



THE KEY ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

(POLICY)

Policy approved by: Directors Committee

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Business Manager

Introduction

No-one likes criticism but an open organisation will always be willing to listen to concerns and anxieties and be ready to learn from them if appropriate. Most concerns are likely to be expressed

by the parents or carers of our students, though some may come from students themselves, or from other interested parties such as staff of other agencies, neighbours or users of the premises.

Nearly all concerns or questions can be resolved very quickly and informally if complainants feel able to voice them as soon as they arise. Obviously, the more information the school gives to stakeholders the less scope there is for misunderstanding. As part of this information, potential complainants should be told that feedback is always welcome and that, therefore, they are warmly encouraged to voice any concerns straightaway, preferably to the person concerned. In most cases, discussion, explanation, further information – or an apology, if appropriate – will resolve the issue. **Every effort should be made to allay concerns at this level and with the least possible formality. The ideal is that no concern should ever become a formal complaint.**

Occasionally, however, a concern will be too serious to be handled in this way, perhaps needing greater investigation; or the person concerned may not feel that the answers given so far have been acceptable or adequate. In such circumstances, the concern will become a complaint and the formal procedure should be rigorously followed. Even in these cases, every effort should be made to resolve the issue at the lowest possible level of the procedure. It should be very rare indeed that a complaint needs to be decided at the Appeal Stage by a Complaints Appeals Panel.

It is very important that all directors and members of staff be familiar with the centre complaints procedure and that they know who the Complaints Coordinator for the school is so that they can refer complaints to that person when approached by someone with a complaint.

In all circumstances the published procedure must be followed closely. Should difficulties arise, advice can be sought from the Complaints Coordinator.

The current Complaints Coordinator is the **Centre Business Manager**.

THE FORMAL PROCEDURE

Principles

At every stage of the formal procedure, the handling of the complaint will be:

- non-adversarial
- swift (using agreed time limits)
- fair (using independent investigation where necessary) • confidential

Throughout the process, the centre will be willing:

- to listen
- to learn
- to admit mistakes
- to apologise if appropriate
- to address any issues raised



- to change centre practice if appropriate

In using this procedure:

- staff are asked to be aware that complainants may feel intimidated by the centre as an institution and unsure whether they will be treated fairly
- complainants are asked to be aware that those complained about, especially individual members of staff, may feel very vulnerable during this process

Throughout the procedure, therefore, the aim of all parties should be not only to resolve the complaint but also to develop and sustain good relationships between all members of the community. However formal or serious the complaint, or however dissatisfied the complainant, the aim will always be reconciliation between all parties and a renewed commitment to work together amicably.

This Complaints Procedure does not apply to:

- members of staff (who should use their own grievance procedure)
- procedures with their own appeal structure e.g. exclusions

It is also totally separate from any disciplinary or capability procedures. If the investigation of any complaint were to lead to concerns on the part of the headteacher or governors about the capability or conduct of a member of staff, these would not be discussed or dealt with within this procedure.

Outline of the Procedure

There are three stages to the formal procedure. At each stage, every effort will be made to resolve the complaint without escalation to the next stage.

Stage 1

Complaint heard by a member of staff (not the subject of the complaint).

All complaints must be addressed to the Complaints Coordinator in the first instance.

(i) *Where the complaint is NOT against either the Headteacher or a member of the Directors Committee:*

The Complaints Coordinator will either hear a complaint personally or, where appropriate, refer the matter to another member of staff. The co-ordinator will also keep records of each complaint and of action taken in regard to it (using the proforma in Appendix A) so that the senior managers and directors of the centre can be kept informed of all issues that arise and as a result can change or develop centre practices where necessary or appropriate. Thus complaints about The Key Alternative Provision can be used positively as a self-evaluation tool.



(ii) *Where the complaint is directly against either the Centre Manager or a member of the Management:*

The Complaints Coordinator will first refer to the Chair of the Management, unless the complaint is against the Chair, in which case the Complaints Coordinator will refer the matter to the Vice-Chair. The Chair or Vice-Chair, unless they feel that the complaint is too grave, may call an investigation and meeting with the complainant in line with 1.1 to 1.6 below.

If either the complaint is considered too grave or this process fails to resolve the complaint, then the process would move directly to Stage 3.

Stage 2

Complaint heard by the centre manager.

Stage 3

Complaint heard by Governing Body's Complaints Appeal Panel. (Final stage)

If unsatisfied at Stage 1 or 2, the complainant can take the complaint to the next stage.

THE FORMAL COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE IN DETAIL

Stage 1 – Complaint Heard by Staff Member

NB The aim is to resolve the complaint at this level.

- 1.1** The complaint should be addressed in the first instance to the Complaints Coordinator. This may be done in person, by telephone or in writing.
- 1.2** The Complaints Coordinator will log the complaint (See Appendix A) and either investigate the complaint personally or refer it to an appropriate member of staff. In making this decision, the Coordinator will be sensitive to any indication that the complainant would have difficulty discussing the complaint with a particular member of staff.
- 1.3** If the complaint concerns the centre manager, the Coordinator should refer it to the chair of the Director Committee and, in courtesy, inform the headteacher that this has been done. If the complaint concerns the chair of the Director Committee, the co-ordinator should refer it to the vice-chair.
- 1.4** Whoever investigates the complaint will:
 - 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;
 - clarify what the complainant feels would put things right, clearing up any areas of misunderstanding, identifying areas of agreement and discussing what might be possible;

- interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish (this should include adults and students as appropriate, whether main players or witnesses);
- conduct each interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning;
- keep notes of each interview.

1.5 Timescales. The investigator should aim to complete the investigation and contact the complainant to arrange a meeting within ten working days of receiving the complaint. (See 1.6). At any point in the process, the Complaints Coordinator may decide or agree to commission a further investigation, whether by a member of staff or an independent person. If this occurs, the timescale may be extended and the complainant must be informed of the extension and the reason for it.

1.6 When the investigation is complete, the member of staff investigating will meet the complainant to try to resolve the complaint. **Every effort should be made to try to resolve the complaint at this meeting.** Any of the following may be appropriate at this point:

- an acknowledgement that the complaint is valid in whole or in part;
- an apology;
- an explanation;
- a clarification of misunderstandings;
- 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 centre policies in light of the complaint.

Some of the above may require that the investigator seek authority from the head teacher. Naturally, nothing should be offered or promised that cannot be justified or fulfilled.

1.7 If the complaint cannot be resolved, the complainant may refer it to Stage 2.

Stage 2 – Complaint Heard by Centre Manager

- 2.1** Where a complaint has not been resolved at Stage 1, it will be referred to the centre manager **unless** the original complaint concerned either the centre manager or the chair of governors in which case the complainant may refer it straight to Stage 3.
- 2.2** The centre manager will either investigate the complaint personally or refer it to another senior member of staff (who has not so far been involved) or arrange for an independent investigation if appropriate. At this point it is possible that the complaint will have escalated to include a complaint concerning the manner in which the original complaint has been handled. Both parts of the complaint would in this case need to be investigated.
- 2.3** In conducting the investigation, the investigator will operate in accordance with section

1.4.

- 2.4 Timescales:** The investigator will aim to report back to the centre manager within ten school days of receiving the complaint. The centre manager will then seek to contact the complainant and arrange a meeting within a week. (See **2.5**) At any point in the process, the centre manager may decide or agree to commission a further investigation, whether by another senior member of staff or a director or an independent person. If this occurs, the timescale may be extended; the complainant will be informed of the extension and the reason for it.
- 2.5 When the investigation is complete,** the centre manager will consider the evidence and, whether or not he or she investigated the matter personally, will meet the complainant (with or without the person who conducted the investigation if different) to try to resolve the complaint. **Every effort should be made to resolve the complaint at this meeting.** Any of the suggestions in section **1.6** may be appropriate at this point.
- 2.6** If the complaint still cannot be resolved, the complainant may refer it to Stage 3.

Stage 3

Complaint Heard by Director Body's Complaints Appeal Panel

- 3.1** A Complaints Appeal Panel, consisting of three governors, should be appointed, as required, by the Chair of the Directors (or by the Vice-Chair if the complaint is against the Chair). This panel will have delegated power to hear and finally determine complaints. Any governor who has prior involvement in or detailed knowledge of a particular complaint or its investigation may not sit on the panel hearing that complaint. In the event that there are insufficient numbers of g available to participate in a Panel, the Chair of directors or Vice-Chair of Directors as appropriate may appoint members of other governing bodies, on the recommendation of the local authority, to participate solely in the relevant complaints panel.

The complaint must not be discussed at a meeting of the full governing body as this could compromise the impartiality of the complaints panel and also any subsequent disciplinary hearing which may follow a serious complaint against a member of staff.

- 3.2** To trigger Stage 3, the complainant will have been dissatisfied with the centre's approach to the complaint in the first two stages and must now put the complaint in writing to the Chair of the Director Committee (or to the Vice-Chair if the complaint is against the Chair). The Chair or Vice-Chair will check what has happened so far and, if the procedure has been properly followed and it is appropriate to move to Stage 3, he or she, or a nominated other governor, will - via the clerk - convene a Director Committee Complaints Appeal Panel. If the original complaint concerned the chair of governors and was referred to the vice-chair at Stage 1, the vice-chair will tell the complainant the name of the nominated director for a referral to Stage 3. (see section 3.1)

3.3 This is the final stage of the procedure. There is no further redress or appeal. It is, therefore, vital that, in the spirit of the procedure, the Appeal Panel should:

- be prepared to hear complaints without preconceptions;
- examine and discuss the matter fully so that they ensure that they have every piece of information or evidence that they require;
- be prepared to commission, organise or conduct further investigations if necessary;
- give the complainant the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction and worries and to suggest what might put things right;
- be prepared to take whatever action is required.

3.4 Timescales. If possible, the date of the Appeal Panel Meeting should be agreed by all parties within five centre working days of the receipt of the written referral of the complaint. The meeting itself should, if possible, be held within fifteen centre working days of the receipt of the referral. If the complainant or the centre manager wishes to submit information in writing to the panel, they should send it to the clerk to the directors at least five centre days before the meeting. As far as possible, the meeting should not be delayed if the referral comes at the end of a term, especially at the end of the summer term. Since the aim of the procedure is to resolve the issue and effect reconciliation if necessary, it will be best if the matter can come to the panel as quickly as possible, especially as the complainant will already have been engaged over a protracted period in attempts to put things right.

The Meeting of the Governing Body's Complaints Appeal Panel

3.5 Before the meeting: Members of the panel should consider carefully any documentation from the centre manager or the complainant but **should not discuss the matter with any one, including the other members of the panel, before the meeting.**

This is in the interest of fairness and natural justice. The appeal panel must operate scrupulously as an independent arbiter of the complaint.

3.6 Conduct of the meeting – to be borne in mind:

- One of the panel must act as Chair and there should be a clerk for the meeting.
- A human resources (HR) professional may be invited to advise and support the panel.
- The meeting room should be private and as informally laid out as possible in order to encourage a spirit of partnership. It is very important that there should be nothing adversarial about the proceedings. The tone of the whole meeting will be set by the atmosphere of the room in which it is set and by the way people are greeted. Panel members should be sensitive to the vulnerabilities and sensitivities of all concerned. Parents/Carers, for example, may be emotional when talking about their child; the headteacher and others involved in the earlier investigations may fear that their professionalism could be under attack. Everyone needs to remember that the aim and purpose of the meeting is to resolve the complaint and find ways of going forward

together. It is possible that the complainant may not be satisfied with the outcome if the panel does not find in their favour, but the conduct of the meeting can go a long way towards smoothing such dissatisfaction. At the very least, every complainant should feel at the end that their complaint has been taken seriously and examined impartially.

- If the complaint is about the Centre Manager or Chair of governors and has been investigated by the Chair of governors or another governor at Stage 2 then that governor may present the case for the centre.
- Very special care should be taken if the complainant is a child or if there are child witnesses. Children's views should be given equal consideration to those of adults. If a parent/carers has complained on behalf of a child, the parent/carers should be given the opportunity to say which parts of the meeting the child needs to attend.
- The parent/carers must be told that they are permitted to bring a friend or representative to the meeting.

3.7 Role of the Clerk The clerk will:

- confirm to all parties in writing the date, time and venue of the hearing;
- receive and distribute any documentation to be read before the hearing;
- meet and welcome all parties as they arrive at the hearing;
- record the proceedings;
- notify all parties of the panel's decision, aiming to do so within 5 school days (or as decided by panel). The wording of any letters will be agreed with the chair of the panel.

3.8 Role of the Chair of the Panel The Chair will ensure:

- that the procedure is properly followed;
- that the procedure for the hearing of the complaint is explained to all parties and that all parties have the opportunity to put their case without undue interruption;
- that the issues are addressed;
- that all parties are put at their ease, especially any who may not be accustomed to speaking at such a hearing;
- that the proceedings are kept as informal as possible and that everyone treats each other with respect and courtesy;
- that the panel operates in an open-minded and independent way; that time is given for all parties to consider any 'new' evidence.

3.9 Order of Proceedings for the Hearing of the Complaint

- Welcome, introductions and explanations of the proceedings by the Chair.
- The complainant is invited to explain the complaint.
- The centre manager may question the complainant.
- The panel may ask questions at any time.
- If there are any witnesses for the complainant, each one is invited into the hearing in turn and in each case the witness is invited to speak, then the headteacher may question them. In each case, the witness will leave after their 'evidence'.
- The centre manager is invited to explain the centre's actions.
- The complainant may question the centre manager.

- If there are any witnesses for the centre manager, they are treated in exactly the same way as the witnesses for the complainant.
- When the Chair is sure that all parties have asked all that they need to, the complainant is invited to sum up their complaint.
- The centre manager is then invited to sum up the centre's actions and response to the complaint.
- The Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within three centre days following the day of the hearing.
- Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues (advised by the HR professional if there).

3.10 Options Open to the Panel The panel may:

- 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 centre's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.

3.11 After the Hearing The following actions need to be taken.

- The Chair of the panel agrees with the clerk the wording of the letter to be sent to both parties. The clerk then ensures that the letter is sent out in accordance with the agreed timescale.
- The clerk writes up the notes of the meeting and gives a copy to the chair of the panel.
- The clerk ensures that any recommendation to change the centre procedures is put on the agenda for the next directors meeting.

3.12 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 procedure having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue once the complaints procedure has been exhausted for a given complaint, the chair of governors is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

GENERAL POINTS

Using and Publicising the Procedure

The Director Committee needs to adopt the procedure formally and then to review and readopt it as required. They also need to ensure that staff are confident in its use and that it is appropriately publicised to all interested parties, especially parents.

Communicaton



At the earliest opportunity, the Complaints Coordinator will ensure that the complainant receives a copy of this procedure. All written correspondence with the complainant will be sent by recorded delivery.

Recording and Reporting Complaints

In order to turn complaints to positive effect, it is important that records are kept so that at regular intervals (perhaps termly) both the senior managers of the school and the governing body can reflect on issues that have arisen and on the way in which they have been handled. The Complaints Coordinator is the most obvious person to hold these records and to collate them into a report for the headteacher (if he or she is not the Coordinator) and the directors. Such a report could be a valuable self-evaluation tool.

Confidentiality

All records of complaints must be kept strictly confidential, except where a legitimate subject access request is made under The Data Protection Act 1998.

Complaints Made Other Than in Accordance with the Procedure

Sometimes a complainant may be unfamiliar with, or unaware of, the complaints procedure; sometimes they may choose to take their complaint straight to directors or to other parties such as the Local Authority. In every such case, the procedure must be strictly adhered to, and the complaint redirected to its proper stage in the procedure. It is, therefore, important that all members of staff and all governors are fully aware of the procedure and that it is publicly available. It is particularly important that governors know that they must not attempt to deal with complaints themselves, but should tell complainants to take their complaint to the centre's Complaints Coordinator.

Complaints Made to the Department for Education

In unusual cases the Secretary of State may have the power to intervene if the Director Committee acted as no reasonable governing body would act. This is very unlikely to be the case unless the whole of the school's own complaints procedure has been exhausted.

Complaints to Ofsted

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 at s.160 provides a procedure for Ofsted to investigate parents' complaints about a centre. A complaint cannot be investigated unless the centre's complaints procedure has been exhausted, subject to the Chief Inspector's discretion to waive this requirement.

London East Alternative Provision

APPENDIX A EXAMPLE OF A COMPLAINT RECORD FORM (could be used for Stage 1 and Stage 2)

PART A RECORD OF COMPLAINT



Complainant's Name:

Address:

Telephone:

Details of the Complaint:

Date Complaint Made:

Action Already Taken to Resolve the Matter:

Complainant's View of what might resolve the issue:

PART B ACTION TAKEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Complaint Investigated By:

Action (with dates):

**Date of formal meeting with complainant: Outcome
of the Meeting:**

Complaints Procedure – Stage 1-3

*Complaints Business manager. Coordinator is currently the Centre.
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* Timescales

At any given time the PCC or investigator may decide to extend the timescale, e.g. in order to commission an external investigator. If this is done, the complainant must be informed in writing with reasons.

