



St Oswald's CE Primary School

Complaints Policy

Last Review Date: February 2019

Next Review Date: February 2021

Suggested Frequency of Review: Every two years

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Concerns and Complaints about School - Guidance notes for Parents

If you have a concern or complaint

We would like you to tell us about it. We welcome suggestions for improving our work in the school. Be assured that no matter what you want to tell us, our support and respect for you and your child in the school, will not be affected in any way. Please tell us of your concern as soon as possible. It is difficult for us to investigate properly an incident or problem, which has happened some time ago.

What to do first

Most concerns and complaints can be sorted out quickly by speaking with your child's class teacher.

Any member of staff at the school can help you and direct you to the most appropriate person to deal with your complaint. If you have a complaint you feel should be looked at by the head in the first instance you can contact them straightaway if you prefer. It is usually best to discuss the problem face to face. You may need an appointment to do this, and can make one by ringing, calling or emailing the school. You can take a friend or relation to the appointment with you if you would like to do so.

All staff will make every effort to resolve your problem informally. They will make sure that they understand what you feel went wrong, and they will explain their own actions to you. They will ask what you would like the school to do to put things right. Of course, this does not mean that in every case they will come around to your point of view, but it will help both you and the school to understand both sides. It may also help to prevent a similar problem arising again.

What to do next

If you are dissatisfied with the teacher's response you can make a complaint to the head. This should be made in writing and can be submitted through the school office or via email.

If your complaint is about an action of the head personally, then you should refer your complaint to the Chair of the governing body. You can contact them through the Clerk to the Governing Body or through the school office.

You may also find it helpful at this stage to have a copy of the School's Complaints Procedures as this explains in detail what procedures are followed. This is available from the school.

The Head will ask to meet you for a discussion of the problem. You may take a friend or someone else with you if you wish. The Head will conduct a full investigation of the complaint and may interview any members of staff or pupils involved. You will receive a written response to your complaint.

Most problems can be resolved by the end of this stage.

If your complaint has not been resolved

If you are still not satisfied you may wish to contact the chair of the governing body to ask for referral of your complaint to the Governing Body. It will then be heard by a group of governors who have no previous knowledge of the problem and so will be able to give it a fresh assessment. You may be invited to attend and speak to the panel at a meeting, which the head will also attend. The General Complaints Procedure statement explains how these meetings operate.

Further action

Complaints about school problems are almost always settled within schools but in exceptional cases it may be possible to refer the problem to an outside body such as the Secretary of State for Education. There is more information on this in the General Complaints Procedure.

General principles: The right approach

As part of the general home/school policy, parents and pupils are encouraged to express their views on what goes on within school, so that staff receive an early warning of potential difficulties, and many problems can be prevented from arising. Certain general underlying principles should be observed whenever concerns or complaints are raised.

1 Publicity

Parents should always know how they can raise concerns or lodge a formal complaint. The complaints procedure should be easily accessible and well publicised through the website, regular email updates and available through the office upon request.

A summary of the school's complaints procedure should be included in the information given to new parents when their children join the school, and in the information given to the children themselves. Parents and children are reminded of the system at regular intervals.

The procedure can be made available in languages other than English upon request. Braille or large print version should be made available if requested.

Where parents contact the Local Authority with their concerns they should be referred back to the school. However, the Local Authority through its web site can help parents and others know about, and how to use the procedures available.

2 Procedures should be as speedy as possible - consistent with fairness to all concerned

Each stage of the procedure has known time limits. Where it is not possible to meet these, information about progress will be given to the complainant. Whilst it is not possible to always meet the time limits care will be taken not to draw things out with unnecessary bureaucracy.

The complaints procedure is distinct from formal disciplinary proceedings for staff. There may be occasions where a complaint launches a disciplinary procedure, which then puts the complaints procedure on hold. If so, the complainant will be informed of this and any non-disciplinary aspects of the complaint will be dealt with by the usual complaints procedures; the complainant will be up-dated on progress on a regular basis.

3 Support for complainants

As part of the general publicity about complaints procedures, it is important for parents to know where they can go for information, advice and advocacy, if they require it. Ideally, support should be offered from individuals and organisations who are clearly separate from those complained against, details of individuals and organisations can be provided upon request.

Parents raising concerns or complaints are invited to be accompanied by a friend, a relative or a representative at any stage of the procedure.

4 Support for a person complained against

Staff who may be questioned as part of a complaints procedure investigation must feel that they are being treated in a fair way and will be informed that they too will have an opportunity to put their case. They will be told about the procedure, provided with a copy, and be kept informed of progress. It is recognised that there is a crucial balance to be maintained between supporting staff so that his/her rights and reputation are protected, and investigating a complaint thoroughly and impartially. Staff have the right to be accompanied by a union representative, friend or colleague at discussions about the complaint.

5 Confidentiality

It is very important to treat conversations and correspondence with discretion. It is vital that parents feel confident that their complaint will not mean that their child will be penalised. However, from the outset, all parties to a complaint will be made aware that some information may have to be shared with others involved in the operation of the complaints procedure.

It is usually proper to disregard anonymous complaints unless somebody is prepared to substantiate them, but the danger in this is that they may relate to something quite serious. If the forewarned eventuality occurs, to the detriment of the school, the complainant may come forward subsequently and say that s/he alerted the school even though the complaint was unsigned. It should be at the headteacher or governing body's discretion to decide whether the gravity of an anonymous complaint warrants an investigation.

6 Redress

If the outcome of the complaints procedure shows that the school is at fault, the school will provide redress in the form of an acknowledgement that the complaint is valid. One or more of the following may be offered:

- an apology;
- an explanation;
- a promise that the event complained of will not recur;
- an undertaking to review school policies or practices in the light of the complaint; or,
- in appropriate circumstances, financial compensation.

Fear of litigation will not prevent a school from admitting to parents when mistakes have been made, advice may be taken from the LA if litigation could be possible. Staff are encouraged to take advice from their union and/or professional body.

7 Staff awareness and training

School staff, including non-teaching staff, are familiar with the procedures so that they can advise parents about their operation. Potentially a great many staff are involved in handling complaints, especially at an informal level. Their confidence in doing so depends on their having clear information about the procedures, reassurances that senior staff are committed to the procedures and some basic training in the practical interpersonal skills needed in dealing with people who are upset or angry. All school staff are regularly informed about which staff have particular responsibilities at school so that parents do not get continually passed from one to another.

8 Record keeping

Complaints contribute to raising the quality of education, and as such are recorded and monitored regularly by senior staff and governors. Recording begins at the point when a concern or initial complaint has become the kind of complaint that can not be resolved on the spot but needs investigation and/or consultation with others in the school, and will require a report back (either orally or in writing) to the parent.

Recording at the earliest stages need only be a very basic record of the complaint, giving the date, name of parent and general nature of the complaint.

All complaints are recorded, kept safely, confidential and secure.

The complaints process

Although it is always hoped that a complaint can be resolved as early as possible there are opportunities to escalate a complaint where resolution is not achieved. The stages of the process are -

1. The first contact
2. Referral to head
3. Review by governing body
4. Review by Diocesan Board (Church of England) only where a complaint is a specific one regarding any aspect of religious education and/or collective worship
5. Beyond local resolution

Stage 1: The first contact - guidelines for dealing with concerns and complaints informally

- 1.1 The majority of concerns and complaints can often be resolved informally. There are many occasions where concerns can be resolved straight away through the class teacher or school administrative staff or head, depending on whom the parent first approaches.
- 1.2 Parents must feel able to raise concerns with members of staff either in person, by telephone, email or in writing. On occasion it may be appropriate for someone to act on behalf of a parent. Staff should refer to the school policy for dealing with parents, if they are unsure.
- 1.3 At first it may be unclear whether a parent is asking a question or expressing an opinion rather than making a complaint. A parent may want a preliminary discussion about an issue to help decide whether he or she wishes to take it further.

Stage 1 procedure

- 1.4 Parents have an opportunity to discuss their concern with an appropriate member of staff who clarifies with the parent the nature of the concern, and reassures them that the school wants to hear about it. The "appropriate member of staff" is the person who has been designated to handle the complaint and where in the case that it is a teacher being complained about, not that teacher. The member of staff may explain to the parent how the situation happened. It can be helpful to identify at this point what sort of outcome the parent is looking for.
- 1.5 If the member of staff first contacted cannot immediately deal with the matter, s/he makes a clear note of the date, name, contact address or phone number of the complainant.
- 1.6 All members of staff know how to refer, if necessary, to the person with responsibility for that issue raised by the parent. S/he will check later to make sure the referral has been successful.
- 1.7 There may be certain circumstances where the head may decide to deal with concerns directly at this stage, all staff are aware of the internal escalation mechanism to ensure the head is kept informed where necessary.
- 1.8 If the concern relates to the head, the parent is advised to contact the chair of the governing body.
- 1.9 The staff member dealing with the concern makes sure that the parent is clear what action (if any) or monitoring of the situation has been agreed, putting this in writing only if this seems the best way of making things clear.

- 1.10 All complaints are followed up and where no satisfactory solution has been found within 10 working days, parents will be asked if they wish their concern to be considered further. If they do, parents will be given clear information, both orally and in writing, about how to proceed and about any independent advice available to them (see Appendix A).
- 1.11 In some cases, it may be necessary for a complaint to progress straight to stage 2 (Referral to the head).

Stage 2: Referral to the head (or designate) for investigation

- 2.1 At this stage it has become clear that the concern is a definite complaint. In some cases, the head has already been involved in looking at the matter; in others it is their first involvement. In either case, the head (or the person delegated to investigate) will ensure consistency among cases, and to make sure that nothing happens at this stage which could make it difficult for later stages to proceed smoothly.
- 2.2 As heads have responsibility for the day-to-day running of their schools, they have responsibility for the implementation of a complaints system, including the decisions about their own involvement at various stages. One of the reasons for having various "stages" in any complaints procedure is to reassure complainants that their grievance is being heard by more than one person. The head will ensure that their involvement will not predominate at every stage of any one complaint. For example, staff are encouraged to deal with parents' concerns at Stage 1, while the head deals with contact with parents at Stage 2. Even at stage 2 the head may on occasions designate another member of staff to collect some of the information required, though the decision on action to be taken will not be delegated.

In some cases, a complaint will have been taken straight to Stage 2 and will have been investigated by the head as the most appropriate person.

Stage 2 procedure

- 2.3 The head (or designate) will acknowledge the complaint orally or in writing within 3 working days of receiving the written complaint. The acknowledgement gives a brief explanation of the school's complaints procedure and a target date for providing a response to the complaint. This should normally be within 10 working days; if this proves impossible, a letter will be sent explaining the reason for the delay and giving a revised target date.
- 2.4 The head (or designate) will provide an opportunity for the complainant to meet them to supplement any information provided previously. The complainant will be reminded that if s/he wishes, s/he may be accompanied to any meeting by a friend, relative, representative, or advocate who can speak on his or her behalf, and that interpreting facilities are available if needed.
- 2.5 If necessary, the head (or designate) will interview witnesses and take statements from those involved. If the complaint centres on a pupil, the pupil will also be interviewed. Pupils would normally be interviewed with their parent/carer present. In some situations, circumstances may prevent this, e.g. where this would seriously delay the investigation of a serious/urgent complaint or where particular circumstances mean that a pupil has specifically said s/he would prefer that parents or carers were not involved. In such circumstances another member of staff with whom the pupil feels comfortable will be asked to attend. If a member of staff is complained against, the needs of that person should be borne in mind (see paragraph 4 under 'General Principles').
- 2.6 The head (or designate) will keep written records of meetings, telephone conversations, and other documentation.

- 2.7 Once all the relevant facts have been established, the head (or designate) should then produce a written response to the complainant, or may wish to meet the complainant to discuss/resolve the matter directly.
- 2.8 A written response includes a full explanation of the decision and the reasons for it. Where appropriate, this includes what action the school will take to resolve the complaint. The complainant is advised that should s/he wish to take the complaint further s/he should notify the Chair of the Governing Body within 20 working days of receiving the outcome letter.
- 2.9 If a complaint is against the action of a head, or if the head has been very closely involved at Stage 1, the complaint may be moved to directly to Stage 3.

Stage 3: Review by the Governing Body

- 3.1 ***Complaints only rarely reach this formal level, but it is important that governing bodies are prepared to deal with them when necessary.*** At this stage, the school will seek advice from any relevant authority eg the LA, Board of Education (Church of England), where appropriate. This can provide a useful "outside view" on the issues.
- 3.2 ***It is important that this review not only be independent and impartial but that it is seen to be so.*** Therefore, individual complaints should not be considered by the full governing body as serious conflicts of interest can arise. For example, in exceptional circumstances a complaint may result in disciplinary action against a member of staff, and governors might be required to give an unprejudiced hearing to an appeal by the member of staff concerned. Similarly, some governors might have previous knowledge of the problem which led to the complaint and would be unable to give fair unbiased consideration to the issue.
- 3.3 Many complaints are inevitably seen by parents as being "against" a particular member of staff and their actions. However, all complaints which reach this stage will have done so because the complainant has not been satisfied by the head's response at the earlier stage of the procedure. Where a complaint is about a member of staff it is appropriate for the governing body to consider that the complaint is against the school rather than against the member of staff whose actions led to the original complaint.

Stage 3 procedure

- 3.4 Upon receipt of a written request by the complainant for the complaint to proceed to Stage 3, the procedures outlined below should be followed.
- 3.5 The clerk to the governing body should write to the complainant to acknowledge receipt of the written request. The acknowledgement should inform the complainant that the complaint is to be heard by three members of the school's governing body within 20 working days of receiving the complaint. The letter should also explain that the complainant has the right to submit any further documents relevant to the complaint. These must be received in time for the documents to be sent to the three members.
- 3.6 The clerk to the governors should arrange to convene a Governors' Complaints Panel elected from members of the governing body. It may be necessary for the governing body to appoint reserves to this panel to ensure that three governors are available to carry out their task within the set time.
- 3.7 The panel members should be governors who have had no prior involvement with the complaint. If s/he has not previously been involved, the chair of the governing body should chair the panel;

otherwise the vice-chair should do it. Generally, it is not appropriate for the head to have a place on the panel. Governors will want to bear in mind the advantages of having a parent (who is also a governor) on the panel. Governors will also want to be sensitive to issues of race, gender and religious affiliation.

- 3.8 The chair/vice-chair will ensure that the complaint is heard by the panel within 20 working days of receiving the letter in 3.5. All relevant correspondence regarding the complaint should be given to each panel member as soon as the composition of the panel is confirmed. If the correspondence is extensive, the chair of the panel should prepare a thorough summary for sending to panel members.
- 3.9 The chair/vice-chair will write to all parties (the complainant, head, members of the panel and any relevant witnesses) at least 5 working days before the meeting, informing them of the date, time and place. The notification to the complainant should also inform him/her of their right to be accompanied to the meeting by a friend/advocate/interpreter. The letter will also explain how the meeting will be conducted and the complainant's right to submit further written evidence to the panel.
- 3.10 The chair/vice-chair of the governing body should invite the head to attend the panel meeting and prepare a written report for the panel in response to the complaint. The head may also invite members of staff directly involved in matters raised by the complainant to respond in writing or in person to the complaint. Any relevant documents including the head's report should be received by all concerned - including the complainant - at least 5 working days prior to the meeting.
- 3.11 The involvement of staff other than the head is subject to the discretion of the chair of the panel.
- 3.12 It is the responsibility of the chair of the panel to ensure that the meeting is properly minuted.
- 3.13 The aim of the meeting should be to resolve the complaint and achieve a reconciliation between the school and the complainant. However, it must be recognised that sometimes it may only be possible to establish facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that his or her complaint has at least been taken seriously.
- 3.14 The panel should remember that many parents are unused to dealing with groups of people in formal situations and may feel inhibited when speaking to the panel. It is therefore recommended that the chair of the panel ensures that the proceedings are as informal as possible.
- 3.15 If either party wishes to introduce previously undisclosed evidence or witnesses, it is in the interests of natural justice to adjourn the meeting so that the other side has time to consider and respond to the new evidence.
- 3.16 The meeting should allow for:
 - the complainant to explain their complaint
 - the head to explain the school's response
 - the head to question the complainant about the complaint
 - the complainant to question the head and/or other members of staff about the school's response
 - panel members to have an opportunity to question both the complainant and the headteacher
 - any party to have the right to call witnesses (subject to the approval of the chair)
 - all parties having the right to question all the witnesses

- final statements by both the complainant and the head.
- 3.17 The chair of the panel will explain to the complainant and the head that the panel will now consider its decision, and a written decision will be sent to both parties within 15 working days. The complainant, head, other members of staff and witnesses will then leave.
- 3.18 The panel will then consider the complaint and all the evidence presented and (a) reach a unanimous, or at least a majority, decision on the complaint and (b) decide upon the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint and (c) where appropriate, suggest recommended changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not happen again.
- 3.19 A written statement outlining the decision of the panel must be sent to the complainant and head. The letter to the complainant should explain that if they are not satisfied with the response whether a further appeal can be made, and if so, to whom.
- 3.20 The school should ensure that a copy of all correspondence and notes are kept on file in the school's records. These records should be kept separately from any involved pupil's personal records.

Stage 4: Voluntary Aided schools

- 4.1 **For voluntary aided schools:** If the complaint was a specific one regarding any aspect of religious education and/or collective worship then the appropriate Bishop would need to be involved in any appeal. For more general complaints Diocesan Boards (Church of England) can give advice on procedures to their schools but they have no powers to receive appeals from complainants.

Stage 5: Beyond local resolution

- 5.1 **The Secretary of State:** Complaints can be taken to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills under Section 496 of the Education Act 1996, on the grounds that a governing body or LA is acting or proposing to act unreasonably, or under Section 497 of the same Act, on the grounds that either the Governing Body or the LA has failed to discharge its duties under the Act. The Secretary of State may contact the Governing Body or the LA for more information in order to consider the complaint. These powers relate to community schools, voluntary schools, foundation schools and city technology colleges.
- 5.2 **The Local Government Ombudsman:** Complaints about the maladministration of local authority services, including the way it operates any general school complaints procedure, could be made to the Ombudsman. However, the Ombudsman does not look at internal school management matters and usually expects that thorough attention has been given to a complaint locally before investigation by the Ombudsman.

How to Listen to Complaints – Guidance for staff

As soon as you realise that you are listening to a complaint, remember these points:

Don't pass the buck	Try not to keep transferring someone from one place to another. Make sure you know the contact person for anything you cannot deal with yourself.
Don't be flippant	First impressions count. You and the school may be judged on your immediate reaction.
Treat all complaints seriously	However small or trivial it may seem to you; the complaint will be an important problem for anyone who takes the trouble to complain.
Treat every complaint individually	Even if you have already received several similar complaints the same day, it is probably the person's first chance to have their say.
Be courteous and patient	Be sympathetic and helpful, but do not blame other colleagues.
Say who you are	If you are unknown to the person, introduce yourself.
Ask for their name and use it	Anonymous complaints are acceptable only where there are special circumstances.
Take time to find out exactly what the problem is	It is easy for someone to forget to tell you an important detail, particularly if they are upset or annoyed.
Don't take the complaint personally	To an angry or upset person, YOU are the school, and the only one they can put their feelings to right now.
Stay cool and calm	Do not argue with the person - be polite and try to find out exactly what the person thinks is going wrong, or has gone wrong.
Check you are being understood	Make sure that the person understands what you are saying. Don't use jargon - it can cause confusion and annoyance to someone "not in the know".
Don't rush	Take your time. Let people have their say, and let off steam if they need to. Listen carefully and sympathetically to their problems before replying and attempting to find a solution or offer a next step.

Complaint form

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

Your name:

Pupil's name:

Your relationship to the pupil:

Address:

Postcode:
Day time telephone number:
Evening telephone number:

Please give details of your complaint.

**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: