



## **COMPLAINTS POLICY**

(incorporating serial and unreasonable complaints)

**Our school motto – Esse Quam Videri – To be, rather than to seem to be**

**The school has adopted Wokingham Borough Council's model complaints policy. This policy is to be read in line with WBC's model policy. Where there are any differences WBC's model policy is to be followed.**

### **Who is allowed to complain?**

This policy may be used by anyone who has a concern or complaint about any aspect of the school. In the main this will mean the families of our pupils, but may include families of pupils who are no longer at the school, neighbours of the school, or any other members of the local community. Every effort will be made to resolve all complaints received. Complaints will always be investigated so that the school can ensure that all statutory duties are being met and if not address the issues raised and learn from them- for example child protection issues may only come to light after the pupil has left the school.

### **Aims and objectives of the policy**

This complaints policy aims to:

- Encourage the resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible;
- Ensure that concerns are dealt with quickly, fully and fairly and within clearly defined time limits;
- Provide effective responses and appropriate redress;
- Maintain good working relationships between all people involved with the school.

### **Complaints procedure**

The complaints procedure is set out on pages 5-9.

In most cases any concern or complaint, regardless of whose attention it is initially brought to, should be discussed informally before being escalated to any of the following three formal stages:

- Stage 1 Referral to Head Teacher
- Stage 2 Complaint referred to Chair of Governors
- Stage 3 Review by Governing Body Complaints Panel

This policy sets out the most suitable and effective process for dealing with the majority of complaints which are not covered by alternative procedures (see page 4).

## **Circumstances under which stages of the procedure should be missed out**

In some cases, it may be deemed inappropriate for individuals to discuss their concerns informally. In such cases, complainants may be directed to contact the Headteacher directly (i.e. begin at stage 1). Complainants may choose to contact the Headteacher directly of their own accord. In these cases it will be at the discretion of the Headteacher as to whether or not it is appropriate for the complainant to discuss the matter informally before invoking the formal complaints procedure at Stage 1.

In all cases where the complaint concerns the school's Headteacher directly, stage 1 will be missed out and the formal complaints procedure will begin at stage 2.

If and when complaints about the school are brought to the attention of Wokingham Borough Council, complainants will be advised to contact the school and to follow the procedures set out in the school's complaints policy.

## **Monitoring complaints**

At all formal stages of the complaints procedure, the following information will be recorded:

- The name of the complainant;
- The date and time at which complaint was made;
- The details of the complaint;
- The desired outcome of the complainant;
- How the complaint is investigated (including written records of interviews held);
- Results and conclusions of investigations;
- Any action taken;
- The complainant's response (satisfaction or further pursuit of complaint).

The school may choose to appoint a member of staff as a 'complaints co-ordinator'. When this is the case, this individual will have the responsibility for the operation and management of the school complaints policy and will be responsible for monitoring complaints. Records will be retained within school for 6 years from the date of resolution and may then be destroyed.

## **Upholding or not upholding complaints**

At each stage of the complaints procedure, the conclusion will be either:

- 1 That the complaint is upheld (in part or in full) and, where appropriate, some form of action is taken.

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.

Or

2 That the complaint is not upheld and reasons for this are clearly given.

The complainant may either choose to take no further action or will be advised of how to take the complaint to the next relevant stage of the complaints policy.

### **Publicity and communication**

There is a legal requirement for schools to publicise their complaints procedures. This policy will be included on the school's website or available through the school office.

### **Confidentiality**

All conversations and correspondence will be treated confidentially. Personal information will only be shared between staff and governors on a 'need to know' basis. Confidentiality will be maintained within the Governing Body to ensure sufficient governors have no prior knowledge of the complaint to enable a complaints panel to be convened, if required, at stage 3.

The school processes any personal data collected during the complaints process in accordance with its data protection policy. Further details can be found in the Privacy Notice on the school's website.

### **Accompaniment**

It is an expectation that equal respect will be granted to each person involved within the process and that differences between people will be respected and understood. This includes the complainant's right to be accompanied by a friend or relative at discussions and hearings and/or to submit formal complaints which have been written by another individual on their behalf.

### **Support offered by Wokingham Borough Council**

Wokingham Borough Council Children's Services offer advice and guidance to headteachers and governing bodies who request this additional support when dealing with a complaint.

It is the responsibility of the Local Authority to ensure that schools are implementing their agreed policies. It is not the role of the Local Authority to become involved in setting policy or to intervene in individual cases, but to ensure that agreed policies have been applied appropriately. The responsibility for managing complaints lies with the governing body.

Where there is a serious allegation against the Headteacher, it is recommended that the governing body seek advice from Governor Services at Wokingham Borough Council from the outset.

### **Anonymous complaints**

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

### **Time scales**

You must raise the complaint within three months of the incident or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. We will consider complaints made outside of this time frame if exceptional circumstances apply.

## **Complaints received outside of term time**

We will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

## **Time between stages**

After each stage, the complainant and the individual who is dealing with their complaint at that time will allow 15 school days to decide an appropriate time limit within which the next stage should be accessed, if at all. If the complaint is not submitted to the next stage within this agreed time limit it should be considered as closed.

## **Changes to time limits and deadlines**

In general, the time limits and deadlines contained within this policy will be adhered to by the school. However, in certain circumstances it may be inappropriate or impractical, for example, if an investigation cannot be conducted due to school holidays or illness. Where a complaint leads to criminal proceedings this will always be the case.

If, and when, it becomes necessary to alter the time limits and deadlines set out within this policy, the complainant will be told and given an explanation as to why this has been the case.

## **Circumstances under which this procedure should not be used-**

This guidance does not refer to areas where Wokingham Borough Council (WBC), as the Local Authority (LA), has the lead role or for which separate appeal arrangements are provided. These include:

- Pupil admissions
- Pupil exclusions
- Statutory Assessment of Special Educational Needs

Issues related to child protection, criminal investigations and employee grievances will also all be dealt with separately from this policy.

This complaints policy is distinct from formal staff disciplinary proceedings and this will be made clear to all concerned. There may be occasions where a complaint gives rise to disciplinary procedures which put the complaints process on hold. If, and when, this occurs, the complainant will be informed. Any non-disciplinary aspects of the complaint will continue to be dealt with through the usual complaints procedures.

This policy does not cover complaints made against Wokingham Borough Council. Any complaint of this sort should be dealt with in accordance with the Council's '*Corporate Complaints Procedure*'.

## **PROCEDURES FOR HANDLING COMPLAINTS**

### **Informal discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The vast majority of concerns can be dealt with informally. There are many occasions where concerns are resolved straight away without the need to submit a formal complaint. Indeed, many concerns raised at this level might not be classified as complaints.

#### **Who to speak to informally**

Individuals may decide to raise their concerns with a member of school administrative staff, class teacher, senior teacher, governor or headteacher depending on their wishes and the type of issues they want to discuss.

#### **Monitoring**

It is not necessary to record or monitor concerns at this level.

#### **Time scales**

There are no specific time scales for dealing with concerns at this stage. However, as at all stages, issues will be considered and dealt with as quickly and effectively as possible.

#### **Response**

The individual who raised the issue will be informed of any action to be taken to resolve the issue. If appropriate, this might be confirmed in writing.

#### **Options for complainant**

If the individual is dissatisfied with the response they have been given and would like to take their concerns further, they will be referred to the school's complaints procedure.

## **STAGE 1: Referral to the Headteacher**

### **Introduction**

This is the first stage of the formal complaints process and, as a result, all communications between parties will to be carefully recorded and monitored as set out in the 'monitoring complaints' section of this document.

When a complaint is made directly against the school's Headteacher, stage 1 is not required and the formal procedure begins at stage 2.

### **Submitting a formal complaint**

By this stage it must be clear that the concern is a definite complaint which will be dealt with according to this policy and should be made formally to the Headteacher. This can be in writing, via an email, over the telephone or face to face at a meeting.

### **Acknowledgement and time scales**

The Headteacher will formally acknowledge the complaint within 3 school days of receiving it and begin an investigation.

### **The investigation**

The Headteacher will investigate the complaint and review any relevant documentation and information. If necessary, the Headteacher will take statements from those involved.

### **Response**

The Headteacher will provide the complainant with a full written response within 10 school days of acknowledging it. This response will determine whether or not the complaint has been upheld, the reasons why, and what action (if any) will be taken. The response will provide details of how to move on to the next stage, if the complainant is not satisfied.

## **STAGE 2: Complaint referred to the Chair of Governors or Vice Chair, if more appropriate**

### **Introduction**

Upon receiving a formally submitted complaint at this stage the Chair of Governors or his/her nominee will seek to resolve the issue with the complainant by other means without the need for a complaints committee review at stage 3.

When a complaint is made directly against the school's Headteacher, stage 1 is not required and the formal procedure begins at stage 2.

### **Submitting a formal complaint**

The complainant must make a formal request to the Chair of Governors who will investigate the complaint or arrange for his/her nominee to investigate it.

### **Acknowledgement and time scales**

The Chair of Governors or his/her nominee will formally acknowledge the complaint within 3 school days of receiving it and begin an investigation.

### **The investigation**

The Chair of Governors or his/her nominee will investigate the complaint and review any relevant documentation and information. If necessary, the Chair of Governors or his/her nominee will take statements from those involved.

### **Response**

The Chair of Governors or his/her nominee will provide the complainant with a full written response within 10 school days of acknowledging it. This response will determine whether or not the complaint has been upheld, the reasons why, and what action (if any) will be taken. The response will provide details of how to move on to the next stage, if the complainant is not satisfied.

### **Complaint against the Chair and/or Vice-Chair of Governors or governing body**

If the complaint is about the Chair and/or Vice-Chair of Governors, or the governing body as a whole, the complainant should put the complaint in writing (marked Private and Confidential) to the Clerk to Governors and this will either be investigated by an independent person or be considered under Stage 3 (using an independent panel of governors). This will be agreed in conjunction with the complainant.

## **STAGE 3: Review by Governing Body Complaints Panel**

### **Introduction**

If the complainant remains unsatisfied following an investigation by the Chair of Governors they can ask for their complaint to be referred to a governor complaints panel.

The complaints panel will be clerked by a member of the school staff, the clerk to the governing body or another governor.

### **The Committee**

The panel will generally consist of three governors who have not previously been involved with dealing with the complaint. If the Governing Body is unable to find 3 governors without prior involvement they can contact WBC Governors Services to assist in finding independent governors to sit on the panel. The panel will elect its own chair.

If required, WBC will offer support and guidance to the clerk, the Chair of governors and/or the members of the complaints panel on procedural issues but will not play any part in reviewing the details of the complaint itself which is the responsibility alone of the complaints panel.

### **Acknowledgement and time scales**

The Chair of Governors will acknowledge receipt of the complainant's letter within 3 school days. This letter will inform them that their complaint will be heard by a complaints panel within 15 school days.

### **Governor Complaints Panel Arrangements**

The Chair of Governors will contact the clerk and ask them to begin making preparatory arrangements.

The Clerk will write to the complainant to inform them of the date of the meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within 15 school days of receipt of the Stage 2 request. If this is not possible, the Clerk will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed. If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Clerk will decide when to hold the meeting. It will then proceed in the complainant's absence on the basis of written submissions from both parties.

The clerk will then formally write to the complainant, the headteacher and any other relevant staff or witnesses and inform them:

- Of the date, time and venue of the hearing;
- How it will be conducted;
- Request for any supporting documentation by either the complainant or the school which must be returned to the Clerk no later than 5 school days before the hearing takes place; this should include any request from supporting witnesses or representatives to attend with either party.
- Of the rights of accompaniment as outlined in this document.

The clerk will ensure that all parties receive all relevant documents at least 3 school days before the date of the hearing so as to allow individuals to familiarise themselves with them.



## **Governors Complaints Panel Meeting**

The Chair will allow each party involved to explain their understanding or interpretation of events and for the Panel to question them for further clarification. Complainants do not have to attend the Panel meeting if they would prefer not to, and all written evidence will be considered.

Ultimately, the chair of the meeting has control over its proceedings.

The committee will also not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New complaints must be dealt with from Stage 1 of the procedure.

The meeting will be held in private. Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs require it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending must be sought before meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

## **After the Panel meeting**

The panel will then consider the complaint and all the evidence presented and:

Reach a majority decision;

- Uphold the complaint in whole or in part
- Dismiss the complaint in whole or in part

If the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, the committee will:

- decide or recommend upon the appropriate action (if any) to be taken;
- where appropriate, suggest changes to, or request a review of, the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not happen again.

This information will be included in letters to both the headteacher and the complainant. See Governors Complaints Panel Guidance notes for more detail.

## **Options for complainant**

This is the end of the schools complaints process. If the complainant is not satisfied they can contact the Secretary of State or Ofsted.

The Secretary of State has the power to consider complaints that the governing body has acted unreasonably in the discharge of any of its statutory duties. The complainant can refer their complaint to the Department for Education online at: [Complain about a school to the Department for Education \(DfE\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-a-school-to-the-department-for-education)

by telephone on 0370 000 2288 or by writing to: Department for Education, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester M1 2WD.

The Chief Inspector (Ofsted) has the power to investigate complaints about the school as a whole. (Standards of education, welfare of pupils and school management). Ofsted will not normally investigate cases to do with individual pupils.

Parents may seek advice from the Department for Education at <https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school/state-schools> or from the Advisory Centre for

Education at [www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk) or on their helpline which is available on Monday - Tuesday 10am -1pm on 0300 0115 142 (term time only).

## **GOVERNOR COMPLAINTS PANEL GUIDANCE NOTES**

### **1 Terms of Reference**

The panel must be convened according to the complaints procedure published by the school as part of their complaints policy. All parties should have received a copy of the procedures.

### **2 Composition**

The panel must consist of three governors previously unconnected with the case. This would usually exclude the Chairman of Governors if he/she has had prior involvement.

The Chairman of the panel is agreed by the other members of the panel.

The meeting must be minuted by a nominated clerk who is usually the clerk to the governing body.

The minutes must be an accurate representation of what happens at the meeting. The minutes are confidential.

### **3 Chairman's Introduction**

- Welcome and introduce everyone in the room and their role in the proceedings. Those present will be the panel members, the clerk, the headteacher (or the person representing the school), the complainant (both parties are entitled to be accompanied by a friend or relative)
- Witnesses in support of either the school or the complainant should wait outside the room until called.
- Explain the reason for the panel being held – to offer a fresh and fair look at the complaint from stage 2 as defined in the complaints procedures.
- Explain that the panel cannot consider new complaints at this stage.
- Explain the structure of the meeting.
- Explain that the panel will deliberate separately, in private, after the meeting and their conclusions will be sent out to all parties within 5 school days.
- Ensure that everyone has a copy of the papers including a copy of the complaints procedures.
- Check that everyone understands all of the above.

The Chairman must ensure that:

- There is a clear written statement of the complaint which is the same as the complaint previously investigated. It may be appropriate to clarify if any aspects of the complaint fall outside the remit of the panel.

- There is a clear statement of the outcomes desired.

#### **4 Structure of the Meeting**

- a The complainant will be given the opportunity to explain their complaint.
- b The panel and the Headteacher (or person representing the school) will be allowed to ask the complainant questions.
- c The Headteacher (or person representing the school), will be given the opportunity to present the school's response, interpretation or view about the complaint.
- d The panel and the complainant will be allowed to ask the Headteacher (or person representing the school) questions.
- e At the panel's discretion, witnesses may be called and heard in support of either party's representations, and if so may be questioned by the panel and either party.
- f The complainant will be given the opportunity to make a final statement.
- g The Headteacher (or person representing the school) will be given the opportunity to make a final statement.
- h The Chairman will confirm with both parties that they have had the opportunity to put their case.
- i The Chairman will thank all for attending and explain that the panel will deliberate separately in private and a letter setting out the panel's conclusions will be sent out within 5 school days.

#### **5 Deliberation and Conclusion**

The main points of the complaint must all be addressed.

- For each point, the panel need to explain their findings based on fact where possible.
- The panel need to consider the outcomes requested and agree or disagree giving reasons.
- The panel can make recommendations to either the Headteacher or governing body.
- The concluding letter must be signed by the Chairman of the panel.
- It will be sent out promptly and within 5 schools days of the meeting.
- The letter should indicate that this is the final stage of the schools complaints procedure. Where relevant, it should refer the complaint to other available avenues if dissatisfied with the outcome.

## **MANAGING SERIAL AND UNREASONABLE COMPLAINTS**

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with our school. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive, or threatening.

We define unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the school, such as, if the complainant:

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance
- refuses to co-operate with the complaints investigation process
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on
- raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced
- changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed)
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with
- make unreasonable demands and fail to accept that these may be unreasonable, for example, insist on responses to complaints or enquiries being provided more urgently than is reasonable or within the complaints procedure or normal recognised practice
- are known to have recorded meetings or telephone conversations or circulated such records to third parties without the prior knowledge and consent of other parties involved
- uses threats to intimidate
- uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence
- knowingly provides falsified information
- publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint, while the complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent (either by letter, phone, email or text), as it could delay the outcome being reached.

Whenever possible, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking.

If the behaviour continues, the Headteacher will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and ask them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from the school.

### **Strategy for Dealing with an ‘unreasonable’ complainant.**

Where complainants’ actions have been identified as ‘unreasonable’ under the scope of this policy, taking account of the above criteria, the Headteacher and Chair of Governors (or if unavailable the Vice Chair of Governors) will determine what action to take. The Clerk will implement such action and will notify complainants, in writing, of the reasons why their actions have been classified as ‘unreasonable’ and what action will be taken. They will also be notified of the review procedure.

This notification may be copied for the information of others already involved in the complaint or matters closely related to it, e.g. LA officers, staff, Members of Parliament, Members of WBC. A record must be kept, for future reference, of the reasons why a complainant has been classified as “unreasonable”.

It may be decided to deal with complainants in one or more of the following ways:

- (a) Withdraw contact with the complainant either in person, by telephone, by email, by fax, by letter or any combination of these, provided that at least one form of contact is maintained. If staff are to withdraw from a telephone conversation with a complainant there will be an agreed statement available for them to use at such times.
- (b) To restrict contact to liaison through a designated member of staff.
- (c) Notify the complainant in writing that the Governing Body has responded fully to the points raised and has tried to resolve the complaint but there is nothing more to add and continuing contact on the matter will serve no useful purpose. The complainant should be notified that any form of contact, either orally or in writing, in relation to their complaint, or any further complaints relative to the same period of time, or the same or similar issues as an earlier complaint, is at an end, and that further contact received will be acknowledged but not answered.
- (d) Temporarily suspend, for a period to be specified to the complainant, all contact with the complainant, provided that the Governing body shall not, without the consent of the LA, withdraw or not provide any services to which the complainant or his/her family are entitled to receive.

Such status will be regularly reviewed, and, where appropriate, withdrawn at a later date. Such action may be appropriate where a complainant subsequently demonstrates a more reasonable approach or submits a further complaint for which the normal complaints procedures would appear appropriate.

A panel of 3 governors will review their decisions every six months.

The panel on review may either withdraw the categorisation of a person’s actions as an ‘unreasonable’ or amend the strategy being applied to that person.

If the panel considers it appropriate to withdraw the marking of 'unreasonable', normal contact with the complainant and application of the school's complaints procedure will be resumed. The complainant will be given notice of this decision forthwith.

Copies of all decisions relating to the marking of a person as an 'unreasonable' complainant will be sent to the Clerk who will hold and maintain a central register of such decisions.

Statistical information will be presented annually to the Governing Body with details of complainants who are categorised as serial, persistent or 'unreasonable'.

## **General**

Nothing in this policy affects an individual's statutory rights.

The school processes any personal data collected during this process in accordance with its data protection policy. Further details can be found in the Privacy Notice on the school's website. Any data collected is held securely and accessed by, and disclosed to, individuals only for the purposes of completing the complaints procedure.

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