



COMPLAINTS: POLICY AND PROCEDURE

This is a whole-school policy, within the framework of which the Nursery, Junior School and Infant School plus EYFS policies operate as appropriate.

Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School is an open community. As such it has nothing to fear and everything to gain from listening to and acting upon the concerns and complaints of parents, pupils and anyone else associated with the community.

Climate and culture

Problems may arise if parents feel that the school is not open to their concerns. It is better to have a direct complaint to a member of staff than to have parents sharing their dissatisfaction with others. Parents like to feel valued and involved with the school and they should be encouraged to voice their concerns. This is helped when complaints are received in a positive manner.

- ◆ Is the school open, listening to parents and pupils?
- ◆ Are parents comfortable in contacting the Headmaster or other members of staff?
- ◆ Are members of staff comfortable in dealing with complaints?

An effective complaints procedure can diffuse problems and can provide the school with helpful information. Complaints treated as constructive suggestions can be used to improve standards and may prevent cause for further complaint. Even an unjustified complaint may indicate an area which can be improved.

What constitutes a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with or of concern about a real or perceived problem.

A complaint may be made if a parent thinks that the school has, for example,

- ◆ Done something wrong
- ◆ Failed to do something it should have done
- ◆ Acted unfairly.

A complaint may be made about the school as a whole, about a specific department, about an individual member of staff or about a specific incident.

All complaints need to be handled seriously. A gentle expression of concern or a simple query may grow into a complex and painful matter if parents feel that they have been brushed aside. Equally, issues with the potential to become acutely difficult may dwindle and fade if they are handled well at the initial stage.



An unresolved problem may become a festering dispute or a confrontation. Our procedure is in place for appropriate action to be taken when a matter remains unresolved or cannot be resolved quickly.

Our procedure needs to be flexible to handle both formal complaints and the informal raising of concerns. It is not helpful to differentiate between “formal” and “informal” complaints: one can easily become the other. Serious issues may be raised in an informal and friendly way and apparently trivial issues in an adversarial manner. Complaints against members of staff need particularly careful handling.

All complaints must be recorded.

Please note that there are specific guidelines relating to pupils in Early Years Foundation Stage only, in which area, the record of complaints is kept for at least three years and unlike for the rest of the school parents can complain directly to Ofsted should they so wish, though it remains the hope in all parts of the school that complaints be dealt with at the informal stages as detailed below.

Stage 1

Lines of Approach

All members of staff are encouraged to deal with parental concerns which lie within their area of responsibility. If approached about a matter which lies outside their remit, staff should refer it to the appropriate person and inform the parents.

Matters incapable of resolution at a particular level should be referred to the appropriate senior person, with parents kept informed of the action being taken. This covers, for example, a complaint made to a relatively junior member of staff about a more senior colleague.

Senior staff will recognise when issues need to go to the Deputy Head (Academic) or Deputy Head (Pastoral), or straight to the Headmaster with whom the responsibility for dealing with most complaints lies.

Certain parents will wish to go straight to the Headmaster with their concerns and this should be respected. However, it should be explained that the Headmaster may not be able to respond until he has consulted the staff who can help.

Serious complaints will be shared with the Chairman of Governors by the Headmaster. There may be certain circumstances, such as complaints about the Headmaster, when the parents will need to write directly to the Chairman at the school.

Written responses should always be signed by the person to whom the parent made the complaint, or by a more senior person in the school.

Informal complaints will be investigated and responded to within 10 days.

Reducing Anxiety

The person who complains may feel vulnerable. The school can reduce anxiety by taking the matter seriously and dispelling uncertainty about how the complaint will be handled.

- ◆ Information about the complaints procedure is clear.
- ◆ Complaints should be acknowledged immediately or within five working days. Staff should inform parents what is happening to their concern or complaint and, if a more detailed response is needed, by what date it will be received. In any event, the issue should be dealt with as quickly as possible.
- ◆ The nature of the complaint and what is concerning the complainant should be clear. If it is not immediately obvious:
 - The parents may need more time to explain
 - They could be asked to put their complaint in writing
 - It may be helpful to discuss possible outcomes.
- ◆ Parents need to feel that their views matter.
- ◆ Paradoxically, in some circumstances, parents may prefer a response given after 24 hours to one – even the same response – given immediately.

Recording

The school keeps records of complaints and other parental concerns because

- ◆ Patterns in the record may indicate a need for action
- ◆ **Governors will periodically wish to examine the file**
- ◆ Inspectors will wish to see records as evidence of the school's attitude to complaints

The record contains the following information:

- ◆ Date when the issue was raised (**whether in writing or orally**)
- ◆ Name of parent
- ◆ Name of pupil
- ◆ Brief statement of issue
- ◆ Location of detailed file(s)
- ◆ Staff member handling the issue
- ◆ Brief statement of outcome

Confidential files on all complaints are kept together, cross-referenced with other files as necessary. The files contain notes of all conversations with parents about any source of dissatisfaction. This applies to friendly chats and to telephone conversations as misunderstanding can easily arise. There should be a clear statement of what is concerning the complainants. The notes can be agreed with parents.



Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important issue for parents, pupils and staff alike. It is essential that any complaint is treated with respect and in a confidential manner.

Parents often seek an assurance of confidentiality before expressing their concerns. If, for example, they wish to discuss a member of staff, they fear that their child will suffer in some way because they have complained.

It should be made clear to all concerned that it is the school's policy that complaints made by parents should not rebound adversely on their children and similarly that complaints raised by pupils should not rebound adversely on them or on other pupils.

The question of confidentiality should be discussed sensitively and on an individual basis with the parents and the school's policy should be carefully explained. No prior guarantee of absolute confidentiality should ever be given.

It may be possible to deal with a problem without naming individuals. Even if no names are given, however, the source of the complaint may be clear. Depending on the nature of the complaint and on the circumstances, it may be impractical to investigate without identifying the member of staff or the child. It may also be in the interest of the child to do so.

Staff members are rightly concerned that they should know about complaints which might be damaging to their reputation. Such complaints will be known only to themselves and to those who have to be consulted. The school recognises the need to provide support for staff against whom a complaint is made; this will be provided by a colleague who is not otherwise involved.

If there is a question of the child's safety or a possible situation involving external agencies including the police, the guidance on confidentiality in the school's Child Protection Policy should be followed.

Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints may be where there is no indication of either name or address, or where the complainants say that they do not wish to be identified. They may come from members of the public, parents or pupils.

Complaints from the public about the behaviour of a group of pupils may be dealt with on a general basis, with reminders about the school's expectations.

Parents and pupils should be encouraged to give their names and should be given reassurance on the issue of confidentiality. If they persist in wishing to remain

anonymous, it is at the Head's discretion as to what action if any should be taken, depending on the nature of the complaint. Anonymous complaints will be kept in the file.

Anonymous complaints about child abuse will be dealt with under the school's Child Protection Policy.

Resolution

Sometimes the very acknowledgement of an issue by the school brings relief to parents. Satisfaction for a complainant may come from any of the following:

- ◆ Knowing that changes have been made and that matters will be different in future
- ◆ Knowing that the school is now alert to a possible problem
- ◆ Feeling that their concern has been considered seriously
- ◆ An outcome which may be different from the one they sought but which they perceive to be well considered
- ◆ A considered letter
- ◆ An apology

If time has been needed to consider matters, parents should receive a report letter. This should cover:

- ◆ The issues raised
- ◆ How the issues were considered
- ◆ The people consulted
- ◆ The action that is to be taken
- ◆ An apology if appropriate.

Apparently Intractable Complaints

There may be a small minority of persistent or aggressive complainants who will never be satisfied, whatever the school does. The school may even discover on investigation that the complaint was without foundation or motivated by malice. Nevertheless, it is wise to treat all complaints seriously and follow the procedures.

Most complaints can be resolved if approached positively. If a complaint becomes apparently intractable, it may be due to its nature or to the way in which it was handled, or possibly because the parent perceives the school to have closed ranks against him or her.

There are different stages of action to be taken with apparently intractable complaints:

Stage 2

Referral to the Chair of Governors or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors

In most cases, the procedure will be that the Headmaster refers the matter to the Chair of Governors or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors and informs the parents that this stage has been reached. A situation may arise where the complaint seems to the parent to have been mishandled by the Headmaster. In that situation, the parents should be able to write direct to the Chair.

The Chair or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors calls for a full report from the Headmaster and for all relevant documents. On the basis of these, the Chairman or in his absence one of the Vice Chairmen of Governors may nominate a Governor to investigate the complaint (the Investigating Governor) or deal with the matter himself.

As the Chair or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors or the Investigating Governor starts work on the case, s/he writes to the parents, informs of the action being taken, asks them if they wish to add to what they have said already, and gives a date by which they may expect a full response.

The Chair or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors may be able to offer a new approach to the matter and this may satisfy the parents. The Chair's or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors' response should be clear and detailed and should offer a meeting if the parents remain troubled.

Meeting with the Chair of Governors or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors

If a meeting is requested, the Chair or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors offers to meet the parents at a mutually convenient time, as soon as practicable and never more than 28 days after the meeting has been requested (**in very exceptional circumstances, such as unavailability of relevant personnel during a summer vacation, this may have to be extended**). Those involved are:

- ◆ The Chairman of Governors or in his absence one of the Vice Chairmen of Governors
- ◆ The Headmaster and at the most one other member of staff
- ◆ The parents

The parents are invited to bring with them a supportive friend who is not involved with the complaint. Legal representation is not appropriate at this stage.

The Chair or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors, after questioning and listening to the parents and the Headmaster, may be able to find a solution. If this is not possible and the parents wish to take the matter further, it should be referred to the Appeals Committee.



The school will respond to formal (stage 2) complaints within ten days.

Stage 3

Referral to the Appeals Committee

The Governors have an Appeals Committee. The committee's constitution and *modus operandi* include:

- ◆ The committee chairman is not the Chair of Governors
- ◆ There are up to three other members
- ◆ Three members, including the committee chairman, constitute a quorum
- ◆ One member of the committee will be independent of the school and the board of Governors.
- ◆ Members are committed to keeping the proceedings of the committee confidential and to operating in a fair and objective manner

The Chair of Governors, or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors, in consultation with the Headmaster, invites the Chair of the Appeals Committee to convene a meeting. As for the Meeting with the Chair of Governors/Vice Chair (above), this will take place as soon as practicable and never more than 28 days after the referral has been made.

The Chairman of Governors has no further involvement until the Chairman of the Appeals Committee reports back at the end of the Committee's deliberations.

Meeting with the Appeals Committee

Those involved with the meeting are:

- ◆ Up to four Committee Members, including the Chair of the appeals committee
- ◆ The Head and possibly a key member of staff
- ◆ The parents, who are invited to bring a supportive friend, as for the meeting with the Chair of Governors or in his absence the Vice Chair of Governors.

A sufficient amount of time should be set aside for the meeting.

The parents and the Headmaster are asked in advance whether there are any papers they would like to have considered at the meeting, bearing in mind the need for all parties to keep the proceedings confidential. The papers are copied and distributed before the meeting.

The Chair of the Committee emphasises that s/he is concerned to reach a positive conclusion and invites first the parents, then the Headmaster to speak. After this, the Chairman of the Committee encourages questions and discussion.



The Chair of the Committee may find it helpful at some point to invite the Headmaster, the parents and their friend to withdraw from the discussion for a time, leaving the Committee alone.

If more time is required, it may be necessary to convene a second meeting. If so, members of the Appeal Committee must commit themselves to attend as continuity is essential.

If a positive conclusion is reached, the Chair of the Committee should summarise the outcome and confirm the nature of the agreement before the meeting disperses. The agreement should be recorded, copied and circulated as soon as possible to the complainant and, where relevant, the person against whom the complaint has been made. At the end of the Appeals Committee's deliberations, the Chairman of the Committee makes a full report to the Chairman of Governors and informs the parents that this is being done. The Chairman of Governors would be expected to endorse the Appeals Committee's decision and would confirm this in writing within 28 days of the appeal hearing.

Further Action

If agreement is not reached and if a complaint cannot be resolved within the school, the parents may choose to seek legal advice **or to refer to the Information Commissioner's Office**

Reviewed and approved by Board of Governors:

March 2016