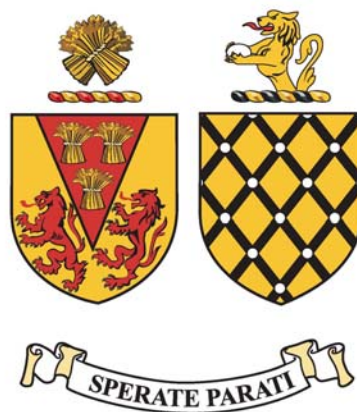


WATFORD GRAMMAR SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

School Complaints Procedure



Date of issue: 11 September 2012

Adopted by Board of Governors: 11 September 2012

Review date: 11 September 2015
March 2018



COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Part 1: General Principles of complaints

Dealing with Complaints – Initial concerns

1. The School recognises 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.

2. Whenever possible we will try to deal with concerns without the need for formal procedures i.e. informally. In most cases the class teacher, Head of Department or Head of Year 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

3. The formal procedures will need to 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.

4. The Headmistress will have responsibility for the operation and management of the school complaints procedure. If the complaint is about the Headmistress this will be dealt with by a nominated member of the Board of Governors.

Framework of Principles

5. The 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 and non-adversarial;
- allow swift handling with established time-limits 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;
- address all the points at issue, 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

6. At each stage, the person investigating the complaint (the complaints co-ordinator), makes sure to:

- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved;
- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;

- meet the complainant or make contact (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

7. At each stage in the procedure we 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;
- an agreement to differ.

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

9. Areas of agreement between the parties will be identified. 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

10. 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 will inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

Time-Limits

11. Complaints need to be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible. Clear and realistic time limits for each action within each stage will be agreed upon. However, where further investigations are necessary, new time limits will be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

Part 2: The Formal Complaints Procedure

The Stages of Complaints

12. At each stage those involved will be clarified. There will be an explanation as to 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 Headmistress after a meeting with the complainant.

13. Three school-based stages are likely to be sufficient:

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

Part 3 – Managing and Recording Complaints

Recording Complaints

14. A record will be kept of the progress of the complaint and the final outcome. A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing. An example of a complaint form can be found in Annex A. 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 can be kept and a copy of any written response added to the record.

Governing Body Review

15. To ensure the effectiveness of the procedure, the level and nature of complaints and their outcomes will be monitored annually at the end of the summer term by the Chair of the Governing Body. This review will be by reference to the record of all complaints maintained by the Headmistress. The Governing Body will make appropriate changes to the procedure if necessary to ensure it is effective. Complaint information shared with the Governing Body will not name individuals.

16. 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, the School may identify underlying issues that need to be addressed.

Publicising the Procedure

17. Details of the Complaints Procedures:

- The School Prospectus/Additional Information pack.
- The School Website has a copy of complaints procedure and a form to download if required.
- A complaints leaflet for minor issues is available from the school office.

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 Headmistress can refer the complainant to another staff member. Where the complaint concerns the Headmistress, the complainant can refer the matter to the chair of the Board of Governors.

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 Complaints Co-ordinator/ Headmistress and advise the complainant about the procedure. It would be useful if governors did not act. Governors should not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the formal procedure or become 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 Headmistress

The Headmistress'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 another staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken.

Stage Three: Complaint Heard by Governing Bodies Complaints Appeal Panel

The complainant needs to write to the Chair of the Board of Governors giving details of the complaint. The Chair, or a nominated governor, will convene a GB 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 GB 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 stage three, and set out its terms of reference; or may nominate a panel ad hoc. The terms of reference of the panel may 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 its 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.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Role of the Clerk

The panel of governors considering complaints will 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;

- each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions;
- written material is seen by all parties. If a new issue arises it would be useful to give all parties the opportunity to consider and comment on it.

Notification of the Panel's Decision

The chair of the panel will ensure that the complainant is notified of the panel's decision, in writing, with the panel's response within any time limit that has been agreed.

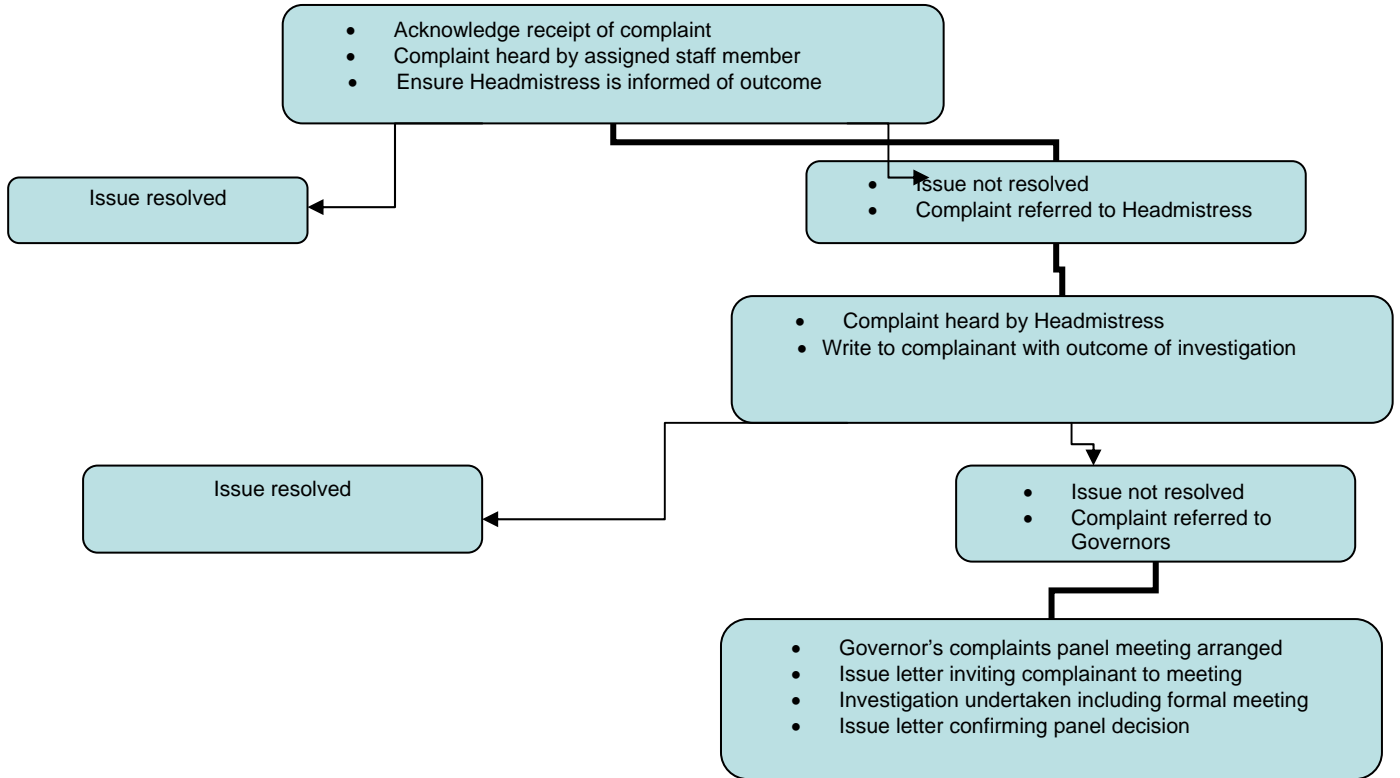
Checklist for a Panel Hearing

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 the complaint, and be followed by their witnesses.
- The Headmistress may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken.
- The Headmistress is then invited to explain the school's actions and be followed by the school's witnesses.
- The complainant may question both the Headmistress and the witnesses after each has spoken.
- The panel may ask questions at any point.
- The complainant is then invited to sum up the complaint.
- The Headmistress 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.

Flowchart

Summary of Dealing with Complaints initially addressed to the Headmistress



Watford Grammar School for Girls Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the Headmistress 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)?

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

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

Signature:

Date:

Official use

Date acknowledgement sent:

By who:

Complaint referred to:

Date:

All serious complaints should in the first instance be referred to the Headmistress.