



HEATHFIELD SCHOOL

Parent Complaints Policy

Policy Area:	General
Relevant Statutory Regulations:	ISSR 2014 - Part 6 ISSR 2014 - Part 7 NMS Part F, Standard 14 Data Protection Act 2018 Education and Skills Act 2008
Key Contact Personnel in School	
Nominated Member of Leadership Staff Responsible for the policy:	Headmistress
Version:	2024.02
Date updated:	01 September 2024
Date of next review:	01 September 2025

This policy will be reviewed at least annually, and/or following any concerns and/or updates to national and local guidance or procedures.

Introduction

Heathfield School (“the School”) has long prided itself on the quality of the teaching and pastoral care provided to its pupils in line with its professed values; ‘kind, positive, honest and respectful.’ If parents do have a complaint, they can expect it to be treated by the School in accordance with the procedure set out in this Policy.

It is important to note that if a complaint relates to child protection allegations, other policies will override this in line with the School’s safeguarding policies.

This policy is made available to parents of all current and prospective pupils, on the School website and on request from headmistresspa@heathfieldschool.net . This policy can also be made available in larger print or more accessible format if required. It is available to all staff on Teams within All Staff Information Team in the policies folder.

If the complaint is regarding exams, parents should refer to the separate “Exams Appeals and Complaints Procedure and Policy”.

Stage 1 – Informal Resolution of complaints

It is hoped that complaints will be resolved quickly and informally.

If parents have a complaint they should contact their child's tutor or Head of Year ("HoY") for academic and pastoral matters, or the housemistress for boarding issues. If the tutor, HoY or housemistress cannot resolve the issue on their own, it may be necessary to consult a member of the Senior Leadership Team ("SLT").

If an issue is raised with the Headmistress or a member of the SLT that can be resolved informally, the issue will be redirected to the appropriate member of staff to deal with.

Staff will use their best endeavours to acknowledge letters, emails or telephone calls within 48 hours of their receipt (excluding weekends and school holidays where the issue will be dealt with as soon as practicable). Parents will be informed of how the School intends to investigate the issue.

The person who is contacted will make a written record of all complaints, the date on which it was received, and the names of the pupil and parents. It may be necessary for the person to carry out further investigations, which may take longer. A timeframe will be notified to parents to enable this.

Should the matter not be resolved within 10 working days during term time (or such other agreed timetable) or a satisfactory resolution met, then parents will be advised to proceed with their complaint in accordance with Stage 2 set out below.

A record will be made of all concerns/complaints and the date on which they were received. Records will be filed either electronically or physically in a separate file. A letter or email will always be written to parents, or a telephone call made, to conclude a matter, indicating how the issue has been dealt with and the outcome reached.

Stage 2 – Formal Resolution of complaints

If the complaint cannot be resolved on an informal basis, then the parents should put their complaint in writing to the Headmistress in the prescribed form set out in Appendix 1. The Headmistress will decide, after considering the complaint, the appropriate course of action to take. If the complaint is about the Headmistress or another conflict of interest exists such that parents consider it is not appropriate for the Headmistress to consider the complaint, then parents should put their complaint to the Chair of Governors who will decide on an alternative member of staff to consider the complaint.

In most cases, the Headmistress or the alternative representative will contact the parents concerned, normally within 10 working days (excluding weekends and school holidays where the issue will be dealt with as soon as practicable) of receiving the complaint, to discuss the matter. If possible, a resolution will be reached at this stage.

It may be necessary for the Headmistress or the alternative representative to carry out further investigations, which may take longer. A timeframe will be notified to parents to enable this.

The Headmistress or the alternative representative will keep written records of all meetings and interviews held in relation to the complaint. Such records will be added to the file and Stage 2 Complaints which do not have safeguarding implications should be retained for a minimum of 7 years. Where there is a safeguarding issue, records must be preserved for the term of the independent inquiry into the allegation and at least until the accused has reached normal pension age or for 10 years from the date of the allegation if it is longer.

Once the Headmistress or the alternative representative is satisfied that, so far as is practicable, all of the relevant facts have been established, a decision will be made and parents will be informed of this decision in writing within 28 working days of receipt of the written complaint (excluding weekends/School holidays). The Headmistress or the alternative representative will also give reasons for the decision.

A written record will be kept as to whether the issue is resolved or if it needs to proceed to a panel hearing.

If parents are still not satisfied with the decision, they should proceed to Stage 3 set out below.

Stage 3 – Panel Hearing

If parents seek to invoke Stage 3 (following a failure to reach an earlier resolution), they will be referred to the Chair of Governors, who has been appointed by the Governing Body to call hearings of the Complaints Panel.

The matter will then be referred to the Complaints Panel for consideration. The Panel will consist of at least three persons not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint, one of whom shall be independent of the management and running of the school. Each of the Panel members shall be appointed by the Chair of Governors. A member of the Panel will then acknowledge the invocation of Stage 3 and schedule a hearing to take place as soon as practicable and if during term time, normally within 21 days of receiving the written request.

If the Panel deems it necessary, it may require further particulars of the complaint or any related matter to be supplied in advance of the hearing. Copies of such particulars shall be supplied to all parties not later than five days (excluding weekends or holidays) prior to the hearing.

The parents may be accompanied to the hearing by one other person; this may be a relative or friend but may not be a legal representative. At this stage, legal representation is not permitted.

The Panel's aim is to clarify what has happened, who has been involved and what the complainant feels would put things right. If possible, the Panel will resolve the parents' complaint immediately without the need for further investigation. Where further investigation or consideration is required, the Panel will decide how it should be carried out.

After due consideration of all facts it considers relevant, the Panel will reach a decision and may make recommendations, which it shall complete within five working days of the hearing. The Panel will write to the parents informing them of its decision and the reasons for it. The decision of the Panel will be final.

The Panel's findings, actions the School may take and, if any, recommendations will be sent in writing to the parents, the Headmistress, the Chair of Governors and, where relevant, the person complained of within 10 working days (excluding weekends and school holidays). Minutes of the hearing will be kept at the school for inspection by the Headmistress and the Chair of Governors.

When a complaint is received during the school holidays, it will not always be possible to resolve the complaint within the holiday period. It will be dealt with as quickly as feasible but will always be addressed within the stated number of working school days mentioned above.

If the complaint is regarding any member of the governing body other than the Chair of Governors it should be made in writing to the Chair of Governors.:

Chair of Governors
Mr Alex Popplewell
E: apopplewell@heathfieldschool.net

If parents are dissatisfied with this procedure, or if the complaint is about the Chair of Governors, then they may contact the ISI (Independent Schools Inspectorate) on 0207 600 0100 or email info@isi.net

Independent Schools Inspectorate
CAP House

9-12 Long Lane
London
EC1A 9HA
T: 0207 600 0100
E: concerns@isi.net

Remote Meetings

The School recognises the seriousness of a referral to the Complaints Panel and accordingly, considers fair and transparent Stage 3 Panel Hearings to be of paramount importance. As a result, other than in exceptional circumstances and other than with the consent of the Chair of Governors, a Stage 3 Panel Hearing will be held in person.

Exceptional circumstances are considered to include School closure due to flood, fire or infectious disease/illness.

Where a remote meeting is held, the Complaints Panel will establish the following prior to proceeding:

- confirmation that all participants have access to the requisite technology which will enable them to hear, speak, see and be seen clearly;
- ensure that all participants will be able to participate fully;
- ensure that there are no other impediments to the remote meeting being held fairly and in a transparent manner.

Where the Stage 3 Panel Hearing is held remotely, parents and the person accompanying them, will each be asked to confirm that the meeting is not being recorded and their responses will be minuted.

Confidentiality

Parents can be assured that all formal complaints at this level will be treated confidentially. Correspondence, statements and records will be kept confidential except in so far as is required of the School by the Secretary of State or if a regulatory body conducting an inspection under section 108 or 109 of the 2008 Act requires access to them and where disclosure is required in the course of the School's inspection or, where any other legal obligations prevail.

Record Keeping

The School will keep full and accurate records of the investigations and contact with parents at each stage of the complaint. Records will be filed either electronically or physically in a separate file centrally by the SLT. We will identify complaints about boarding separately within the main school complaints log.

Complaints which do not have safeguarding implications are retained for a minimum of 7 years, indicating whether they have been resolved and at what stage, and the action taken by the School as a result of these complaints (regardless of whether they were upheld). Where there is a safeguarding issue, records must be preserved for the term of the independent inquiry into the allegation and at least until the accused has reached normal pension age or for 10 years from the date of the allegation if it is longer.

Vexatious or serial / persistent complaints

Please note that whilst all complaints are investigated, the School reserves the right not to progress complaints which the Headmistress or Chair of Governors consider frivolous, vexatious, or serial / persistent, in line with Department for Education advice (see Best Practice Guidance for School Complaints Procedures

2020).

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator defines the characteristics of a “frivolous” or “vexatious” complaint as:

- complaints which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, repetitious;
- insistence upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason;
- insistence upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner;
- complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance; or
- demands for redress which lack any serious purpose or value.

If a complainant who has completed the procedure tries to re-open the same issue, the correspondence may then be viewed as “serial” or “persistent”. However, the application of a “serial or persistent” marking should be against the subject or complaint itself rather than the complainant.

Any decision not to progress a frivolous, vexatious, serial or persistent complaint will not be taken lightly and the School will consider all surrounding circumstances and best practice guidance before taking such action. Whenever possible the Headmistress and/or the Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before dismissing a complaint as vexatious, serial or persistent. Should any such decision be taken this will be communicated to the complainant.

Review of Complaints

The Complaints Register is reviewed by the Headmistress and appropriate members of SLT on a termly basis as a minimum. In addition, the Headmistress will consider the process of handling of complaints at least annually and will discuss issues with staff as necessary. The Headmistress will report to the Governing Body termly on the number and type of complaints received and their outcomes.

A nominated Governor will monitor the level and nature of complaints regularly with the Headmistress and Bursar. The Governor involved will not form part of a Panel Hearing constituted on a case in which they have had any discussion.

All complaints which reach Stage 2 and beyond are recorded in the Complaints Register and in this Policy and published on the School’s website.

Complaints received by the School

2018 – 2019	One formal complaint recorded at Stage 2 No formal complaints recorded at Stage 3
2019 – 2020	No complaints were received at Stage 2 or Stage 3
2020 - 2021	No complaints were received at Stage 2 or Stage 3
2021 - 2022	No complaints were received at Stage 2 or Stage 3
2022 - 2023	Three formal complaints recorded at Stage 2 No formal complaints recorded at Stage 3
2023 - 2024	One formal complaint recorded at Stage 2 No formal complaints recorded at Stage 3

--	--

Related Policies

- Confidentiality Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Exams Appeals and Complaints Procedure and Policy
- Pupil Complaints Policy and Procedure
- Record Keeping Policy

APPENDIX 1

PARENTS' COMPLAINT FORM

In the event that parents have a serious complaint that has not been resolved by talking to the relevant Head of Year or Senior Leader, they should fill in this form, or email and return it to the Headmistress.

The School will contact the parents upon receipt of the complaint form and will investigate and give a formal response to the complaint, normally within 10 working days.

I WOULD LIKE TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE FOLLOWING:

Name: Date:

YOUR COMPLAINT WILL BE TREATED CONFIDENTIALLY AND VERY SERIOUSLY.

In normal circumstances, you can expect that your complaint will be responded to within 10 working days of receipt of this form.