

Complaints Policy



COOMBE HOUSE
SCHOOL

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This Policy is for Parents / Carers, Pupils, Staff and other Stakeholders.

1. Introduction

At Coombe House School (the "School") we recognise that everyone occasionally makes mistakes. What is important, however, is that when mistakes are made there is a clear and fair approach to putting things right again.

The School's stance on complaints is vital to our ethos of openness, transparency, and the importance of the voice of the pupil, parent/carers, stakeholders, and staff.

The aim of this Complaints Policy is to ensure that every parent / carer, pupil, and stakeholder involved in the School understands this policy and has access to a procedure that supports and enables them to raise concerns or complain about any aspect of the School or its services.

The School Complaints Policy will:

- be easily **accessible** and **publicised**;
- be **simple** to understand and use;
- be **impartial**;
- be **non-adversarial**;
- allow **swift** handling with established **timescales** for action and keep people informed of the progress;
- ensure a full and **fair** investigation by an independent person where necessary;
- respect people's desire for **confidentiality**; and
- address all the points at issue and provide an **effective** response and **appropriate** redress, where necessary.

2. Aims and objectives of the policy

This policy aims to:

- encourage the resolution of concerns by informal means wherever possible;
- ensure that concerns and complaints are dealt with quickly, fully, fairly and within clearly defined time scales;
- provide effective responses and appropriate redress; and
- maintain good working relationships between all people involved with the School.

3. Which complaints shall be managed in line with this policy?

In line with the requirements of the Independent School Standards, this policy is primarily for the parents and carers of pupils at the School.

However, the same process may also be used for other stakeholders such as (but not limited to) partners and stakeholder, members of the community, or neighbours at the discretion of the Headteacher.

Staff members who have concerns or complaints relating to their contract, employment or employee relationships, are expected to raise these through the staff grievance policy and will not typically have their concerns considered in line with this policy.

Pupils have separate arrangements through which they are able to communicate thoughts and feelings, including if they wish to raise a concern or complaint, through the school pastoral system.

4. What constitutes a complaint?

Any matter which a parent or carer of a pupil communicates that they are unhappy and seeks action by the school, shall typically be considered as a complaint and will be dealt with in line with this policy.

Where a parent / carer states that are making a complaint, it will always be managed in line with this policy. Members of staff can also choose to identify communication from a parent / carer as a complaint, even if the term complaint has not been explicitly used.

5. Monitoring complaints

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

- the name and address of the complainant;
- the name and address of the child / young person it relates to;
- the date and time at which complaint was made;
- the details of the complaint;
- the desired outcome of the complaint;
- how the complaint is investigated (including written records of interviews held);
- results and conclusions of investigations;
- any action taken; and
- the complainant's response (satisfaction or further pursuit of the complaint).

The **Headteacher** is the responsible person for maintaining a record of complaints and ensuring that all school pupils, parents / carers, and staff, are aware of and comply with this policy, providing leadership and vision in respect of the relevant equality matters and providing guidance and support to all staff. The Headteacher can be contacted at head@coombehouseschool.org.uk.

The only instance where the Headteacher will **NOT** be responsible for logging complaints is if the complaint is made against the Headteacher, or the Headteacher's ability to objectively review the complaint is compromised. In this instance the complaint will be dealt with or overseen by the Managing Director of Dorset Centre of Excellence, Andy Holder, who is contactable at andy.holder@dorsetcentreforexcellence.org.uk. A colleague nominated by the Chair of the Board will undertake this role if the complaint is about the Managing Director.

Upholding or not upholding complaints

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

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

- that the complaint is not upheld and reasons for this are clearly given.

Publicity and communication

It is a legal requirement to publicise our complaints procedures.

This policy will be included within the School's information by:

- information will be shared with new parents/carers when their child joins the school and
- information will be published on the school's website.

All staff at the School will be made aware of the complaints procedure and the various stages involved. At all stages of the complaints procedure, relevant stakeholders will be clear about what is happening and what their responsibilities are.

Written records will be kept as evidence of procedures followed. In addition, the complainant will be informed of how to proceed to the next stage of the procedure when their complaint is not upheld.

6. Stage 1 - Initial Concerns

The School acknowledges that some communications are actually queries / clarifications / requests for more or different information and are primarily minor / trivial matters which can be very quickly / immediately resolved without the need for a formal process. This type of communication is considered to be part of the day-to-day work of the School and would not typically be managed via this Complaints Policy, unless the 'complainant' indicates that they would like it to be.

If the concern or complaint being raised is more substantial than that which is managed as part of the day-to-day work of the School, it shall typically be considered as a Stage 1 complaint in the first instance.

At the outset of any concern or complaint being raised, it shall be taken seriously. We believe that taking concerns and complaints seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the numbers that require more substantial responses later.

We understand that concerns or complaints are often caused by simple mistakes or misunderstandings, or thoughts and feelings that have not been aired or acknowledged. We anticipate that these and other issues can be quickly and informally resolved through improved communication and prompt responses.

Staff shall always attempt to resolve issues 'in the moment', including apologising where appropriate. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event of concern will not recur; and/or
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again.

If the Stage 1 process is not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction via these initial responses, or if the complainant has indicated they want it to be considered formally, it will be necessary to use the

formal Stage 2 complaints procedure. It is important that this choice is always available to the complainant.

Who to speak to informally?

Individuals can raise concerns or complaints with a member of the school administrative staff, class teacher, senior leader or Headteacher depending on their wishes and the type of issues they want to discuss.

Monitoring

A brief note of all Stage 1 matters, and the outcomes will be kept.

Time scales

There are no specific time scales for dealing with concerns or complaints 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 concern or complaint will be informed of any action to be taken to resolve the issue and if appropriate, in writing.

7. Stage 2 - Formal Procedures

If a parent / carer (or where relevant, another complainant) is dissatisfied at the outcome of discussing a concern at Stage 1, or if they indicate that they wish to have their concern managed formally from the outset, it will be treated as a Stage 2 complaint.

The **Headteacher** is the School's nominated member of staff with responsibility for the operation and management of the School complaints procedure (unless the complaint is about the Headteacher, or the Headteacher's ability to objectively review the complaint is compromised).

This procedure sets out in terms of what the Headteacher shall do. However, the Headteacher may choose to delegate the task (but not the responsibility) of managing any complaint (acting as the complaint management lead) to an appropriate colleague, or the procedures may be followed by the Managing Director if the complaint is about the Headteacher, or a colleague nominated by the Chair of the Board if the complaint is about the Managing Director.

The Headteacher / complaint management lead, must ensure, when they investigate complaints, that they:

- establish **what** has happened so far, and **who** has been involved;
- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;
- seek to meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is necessary);
- clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;
- seek to meet with those involved in the matter, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish;
- conduct the meeting(s) with an open mind and be prepared to persist with questioning; and
- keep detailed notes of the interview.

The complainant will be encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage during the resolution of the complaint.

This procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties and clarify any misunderstandings that may have occurred to ensure a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues. Our first action will always be to ensure, from the outset, that everyone involved with the School is given a copy of the Complaints Policy and has the procedure fully explained to them.

Where required or judged appropriate, the Headteacher will seek the advice of the Managing Director or the Board and explore whether an external independent person should carry out the investigation, to ensure a full and fair investigation.

We recognise that it is essential to be open to criticism or complaint from any source and that only by being open to criticism or complaints can we hope to improve our service and the attainment of the pupils we teach. Therefore, we welcome concerns and complaints.

The Steps in the Stage 2 Complaints Process are outlined below:

1. When a complaint is made it must always be recorded on the complaints register, to show the date and time of the complaint being made; the name and address of the person making it; the name and address of the child / young person it relates to; the nature of their complaint; any response required/given; the name of the person(s) dealing with it (the complaint management lead) and the complaint reference number (based upon the date the complaint is received, and the initials of the person making the complaint). Details of any complaint must always be carefully recorded, along with any supporting information such as to whom the complaint was made or evidence in support of the complaint.
2. Information about any complaint made must be passed immediately to the Headteacher or their Deputy, if they are not available for them to make an initial assessment and to monitor how complaints are being handled (If the complaint is about the Headteacher, the complaint must be passed to the Managing Director. If the complaint is about the Managing Director, it must be passed to the Chair of the Board).
3. A decision must be made as to if, how and when to inform any third party who may be the subject of the complaint.
4. Acknowledgement, including sharing the reference number and name of person dealing with the complaint, must be given to the person making the complaint within **2 WORKING DAYS** of the complaint being received during term time, and as soon as practicable (but certainly within the first two days of any new term) if a complaint is received within the school holidays.
5. The matter should then be looked into and responded to, if not in full, within a further **5 WORKING DAYS** from acknowledgement, providing written details of how the matter has been dealt with or the timescale during which it will be investigated and fully addressed.
6. A written record will be kept throughout of all communication and actions planned or taken, so that the progress of any investigation can be monitored. The records will indicate whether the complaint was resolved satisfactorily at Stage 2, or whether it preceded to Stage 3 (a panel hearing).

7. The process of investigation and response should not typically exceed **10 WORKING DAYS** from acknowledgement, except in rare and exceptional circumstances. If this does occur it is vital that the complainant is informed, in writing, as to when they may expect a full response. It is essential throughout that the complainant is kept fully informed of the progress of their complaint.
8. Should the matter remain unresolved to the complainant's satisfaction following receipt of the outcome correspondence, they have the right to appeal the outcome, within **20 WORKING DAYS or 4 WEEKS** of the full response being received. This appeal should be in writing to the person who is named within the outcome letter that is sent (typically the Chair of the Board).

8. Stage 3 – Appeal panel (with independent representation)

Where the complainant wishes to appeal against the response provided at Stage 2, a Stage 3 appeal panel hearing will be arranged by an appropriate person nominated by the Chair of the Board (typically either a Board Director, or the Managing Director).

The appeal will be heard by a panel of at least three people, who have not previously been involved in the complaint, and will include an external independent member, who is not involved with the management or running of the School.

The Chair of the Board, or their representative, will acknowledge receipt in writing within **5 SCHOOL DAYS** of receipt of the appeal request. This correspondence will inform them that their complaint will be heard by a complaints appeal panel within **15 SCHOOL DAYS** of the date of this acknowledgement. The written confirmation will clearly identify the individual who has been nominated to chair the appeal panel.

The appeal meeting shall have a clerk. It is the responsibility of the clerk to ensure that all parties receive all relevant documents at least **3 SCHOOL DAYS** before the date of the hearing to allow individuals to familiarise themselves with them.

The complainant may attend the panel meeting and may also be accompanied by a friend or relative. Accompaniment by individuals other than friends and relatives may be permitted at the discretion of the chair of the panel

The appeal hearing will be arranged, and an appeal panel convened by the nominated appeal panel chair within **15 WORKING DAYS** of receipt of the written appeal, with at least three working days' notice given.

Panel members will be asked to consider the substance of the original complaint and the response provided to this complaint by the Headteacher or other complaint management lead. They will then be free to make their own findings and recommendations.

The hearing

The hearing will allow each party involved to explain their understanding or interpretation of events and for other parties to question them. The hearing will, therefore, usually operate according to the following format:

- the panel chair that has been nominated will introduce all parties to one another and explain the principles, objectives, and format of the hearing;
- the complainant will be given the opportunity to explain their complaint. Following this the Headteacher or complaint management lead and the panel will be allowed to ask the complainant questions;
- the Headteacher or complaint management lead will then be given an opportunity to explain the School's official response, interpretation, or view about the complaint. Following this the complainant and panel will be allowed to question the Headteacher or complaint management lead;
- if judged reasonable and appropriate by the panel chair, the Headteacher or complaint management lead, or the complainant will be given reasonable and proportionate opportunities to call witnesses and question witnesses called by other parties;
- the Headteacher or complaint management lead and the complainant will both be given the chance to give final statements; and
- the hearing will be concluded by the appeal panel chair who should explain that the panel will consider its decision and write to both parties **within 5 SCHOOL DAYS** informing them of the outcome.

After the hearing

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

- reach a unanimous, or if necessary, a majority decision, on the complaint;
- decide upon the appropriate action (if any) to be taken; and
- 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.

The outcome of any appeal panel hearing will be formally recorded, and copies of the findings and recommendations distributed **within 5 working days** of the hearing date to the complainant, the Headteacher or complaint management lead, and, where possible, any person(s) about whom the complaint has been made.

The outcome letter from the appeal panel hearing shall be written by the nominated chair of the panel and shall provide a summary of the final outcome and shall make clear that the School complaints procedure has reached its conclusion and there is no further school based procedural route to further appeal.

Suggestions of other avenues through which the complainant could take their complaint if they remain dissatisfied shall typically be explained (e.g. the Local Authority, Ofsted, DfE etc).

9. Confidentiality

Confidentiality is vital. All conversations and correspondence will be treated with discretion. Complainants have the right to know what use will be made of personal information and accordingly, personal information will only be shared between staff on a 'need to know' basis. All complaint correspondence will be kept confidentially with access only rights for Headteacher, Managing Director and relevant members of the Board, and others involved with the governance activities of the School.

The exception to this is the sharing of matters regarding child protection / safeguarding as confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed (refer to the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy), the requirement of the school to provide parents and other interested parties with information about

the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding year, and to inspectors conducting inspections under section 108 or 109 of the Education and Skills Act 2008, or to the Secretary of State, should they ask for such records.

10. Equal access, accompaniment, and representation

Reasonable adjustments will be taken to ensure that any individual has the opportunity to raise their concerns or submit a complaint. This includes the right to be accompanied or represented by a friend or relative at discussions and hearings and/or to submit concerns or complaints which have been written by another individual on their behalf. Should any meeting need to be held where any parties would have difficulties in terms of access, the Headteacher or complaint management lead, or the chair of an appeals panel, will assist with providing an appropriate venue.

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.

11. Time between stages

Although each of the stages within the procedure should occur consecutively, it is not necessary for each stage to immediately follow the last. Complainants may need some time to decide whether they wish to pursue the matter any further.

After each stage, the complainant and the individual who is dealing with their complaint at that time will agree an appropriate time scale 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 scale it will be considered as closed.

Where the complaint procedures carry over into holiday periods, the School shall act reasonably and endeavour to move the process forward as well as they are able.

Changes to time scales and deadlines

In general, the time scales and deadlines contained within this policy will be adhered to. However, in certain circumstances it may be inappropriate or impossible to guarantee that this is possible.

Where a complaint leads to criminal proceedings this will always be the case.

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

12. Complaints not in scope of the procedure

This complaints procedure covers all complaints about any provision of facilities or services that a school provides with the **exceptions** listed below, for which there are separate (statutory) procedures.

Exceptions	Who to contact
Local Authority involvement re. admissions to the School	Complaints in relation to admissions and statutory assessments and school re-organisation should be raised directly with local authorities (LA).

Statutory assessments of special educational needs	
Matters likely to require a child protection investigation	In relation to child protection the School Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy will be followed.
Whistleblowing	See the School whistleblowing procedures.
Staff grievances and disciplinary procedures	These matters will invoke the School's grievance procedures.
Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises	Providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with complaints about service. They should be contacted directly.

This policy has been developed after consulting:

- The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2015 Standard 7(a – l)

13. Monitoring arrangements

This policy will be reviewed by the Board. At every review, the policy will be shared with and approved by the Headteacher.

14. Links with other policies

This complaints policy is linked to:

- Safeguarding and Child Protection policy
- Whistleblowing policy

15. Version Control

Date of adoption of this policy, by or on behalf of the Proprietor	March 2023
Date of last review of this policy	February 2024
Date for next review of this policy	February 2025
Policy owner (Proprietor)	Dorset Centre of Excellence

16. Appendix 1 – Number of Complaints Received

In line with the requirements of the Independent School Standards, the number of complaints received are listed below.

Academic Year	Number of Complaints		
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
2021/2022	0	0	1
2022/2023	7	0	0
2023/2024	0	2	0