

Complaints Policy



COOMBE HOUSE
SCHOOL

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1. Aims and objectives of the policy

Dorset Centre of Excellence (the Company) and Coombe House School (the School) aims to meet its statutory obligations when responding to complaints from parents / carers of pupils at the school, pupils, staff and other stakeholders.

When responding to complaints, the aim is to:

- ☒ Be impartial and non-adversarial.
- ☒ Facilitate a full and fair investigation by an independent person or panel, where necessary.
- ☒ Address all the points at issue and provide an effective and prompt response.
- ☒ Respect complainants' desire for confidentiality.
- ☒ Treat complainants with respect and courtesy.
- ☒ Make sure that any decisions we make are lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate, in line with the principles of administrative law.
- ☒ Keep complainants informed of the progress of the complaints process.
- ☒ Consider how the complaint can feed into school improvement evaluation processes.

Complaints are aimed to be resolved by informal means wherever possible. Where this is not possible, formal procedures will be followed.

The Company and the School will aim to give the complainant the opportunity to complete the complaints procedure in full.

To support this, this policy will be published and made available on the school website.

Throughout the process, staff will be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved, and make any reasonable adjustments needed to accommodate individuals.

2. Legislation and Guidance

This document meets the requirements set out in part 7 of the schedule to the [Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), which states that there must be available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents / carers of pupils at the school.

It also refers to [good practice guidance on setting up complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE) although it is acknowledged that independent schools are not within the scope of this document.

3. Scope

This policy does not cover complaints procedures relating to:

- Admissions.
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs (SEN).
- Safeguarding matters.
- Suspension and permanent exclusion.
- Whistleblowing.
- Staff grievances.
- Staff discipline.

Please see our separate policies for procedures relating to these types of complaint.

Complaints about services provided by other providers who use school premises or facilities should be directed to the provider concerned.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

4.1. The Complainant

The complainant will get a more effective and timely response to their complaint if they:

- ☒ Follow these procedures.
- ☒ Co-operate with the School throughout the process and respond to deadlines and communication promptly.
- ☒ Ask for assistance as needed.
- ☒ Treat all those involved with respect.
- ☒ Do not approach any individual staff members about the complaint outside of agreed procedures.
- ☒ Do not discuss the complaint outside of the process or publish details about the complaint on social media.

4.2. The Investigator

An individual will be appointed to look into the complaint and establish the facts. They will:

- ☒ Interview all relevant parties, keeping notes.
- ☒ Consider records and any written evidence and keep these securely.
- ☒ Prepare a comprehensive report to the headteacher or complaints committee, which includes the facts and potential solutions.

4.3. The Complaints Co-ordinator

The complaints co-ordinator can be:

- The Headteacher.
- The Managing Director.
- Any other staff member providing administrative support.

The complaints co-ordinator will:

- Be nominated by the Headteacher or the Managing Director.
- Keep the complainant up to date at each stage in the procedure.
- Make sure the process runs smoothly by liaising with staff members, the Headteacher, Managing Director, Chair of the Board and Clerk to the Board.
- Be aware of issues relating to:
 - Sharing third-party information but should ask for guidance where required from the Quality Assurance Officer.
 - Additional support needed by complainants; for example, interpretation support or where the complainant is a child or young person.
- Keep records.

4.4. Clerk to the Board

The clerk will:

- Be the contact point for the complainant and the complaints committee, including circulating the relevant papers and evidence before complaints committee meetings.
- Arrange the Stage 3 Review Panel, if required.
- Record and circulate the minutes and outcome of the stage 3 review panel.

4.5. Chair of the Panel (Stage 3 Review Panel)

The Chair of the Stage 3 Review Panel will:

- Chair the meeting, ensuring that everyone is treated with respect throughout.
- Make sure all parties see the relevant information, understand the purpose of the stage 3 review panel, and are allowed to present their case.

5. Principles for Investigation

When investigating a complaint, it is important to identify:

- ☒ What has happened.
- ☒ Who was involved.
- ☒ What the complainant feels would put things right.

5.1. Timescales

The complainant must raise the complaint within three months of the incident. If the complaint is about a series of related incidents, they must raise the complaint within three months of the last incident.

Exceptions to this timeframe will be considered in circumstances where there were valid reasons for not making a complaint at that time and the complaint can still be investigated in a fair manner for all involved.

When complaints regarding the School are made out of term time, they will be considered to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

If at any point the timescales set out in this policy cannot be met:

- ☒ New time limits will be set with the complainant.
- ☒ Details of the new deadline and an explanation of the delay sent to the complainant.

6. Stages of Complaint

There is a 3-stage process for dealing with complaints in place:

- Stage 1 – Informal Resolution
- Stage 2 – Formal Investigation
- Stage 3 – Review Panel

6.1. Stage 1: Informal Resolution

Some complaints are actually queries / clarifications / requests for more or different information and are primarily minor matters which can be resolved very quickly, without the need for a formal process. This type of communication is considered to be part of the day-to-day work and would not typically be managed through 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, it shall typically be considered as a Stage 1 complaint in the first instance.

The Company and the School will take informal complaints seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter quickly. It may be the case that the provision or clarification of information will resolve the issue.

The complainant should raise the complaint as soon as possible within the timescales set out in section 5.1.

The complaint should be addressed to the relevant member of school staff or the Headteacher, either in person or by letter, telephone or email. If the complainant is unclear who to contact or how to contact them, they should contact the school office as specified on the website [Contact Us - Coombe House School](#)

Informal complaints will be acknowledged within two school days, which will confirm how the School intends to proceed, including an indication of the anticipated timescale.

The informal stage will involve a physical or virtual meeting between the complainant and the Investigator and / or the subject of the complaint, if appropriate. A written response will be provided within 10 school days following the informal meeting.

If the complaint is not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant informally at Stage 1 , it will be escalated to a Stage 2 formal complaint.

6.2. Stage 2: Formal Investigation

The formal stage involves the complainant putting the complaint to the Headteacher and / or the subject of the complaint:

- In a letter or email (this is preferred).
- Over the phone.
- In person.
- Through a third party acting on their behalf.

The complainant should provide details such as relevant dates, times and the names of witnesses of events, alongside copies of any relevant documents. The complainant should also state what they feel would resolve the complaint.

If complainants need assistance raising a formal complaint, they can contact the school office as specified on the website [Contact Us - Coombe House School](#)

The Headteacher will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within two school days.

The Headteacher (or other person appointed by the Headteacher for this purpose) will then conduct their own investigation. The written conclusion of this investigation will be sent to the complainant within 10 school days. Details of how to appeal and progress to Stage 3 will be detailed within this correspondence.

How to Escalate a Complaint

If the complainant wishes to proceed to Stage 3 of the procedure, they should inform the Clerk to the Board in writing within five school days, as per the instructions detailed following Stage 2. Requests received outside of this timeframe will be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Complaints can be escalated by contacting the Clerk to the Board:

- By letter or email.
- Over the phone.
- In person.
- Through a third party acting on behalf of the complainant.

The clerk will need the details of the complaint as set out above, as well as details from the complainant on how they feel the previous stage of the procedure has not addressed their complaint sufficiently, and what they feel would resolve the complaint.

The clerk will acknowledge receipt of the request within two school days.

6.3. Stage 3: Review Panel

Convening the Panel

Complaints will be escalated to the stage 3 review panel if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal stage.

The panel will be appointed by, or on behalf of, the Chair of the Board and must consist of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. At least one panel member must be independent of the management and running of the School. The panel cannot be made up solely of Board members, as they are not independent of the management and running of the School.

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 panel will have access to the existing record of the complaint's progress (see section 10).

The complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the review panel. The Clerk will aim to find a date within 10 school days of the request, where possible.

If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates without good reason, the Clerk will set a date, and the stage 3 review panel will go ahead using written submissions from both parties.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least three school days before the date of the meeting.

The Chair of the panel will ensure that stage 3 review panel is properly minuted.

At the Meeting

The meeting will be held in private. Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless required as part of reasonable adjustments. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending will be sought before meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

At the review panel meeting, the complainant and representatives from the School, as appropriate, will be present. Each will have an opportunity to set out written or verbal submissions prior to the meeting.

The complainant must be allowed to attend the stage 3 review panel and be accompanied if they wish. Legal representation at this stage is not considered to be required, but it would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

At the meeting, each individual will have the opportunity to give statements and present their evidence, and witnesses will be called, as appropriate, to present their evidence.

The panel, the complainant and the school representative(s) will be given the chance to ask and reply to questions. Once the complainant and school representative(s) have presented their cases, they will be asked to leave, and evidence will then be considered.

The panel will then put together its findings and recommendations from the case. The panel will also provide copies of the minutes of the stage 3 review panel, the findings and recommendations to the complainant and, where relevant, the individual who is the subject of the complaint, and make a copy available for inspection by the proprietor and Headteacher.

The Outcome

The panel can:

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

If the complaint is upheld, the panel will:

- Decide the appropriate action to resolve the complaint.
- Where appropriate, recommend changes to the School's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

The School will inform those involved of the decision in writing within five school days.

7. Complaints Against the Headteacher, the Managing Director or the Board

The stages above will be relevant to managing complaints against the Headteacher, the Managing Director or members of the Board, however the Investigator of the complaint will be assigned accordingly.

For any complaints against the Headteacher, Managing Director or members of the Board, the complainant should contact the Governance and GDPR Lead (clerk@coombehouse.org.uk), who will arrange confidential communication with the appropriate person.

In complaints against the Headteacher, the Managing Director should be appointed as the Investigator.

In complaints against the Managing Director, the Investigator will be appointed by the Chair of the Board.

In complaints against members of the Board, the Shareholder (Dorset Council) will be informed.

8. When a Complaint is not Resolved

If the complainant is unsatisfied with the outcome of the complaints procedure and the complaint is regarding the School not meeting standards set by the Department of Education (DfE) in any of the following areas, the complainant can refer their complaint to the DfE:

- Education.
- Pupil welfare and health and safety.
- School premises.
- Staff suitability.
- Making information available to parents.
- The spiritual, moral, social or cultural development of pupils.

The DfE will consider reports of a major failure to meet the standards. Where appropriate, it can request an emergency inspection to look at pupil welfare and health and safety, and make sure that the school deals with serious failings.

For more information or to refer a complaint, see the following webpage:

www.gov.uk/complain-about-school

9. Unreasonable and Persistent Complaints

9.1. Unreasonable Complaints

Most complaints raised will be valid and therefore will be treated seriously. However, a complaint may become unreasonable if the person:

- 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.
- Seeks an unrealistic outcome.
- Makes excessive demands on 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.
- 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.

Please note: the above list is not intended to be exhaustive and is for guidance purposes only. It is at the discretion of the Company and the School what is deemed to be unreasonable.

Complainants should try to limit their communication 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.

Steps we will take

Every reasonable step to address the complainant's comments and give them a clear statement of the position and their options will be provided. The role as an objective arbiter will be maintained throughout the process, including when meetings with individuals are held. The complaints procedure will be followed as normal (as outlined above) wherever possible.

Whenever possible, the Headteacher or Managing Director will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking. If the behaviour continues, the Headteacher or Managing Director will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable, refer them to this policy and remind them to act in accordance with it.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the police will be informed immediately, and actions will be communicated in writing. This may include barring an individual from school premises and ensuring appropriate measures of support are provided to staff where they are the subject of aggression and / or violence.

9.2. Serial / Persistent Complaints

If the complainant contacts the Company or School again on the same issue, the correspondence may then be viewed as 'serial' or 'persistent'. Responses to the complainant will be stopped when the following conditions have been met:

- Every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns have been taken.
- The complainant has been given a clear statement of the position of the Company and / or the School and their options.
- The complainant contacts the School repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time.
- The complainant's communications are often or always abusive or aggressive.
- The complainant makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff.
- There is reason to believe the individual contacting the School is doing so with the intention of causing disruption or inconvenience.

Where the decision is made to stop responding, the individual will be informed of the intent to do so. An explanation that any new complaints will be considered provided the concerns raised are materially different to those raised previously and / or are unconnected to the previous concern.

9.3. Duplicate Complaints

If a duplicate complaint on the same subject from a partner, family member or other individual is received regarding a resolved complaint under this procedure, it will be assessed as to whether there are aspects that had not previously been considered, or any new information that should be taken into account.

If there are no new aspects:

- The new complainant will be informed that this issue has already been investigated and a response to this issue has been sent, and the local process is complete.
- Direct them to the DfE if they are dissatisfied with the original handling of the complaint.

If a duplicate complaint is raised which warrants further consideration, the procedure outlined in section 6 will be repeated.

9.4. Complaint Campaigns

Where the School receives a large volume of complaints about the same topic or subject, especially if these come from complainants unconnected with the School, these may be responded to by:

- Publishing a single response on the website.
- Sending a template response to all of the complainants.

10. Record Keeping and Confidentiality

The progress of all complaints will be recorded, including information about actions taken at all stages, the stage at which the complaint was resolved, and the final outcome. The records will also include copies of letters and emails, and notes relating to meetings and phone calls.

This material will be treated as confidential and stored securely and will be viewed only by those involved in investigating the complaint or on the review panel.

This is except where the secretary of state (or someone acting on their behalf) or the complainant requests access to records of a complaint through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request or through a Subject Access Request (SAR) under the terms of the Data Protection Act, or where the material must be made available during a school inspection.

Records of complaints will be kept securely, only for as long as necessary and in line with data protection law, our privacy notices and data retention and disposal procedure and guidance.

The details of the complaint, including the names of individuals involved, will not be shared with the Board of Directors at Stage 1 and 2 in case a review panel needs to be organised at a later point.

Where the Board of Directors is aware of the detail of the complaint before the review panel stage, the School will (where reasonably practicable) consider arranging for an independent panel to hear the complaint.

Complainants have the right to request an independent panel at Stage 3 if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. The decision to approve this request is made by the Chair of the Board, who will consider the request.

11. Learning Lessons

The School Quality Committee, as delegated authority by the Board of Directors, will review any underlying issues raised by complaints with the Headteacher / Senior Leadership Team, where appropriate, and respecting confidentiality, to determine whether there are any improvements that the school can make to its procedures or practice to help prevent similar events in the future.

12. Monitoring Arrangements

The School Quality Committee, as delegated authority by the Board of Directors, will monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure in making sure that complaints are handled properly. The School Quality Committee will track the number and nature of complaints, and review underlying issues as stated in section 11.

The complaints records are logged and managed by the Clerk to the Board.

13. 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 2025
Date for next review of this policy	February 2026
Policy owner (Proprietor)	Dorset Centre of Excellence

14. 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
2024/2025	0	0	0