



**CHF Community Federation**

# Complaints Policy

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**Policy Category:** School

## Complaints procedure policy

Coney Hill Community Primary School, Preschool / Finlay Community School, Preschool

### Part 1: General Principles of complaints

#### Dealing with Complaints – Initial concerns

We at Coney Hill Community Primary School and Preschool and Finlay Community School and Preschool (hereafter referred to as ‘the school(s)’) believe in the need to be clear about the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints.

These key messages deal with complaints but the underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally. In most cases the class teacher or the individual delivering the service in the case of extended school provision, will receive the first approach. It would be helpful if staff were able to resolve issues on the spot, including apologising where necessary.

#### Dealing with Complaints – Formal procedures

Formal procedures will be invoked when initial attempts to resolve the issue are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the matter further.

The Head Teacher at each CHF Community Federation school will take the role of complaints coordinator.

#### Framework of Principles

- An effective Complaints Procedure will:
- encourage resolution of problems by **informal** means wherever possible;
- be easily **accessible** and **publicised**;
- be **simple** to understand and use;
- be **impartial**; be **non-adversarial**;
- allow **swift** handling with established **time-limits** for action and keeping people informed of the progress;
- ensure a full and **fair** investigation by an independent person where necessary;
- respect people’s desire for **confidentiality**;
- address all the points at issue and provide an **effective** response and **appropriate** redress, where necessary;
- provide **information** to the school’s senior management team so that services can be improved.

#### Investigating Complaints

- It is suggested that at each stage, the person investigating the complaint (the complaints coordinator), makes sure that they:
- establish **what** has happened so far, and **who** has been involved;



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- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;
- meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is necessary);
- clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;
- interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish;
- conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning;
- keep notes of the interview.

### **Resolving Complaints**

At each stage in the procedure we will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, 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.

It would be useful if complainants were encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that we could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence.

An effective procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties. It is also of equal importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

### **Vexatious Complaints**

There will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the chair of the GB is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

### **Time-Limits**

Complaints need to be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible. An effective complaints procedure will have realistic time limits for each action within each stage. However, where further investigations are necessary, new time limits can be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

## **Part 2: The Formal Complaints Procedure**



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## **The Stages of Complaints**

Our complaints procedure has well-defined stages, found in Annex B.

At each stage we will clarify exactly who will be involved, what will happen, and how long it will take. There may, on occasion, be the need for some flexibility; for example, the possibility of further meetings between the complainant and the member of staff directly involved and further investigations may be required by the headteacher after a meeting with the complainant.

Three school-based stages are sufficient:

- Stage one: complaint heard by staff member (though not the subject of the complaint);
- Stage two: complaint heard by the head teacher;
- Stage three: complaint heard by GB's complaints appeal panel;

Unsatisfied complainant can always take a complaint to the next stage i.e. the Local Authority.

Our procedure specifies how a complaint will be dealt with if it concerns the conduct of the head teacher or a governor or where the head teacher or governor has been involved in the issue previously.

## **Part 3 – Managing and Recording Complaints**

### **Recording Complaints**

We at the Schools will record the progress of the complaint and the final outcome. A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing. The complaint form can be found in Annex C. At the end of a meeting or telephone call, it would be helpful if the member of staff ensured that the complainant and the school have the same understanding of what was discussed and agreed. A brief note of meetings and telephone calls will be kept and a copy of any written response added to the record.

The complaints co-ordinator is be responsible for the records and holds them centrally in the head teacher's office.

### **Governing Body Review**

The GB monitors the level and nature of complaints and reviews the outcomes on a regular basis to ensure the effectiveness of the procedure and make changes where necessary. Preferably, complaints information shared with the whole GB will not name individuals unless necessary.

As well as addressing an individual's complaints, the process of listening to and resolving complaints will contribute to school improvement. When individual complaints are heard, we will identify underlying issues that need to be addressed. The monitoring and review of complaints by the school and the GB can be a useful tool in evaluating our performance.

### **Publicising the Procedure**

There is a legal requirement for the Complaints Procedures to be publicised, ours will be available on each of the Schools websites.



## **Complaints Procedure**

### **Stage One: Complaint Heard by Staff Member**

It is in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. The experience of the first contact between the complainant and the school can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, if staff are made aware of the procedures, they know what to do when they receive a complaint.

It would assist the procedure if the school respected the views of a complainant who indicates that he/she would have difficulty discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff. In these cases, the complaints co-ordinator can refer the complainant to another staff member. Where the complaint concerns the head teacher, the complaints co-ordinator can refer the complainant to the chair of governors.

Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the complaints co-ordinator may consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the complaint objectively and impartially is crucial.

Where the first approach is made to a governor, the next step would be to refer the complainant to the appropriate person and advise them about the procedure. It would be useful if governors did not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the formal procedure or be involved at the early stages in case they are needed to sit on a panel at a later stage of the procedure.

### **Stage Two: Complaint Heard by Head Teacher**

The head teacher's influence will already have shaped the way complaints are handled in the school. At this point, the complainant may be dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled at stage one as well as pursuing their initial complaint. The head may delegate the task of collating the information to one or more staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken.

### **Stage Three: Mediation**

In order to provide a "cooling off" period and affect a resolution, the option of mediation should be offered. This would take place with a panel comprising Governors, head teacher and Senior Management Team. Care should be taken to ensure that there was no contamination of participants in the event that the matter was not resolved.

### **Stage Four: Complaint Heard by Governing Bodies Complaints Appeal Panel**

The complainant needs to write to the Chair of Governors giving details of the complaint. The Chair, or a nominated governor, will convene a Governing Body complaints panel.

The governors' appeal hearing is the last school-based stage of the complaints process, and is not convened to merely rubber-stamp previous decisions.

Individual complaints would not be heard by the whole Governing Body at any stage, as this could compromise the impartiality of any panel set up for a disciplinary hearing against a member of staff following a serious complaint.



The governing body may nominate a number of members with delegated powers to hear complaints at that stage, and set out its terms of reference. These can include:

- drawing up its procedures;
- hearing individual appeals;
- making recommendations on policy as a result of complaints.

The procedure adopted by the panel for hearing appeals would normally be part of the school's complaints procedure. The panel can be drawn from the nominated members and may consist of three or five people. The panel may choose their own chair.

#### **The Remit of The Complaints Appeal Panel**

The panel can:

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

There are several points which any governor sitting on a complaints panel needs to remember:

- a. It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so. No governor may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it. In deciding the make-up of the panel, governors need to try and ensure that it is a cross-section of the categories of governor and sensitive to the issues of race, gender and religious affiliation.
- b. The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that his or her complaint has been taken seriously.
- c. An effective panel will acknowledge that many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child. The panel chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial.
- d. Extra care needs to be taken when the complainant is a child. Careful consideration of the atmosphere and proceedings will ensure that the child does not feel intimidated. The panel needs to be aware of the views of the child and give them equal consideration to those of adults. Where the child's parent is the complainant, it would be helpful to give the parent the opportunity to say which parts of the hearing, if any, the child needs to attend.
- e. The governors sitting on the panel need to be aware of the complaints procedure.
- d.



## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### **The Role of the Clerk**

The school will ensure that any panel or group of governors considering complaints be clerked. The clerk would be the contact point for the complainant and be required to:

- set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible;
- collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing;
- meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing; ☑ record the proceedings;
- notify all parties of the panel's decision.

### **The Role of the Chair of the Governing Body or the Nominated Governor**

The nominated governor role:

- check that the correct procedure has been followed;
- if a hearing is appropriate, notify the clerk to arrange the panel;

### **The Role of the Chair of the Panel**

The Chair of the Panel has a key role, ensuring that:

- the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption;
- the issues are addressed;
- key findings of fact are made;
- parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease;
- the hearing is conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy;
- the panel is open minded and acting independently;
- no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure;



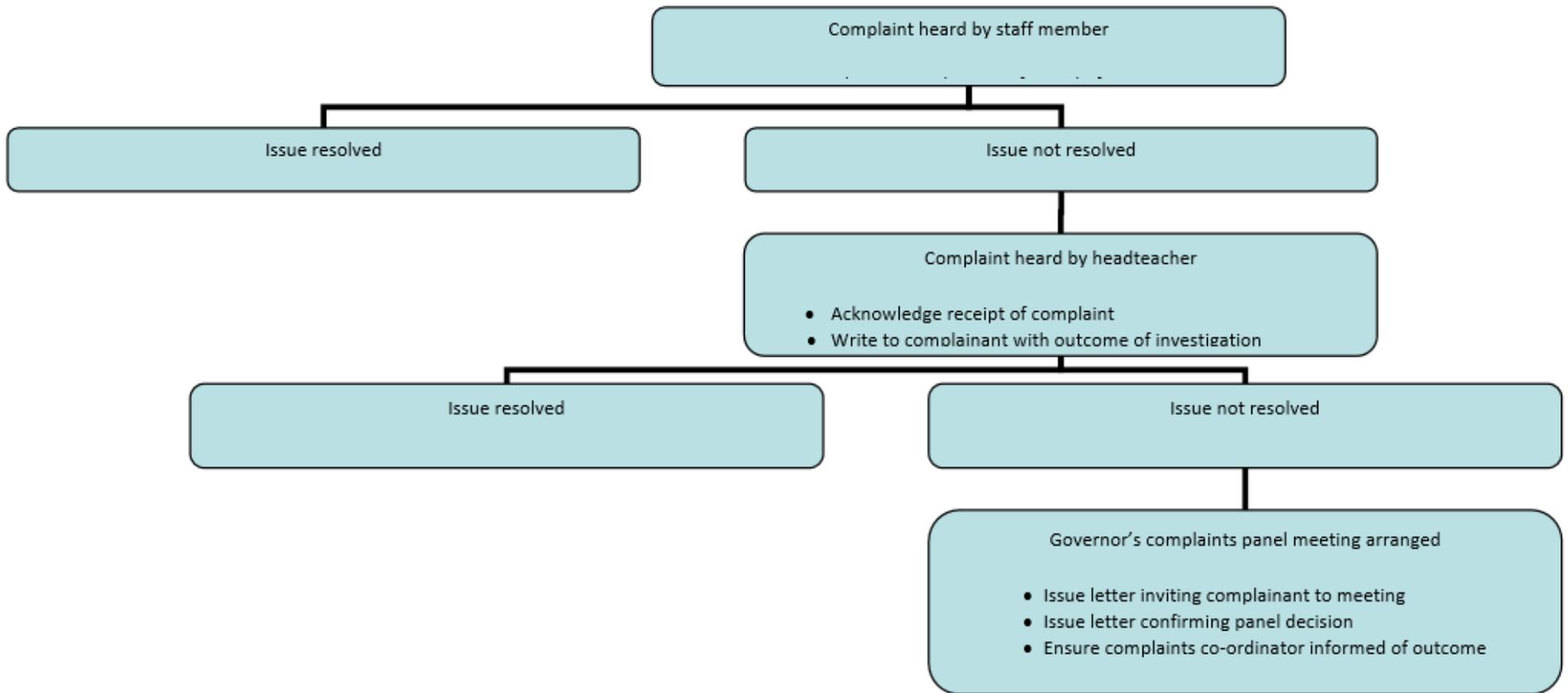
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## Checklist for a Panel Hearing

The panel needs to take the following points into account:

- ☐ The hearing is as informal as possible.
  
- ☐ Witnesses are only required to attend for the part of the hearing in which they give their evidence.
  
- ☐ After introductions, the complainant is invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses.
  
- ☐ The head teacher may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken.
  
- ☐ The head teacher is then invited to explain the school's actions and be followed by the school's witnesses.
  
- ☐ The complainant may question both the head teacher and the witnesses after each has spoken.
  
- ☐ The panel may ask questions at any point.
  
- ☐ The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint.
  
- ☐ The head teacher is then invited to sum up the school's actions and response to the complaint.
  
- ☐ Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues.
  
- ☐ The chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale.

Annex B: Flow Chart





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**Annex C Example of a complaint form**

**Please complete and return to Head Teacher (complaints co-ordinator) 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)?**

**Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.**

**What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?**

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Official use**

**Date acknowledgement sent:**

**By who:**

**Complaint referred to:**

**Date:**

*This policy is a working document for the use of all staff and is subject to staff and governor approval.*