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Complaints For Governors

18th September 2025

Welcome & Objectives

By the end of the session:

- ▶ Purpose of the Trust Policy
- ▶ Types of Complaint & What is covered by the Policy
- ▶ Understand the three stages and the criteria for each
- ▶ Role of Governors in complaints
- ▶ How to investigate and respond to complaints
- ▶ Case Study
- ▶ Helpful tips (including feedback from previous complaints)
- ▶ Signpost to further resources

Trust Complaints Policy

- ▶ Why is a Trust Policy?
 - ▶ DfE mandated
- ▶ Who approves the policy and how frequently is it updated?
 - ▶ The policy is approved by the Board of Trustees annually.
- ▶ Where can I access a copy?
 - ▶ The school website should have the approved policy on their website, and there is also a copy on the Trust website.
- ▶ Effective Use
 - ▶ Follow the process fully – if the process is followed, we are always compliant.
- ▶ Reporting Requirements
 - ▶ Schools should retain a complaints log which governors can review and look for trends or areas of concern

Complaints are usually managed by the Chair when escalated, but this is not always the case, and useful if someone else on the board knows the process

Complaint vs Concern

A concern is an issue raised by a parent or carer that is usually informal and often resolved quickly through discussion. It may not require formal procedures and is typically about day-to-day matters.

Example:

A parent mentions to the class teacher that their child is feeling left out during group activities and asks if this can be looked into.

→ This is a concern because it's raised informally and can likely be resolved through a conversation or small adjustment.

A complaint is a formal expression of dissatisfaction that usually follows a defined complaints procedure. It often involves more serious or unresolved issues and may require investigation and a formal response.

Example:

A parent submits a written complaint to the headteacher stating that their child has been repeatedly bullied and the school has failed to take appropriate action despite previous reports.

→ This is a complaint because it involves a serious issue, has not been resolved informally, and requires formal investigation.

Concern or Complaint?

A parent emails the headteacher saying they are unhappy with the way a teacher spoke to their child during a lesson. They ask for reassurance that this won't happen again.

This could be either a **concern** or a **complaint**, depending on:

- **Tone and intent:** If the parent is seeking clarification or reassurance, it may be a concern.
- **Formality:** If the email is part of a pattern or includes demands for disciplinary action, it may be a complaint.
- **School response:** If the issue escalates or cannot be resolved informally, it may need to be treated as a complaint.
- Encourage staff to treat all concerns seriously and respond promptly. A well-handled concern can prevent escalation into a formal complaint.

What Types of Complaints are not covered by the Trust Policy

ADMISSIONS TO SCHOOLS	This is a separate process
MATTERS LIKELY TO REQUIRE A CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATION	Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance.
EXCLUSION OF CHILDREN FROM SCHOOL	This is a separate process (LA differences)
WHISTLEBLOWING	This is a separate Trust policy
STAFF GRIEVANCES	This is a separate Trust policy
STAFF CONDUCT	This is a separate Trust policy
SEND	Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), where the complaint relates to a Local Authority's decision not to issue an Educational, Health and Care (EHC) Plan or a Local Authority has failed to meet statutory timescales when carrying out an EHC Needs assessment. In these circumstances, the complaint should be made directly to the Local Authority undertaking the statutory assessment. For all other SEND related concerns/complaints this policy applies.

Stages of a Complaint

Stages	Summary of Actions
Informal Stage (1)	The school will aim to resolve a concern or difficulty within 10 school days of the date that it was raised
Formal Stage (2)	The headteacher will aim to resolve a concern or difficulty within 15 school days of the date that it was raised.
Escalation Stage (3)	This is a panel of 2 governors & an independent governor within 20 days of the date it was raised.
Exceptions (where the process is slightly different)	If the complaint is directly about the Headteacher If the complaint is directly about a Governor or Chair
Next Steps	If after the process has completed the parent is still unhappy, there is no further right to appeal under the policy
Ofsted/DfE	If a complainant wishes to raise that the process has not been followed, they must do this via DfE/Ofsted

Challenges

Vexatious Complaints

- ▶ Complaints that are obsessive, harassing, or intended to cause disruption rather than seek resolution. They often lack substance and may be repeated despite being resolved.

Repetitive Complaints

- ▶ Complaints that raise the same issue multiple times, even after a full response has been provided. These may stem from dissatisfaction with the outcome rather than new concerns.

Personal Complaints

- ▶ Complaints that target individuals (e.g., staff or governors) rather than school policies or procedures. They may be emotionally charged and require careful handling to remain objective and fair.

Complaint Handling: What Not to Do

- **Don't ignore or delay:** Failing to respond promptly can escalate the issue and damage trust. Communication with the parent early on in the process can also help prevent further escalation and help resolve.
- **Don't get defensive:** Stay calm and professional — even if the complaint feels unfair, or the tone feels personal
- **Don't prejudge the outcome:** Investigate fully before drawing conclusions.
- **Don't breach confidentiality:** Keep details private and share only with those directly involved.
- **Don't deviate from the complaints policy:** Follow the agreed process to ensure fairness and consistency.
- **Don't use jargon or legalistic language:** Communicate clearly and respectfully with parents.
- **Don't forget to record:** Keep accurate notes of all communications and decisions and investigations
- **Don't miss the opportunity to learn:** Use complaints to improve practice and strengthen relationships.

Investigating a Complaint

- ▶ Clarify whether the issue is a concern or a formal complaint.
- ▶ Check if the complaint has already been addressed informally.
- ▶ Identify the specific issues raised and what resolution the parent is seeking.
- ▶ Gather information – speak to all relevant parties (staff, pupils, parents) in a respectful and confidential manner
- ▶ Collect written records, emails, policies and any other relevant documentation
- ▶ Keep detailed notes of all conversations and findings

Follow the policy

- ▶ Ensure the complaint is logged and acknowledge within the time frame set out in the policy
- ▶ Assign the appropriate person to investigate

Investigating Complaints

Timely and Transparent

- ▶ Stick to the timelines outlined in the complaints policy
- ▶ Keep the complainant informed of progress and expected timeframes
- ▶ Avoid unnecessary delays, but ensure the investigation is thorough

Be fair and objective

- ▶ Approach the investigation without bias or assumptions
- ▶ Consider all sides of the issue and weigh the evidence carefully
- ▶ Avoid making judgements before all the facts are gathered

Provide a Clear Outcome

- ▶ Summarise findings clearly and explain the decision
- ▶ If the complaint is upheld, outline actions to be taken
- ▶ If not upheld, explain the reasoning respectfully

Learn and improve

- ▶ Identify any lessons learned or changes needed in practice or policy.
- ▶ Share learning with relevant staff or governors (while maintaining confidentiality)

Panel Tips

Be Clear on the Panel's Role

- The panel does **not reinvestigate** the complaint but reviews how it was handled.
- Focus on whether the procedures were followed correctly and fairly.
- Consider whether the outcome was reasonable based on the evidence.

Prepare Thoroughly

- Ensure panel members have no prior involvement in the complaint.
- Review all documentation in advance: complaint, responses, policies, and correspondence.
- Agree on the format and who will attend (e.g. complainant, school representative, clerk).

Maintain Impartiality

- Approach the panel with an open mind and no bias.
- Treat all parties respectfully and fairly.
- Avoid making assumptions or personal judgments.

Ensure a Structured Meeting

- Follow the complaints policy for panel format and procedure.
- Allow both sides to present their case and ask questions.
- Keep the meeting focused and avoid going off-topic.

Panel Tips continued

Ask Clarifying Questions

- Use open, neutral questions to understand the facts.
- Clarify any inconsistencies or gaps in the information provided.

Deliberate Privately and Carefully

- After hearing both sides, the panel should meet privately to discuss.
- Consider whether the complaint was handled appropriately and whether the outcome was fair.
- Decide whether to uphold, partially uphold, or dismiss the complaint.

Communicate Clearly

- Provide a written outcome to the complainant, explaining the panel's decision and reasoning.
- Be respectful and professional in tone, even if the complaint is not upheld.
- Outline any recommendations or actions, if applicable.

Record and Learn

- Ensure the clerk records the meeting and outcome accurately.
- Share learning with the governing board or trust leadership (while maintaining confidentiality).

Panel Don'ts

Don't include anyone directly involved in the complaint: Panel members must be impartial and not previously involved in the issue.

Don't allow legal representation (unless exceptional): These panels are not legal proceedings. Legal reps can intimidate and complicate the process.

Don't treat the panel as an investigation team: Their role is to review how the complaint was handled, not to re-investigate the facts.

Don't ignore the complainant's right to complete the procedure: Complainants must be allowed to go through all stages unless the complaint is clearly serial or vexatious.

Don't deviate from the published complaints procedure without justification: Any deviation must be documented and explained clearly.

Don't use ambiguous language in your policy: Avoid terms like “may” or “should” — use “will” to ensure clarity and accountability.

Don't allow recording of meetings without consent: All parties must agree in advance if meetings are to be recorded.

Don't overlook accessibility needs: Allow alternative formats for communication if the complainant has disabilities or language barriers.

Don't allow bias or conflicts of interest: Panel members must be independent and able to demonstrate impartiality.

Don't ignore the emotional impact: Ensure the process is respectful, non-adversarial, and sensitive to the complainant's experience.

Panel Feedback & Tips from Governors

- ▶ Remember a panel hearing is an important and likely stressful experience for a parent, guardian or carer
- ▶ Address the complainant with respect, starting with introductions and how each person wishes to be addressed
- ▶ Tone of voice - Adopt open questioning techniques in a friendly manner with open body language
- ▶ Avoid the use of closed questions or just statements, use open questions where possible.
- ▶ Whilst the outcome may not be what the parent hoped for, they should feel listened to, treated with respect and shown compassion
- ▶ Be aware of different perspectives, different governors bring different levels of experience, skills and background to a panel, just as parents and carer backgrounds do.

Further Resources

- ▶ Trust Complaints Policy
- ▶ DfE Guidance
- ▶ NGA & Learning Link
- ▶ Governance and Compliance Team
- ▶ Other Governors