in writing about how to progress their complaint and about any independent advice available to them.

2. The Second Stage

Referral to the Head of School for Formal Investigation

2.1.1 Guidelines

- 2.1.2 At this stage, it will be apparent that a formal complaint has been registered and an appropriate response will be required. In some instances, the Head of School will already have been involved in looking at the matter; in others, it will be their first involvement. In all instances, it will be helpful for the Head of School (or other designated member of staff) to use these guidelines to ensure consistency and to ensure that regard is paid to the stages of the complaints procedure.
- 2.1.3 The Head of school has responsibility for the day-to-day running of the school. S/He has responsibility for the implementation of the complaints procedure including decisions concerning their involvement at the various stages. A staged complaints procedure should ensure that more than one individual is involved in hearing and investigating the complaint.
- 2.1.4 The Head of School should make arrangements to ensure that their involvement does not predominate at each stage of a particular complaint. Arrangements may be made for other staff to deal with parent and carer concerns at Stage 1, allowing for the Head of School's involvement at Stage 2, should this be necessary. At any stage, the Head of School may designate another member of staff to collect information and prepare a response.

2.2 Procedures

- 2.2.1 Formal complaints at Stage 2 should normally be submitted in writing. In exceptional circumstances, the school may consider progressing a verbal complaint where there are believed to be sufficient grounds for doing so. The Head of School (or designated member of staff) will acknowledge the complaint within 3 working days of receipt.
- 2.2.2 We are sensitive to the particular needs of parents or carers who may have difficulty in making a written complaint or for whom English is not their first language.
- 2.2.3 The acknowledgement should provide a brief outline of the school's complaints procedure and an expected date for the provision of a response. This will normally be within 10 school working days. If this proves to be

unworkable, the complainant should be provided with an explanation for the delay and given a revised date for the provision of a response.

- 2.2.4 The Principal may become involved and enable an agreed way forward. A mediated meeting between the complainant and the school to discuss a solution may be suggested if both parties are in agreement. The aim here is to seek an early resolution to the complaint for the benefit of the child, parents or carers and the school. Prolonging a complaint longer than is necessary is of no benefit to any of the parties involved. Such involvement is not however intended to compromise the formal complaints procedure. A complainant reserves the right to invoke more formal procedures should this be thought necessary to resolve matters.
- 2.2.5 The Head of School should provide an opportunity for a complainant to meet with them in order to supplement any information previously provided. It should be made clear to the complainant that, if they wish, they may be accompanied at any meeting by a friend, relative or representative to speak on their behalf; and that interpreting facilities can be made available should this be necessary.
- 2.2.6 The Head of School will, if necessary, interview witnesses and take statements from those involved. If the complaint concerns a pupil, the pupil should also be interviewed. In some instances, another member of staff with whom the pupil feels comfortable may be asked to attend. It may be appropriate, depending on the circumstances, to invite a parent or carer to be present when the Head of School interviews a pupil. The Head of School should keep written records of all meetings, telephone conversations and other contacts made during the course of investigation of a complaint.

Once all relevant information has been gathered, the Head of School will then formulate a written response to the complainant. The Head of School may, additionally, suggest a meeting to discuss the complaint and seek a resolution. The written response should include a full explanation of the decision reached and the reasons for the decision. Where appropriate, this will include details of the action taken to resolve the complaint. If the complaint concerns a member of staff and action is to be taken against the member of staff concerned, the phrase 'Appropriate action has or will be taken' should be used.

- 2.2.7 The complainant should be advised that, should they find the Head of School's response inadequate and they wish to take matters further, that they should notify the Chair of the School's Governing Body within 10 school working days of receipt. The Chair should arrange for a Governors Complaints Panel to investigate the complaint and would normally chair this panel, unless an alternative chair has designated by the Governing Body.
- 2.2.8 Where a complaint has been made against the Head of School, arrangements should be made for the initial investigation to be conducted by a single Governor (usually the Chair or Vice Chair of the Governing Body) or a suitably constituted Governing Body Complaints panel who will undertake Stage 2 of these procedures.

3. The Third Stage

Appeal to the Chair of the Governing Body or Governing Body Complaints Panel

3.1 Guidelines

- 3.1.1 It is anticipated that complaints will rarely reach this stage. It is, however, important that should they do so, any appeal is not only independent and impartial but that it should be seen to be so. All complaints reaching Stage 3 will have done so because the complainant has not been satisfied with the response provided by the Head of School (or Chair of Governors if the original complaint had been about the Head of School) at an earlier stage of the procedure. Therefore, governors who have had no prior knowledge of or involvement in the complaint must as far as is possible, handle any appeal.
- 3.1.2 As this is the last stage at which a resolution may be reached, every effort should be made to either mediate or conciliate.
- 3.1.3 Appeals should normally be made in writing. In exceptional circumstances, the school may consider progressing a verbal complaint where there are believed to be sufficient grounds for doing so. The appeal should state clearly why it is felt that the complaint has not been resolved satisfactorily and, wherever possible, supported by documentary evidence or witness statements.
- 3.1.4 In the unlikely event of pupils needing to be interviewed, care will need to be taken to ensure that parental permission is obtained. In all instances a single governor should interview the pupil and parents or carers should be given the opportunity to attend but, if they are unable to do so, a nominated member of staff should accompany the pupil.

3.2 Procedures

- 3.2.1 Upon receipt of a written request by a complainant for the complaint to proceed to Stage 3, the procedures outlined below should be followed:
- The Chair of the Governing Body should write to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the written request.
 - The acknowledgment should inform the complainant that the Chair of Governors or up to three members of the school's Governing Body and an independent community representative as appropriate, will investigate the complaint within 20 school working days of receipt of the request.
 - The acknowledgement should also explain that the complainant has the right to submit any further information or documentation relevant to the complaint. Any such documentation must, however, be received in sufficient time for this to be sent to the Chair or Panel members charged with conducting the investigation.
- 3.2.2 If a Governors Complaints Panel is conducting the investigation, the Chair of Governors should convene a panel selected from members of the school's Governing Body and an independent community representative . Panel

members should be governors who have had no prior involvement with the complaint. Generally speaking, it is not appropriate for the Head of School or other staff members to have a place on the panel. Governors may wish to bear in mind the advantages of having a parent or carer (who is also a governor) on the panel. Governors should be sensitive of issues of race, gender and religious affiliation.

- 3.2.3 The Chair should ensure that the Panel hears the complaint within 20 school working days of receiving the request. All relevant correspondence regarding the complaint should be given to each Panel member as soon as the composition of the Panel has been determined.
- 3.2.4 The Chair should write and inform the complainant, Head Teacher, relevant witnesses and Panel members of the date, time and venue of the meeting, at least 10 school working days in advance. The details of the complaint available at that time should also be sent in writing to the Head of School.
- 3.2.5 Notice of the Panel meeting sent to the complainant should also inform him/her of their right to be accompanied to the meeting by a friend, advocate or interpreter. This notice should also explain how the Panel meeting will be conducted and of the complainant's right to submit further written evidence to the Panel at least 5 school working days in advance of the meeting. The Chair should also invite the Head of School to attend and prepare a written report for the Panel in response to the complaint.
- 3.2.6 The Head of School may invite members of staff who have been directly involved in matters or issues raised by the complainant to respond in writing or, at the discretion of the Panel Chair, to attend the meeting in person. All concerned, including the complainant, should receive all relevant documentation, including the Head of School's report, at least 5 school working days in advance of the meeting.
- 3.2.7 It is the responsibility of the panel Chair to ensure that the meeting is properly minuted.

3.3 The Meeting

- 3.3.1 The aim of the Panel meeting will be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. It has to be recognised, however, that whilst the intention is to ensure that any complaint, which reaches this stage, is seen to have been treated seriously, it may not be possible to make recommendations that fully satisfy the complainant.
- 3.3.2 The Panel should be sympathetic to the fact that some parents and carers will not be used to dealing with groups of people in formal situations such as this and may, therefore, feel intimidated by the setting. It is suggested therefore that the Chair ensures proceedings are as informal as the circumstances allow.
- 3.3.3 Should either party wish to produce previously undisclosed or uncirculated documentation, it is in the interests of natural justice to

adjourn the meeting to allow sufficient time for each party to consider and respond to this.

3.3.4 At Stage 3, the complainant and the Head of School , together with and other staff involved with the complaint should be interviewed separately in order that the Panel can form a clear and independent view of the complaint. The interviews, which can be arranged to run consecutively, should allow for:

- The complainant to explain the nature of their complaint(s)
- The Head of School to explain the school's response to the complaint
- Panel members to have an opportunity to question both complainant and Head of School
- All parties to have a right to call witnesses (subject to the approval of the Chair) and the Panel to the opportunity of questioning all witnesses
- Parents and carers, Head of School and staff to have the right of representation at the meeting if they so wish

3.3.5 The Chair should explain to the complainant and the Head of School that the Panel will consider its decision and a written response sent to both parties within 15 school working days.

3.3.6 The Panel will consider the complaint and all the evidence presented and

- Reach a unanimous or at least a majority decision on the complaint;
- Decide upon the most appropriate course of action to be taken to resolve the complaint and,
- Where appropriate, suggest recommended changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not arise in future

3.3.7 Recommendations should be reported to the Governing Body at an appropriate time and a written statement outlining the decision of the Panel should be sent to the Head of School and complainant. The findings and recommendations will be available for inspection on the school premises. Should any action need to be taken against a member of staff, in order to protect their rights, the phrase 'Appropriate action has or will be taken' should be used.

3.3.8 Governors should ensure that a copy of all correspondence and accompanying notes are kept on file. These records should be kept separately from the pupil's personal records and should be kept confidential at all times.

4. The Fourth Stage

Referral to the placing LA, Secretary of State or Ombudsman

4.1 The placing Local Authority

If a complainant believes that their complaint has not been responded to appropriately they may take the matter up with the Local Authority responsible for maintaining the pupil's place.

4.2 The Secretary of State

If a complainant believes that the school or school's governing body has acted "unreasonably", a complaint can be taken to the Secretary of State in the Department for Education and Skills under section 496 of the Education Act 1996. It should be noted that, in this sense, the word "unreasonably" is used in a strict sense and means acting in a way that no reasonable school or authority could act in the circumstances. This should be a last resort and you should set out the steps you have taken to resolve the problem in your letter.

4.3 The Ombudsman

Complaints about our school's complaints procedure can be made to the Ombudsman. However, it must be emphasised that the Ombudsman does not look at internal school management matters and usually expects that thorough attention has been given to a complaint before investigation by the Ombudsman.

Related Policies

Safeguarding Policy
Allegations Policy
Behaviour Management Policy

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School Complaints Procedure

Flowchart Summary of Stages of Complaints Procedure

Stage One:
Informal

Stage 2:
Head of School/Chair of Governing Body Investigation

Stage 3:
Governing Body Appeal Panel

Stage 4:
Beyond the School

