Parental Complaints Policy and Procedures

The Abbey School, Reading

Reviewed by:	Head	August 2025 – updated May 2026
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17 Kendrick Road, Reading, Berkshire RG1 5DZ
Tel: 0118 987 2256 - **Email:** schooloffice@theabbey.co.uk
www.theabbey.co.uk
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Registered Charity No 309115.

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Aims

The aims of this policy and related procedures are to provide a framework for the resolution of complaints which:

- allows for their resolution informally and sets out the School's formal procedures where this is not achievable;
- is easily accessible and publicised, simple to understand and use and impartial and non-adversarial;
- enables a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary;
- respects people's desire for confidentiality;
- addresses all the points at issue and provides an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary, and;
- where necessary, allows information to be shared appropriately so that lessons may be learned and services improved.

Scope and application

- This policy applies to the whole school including the Early Years Foundation Stage (**EYFS**).
- This policy applies to any expression of dissatisfaction however made about actions taken, or a lack of action, by the School.
- This policy applies to complaints from each of the following:
    - parents of current students
    - parents of former students if the complaint was initially raised when the student was registered at the School and / or former students themselves
- This policy does not apply to exclusions, to which the School's Behaviour and Discipline policy applies. Parents seeking a review of any decision on disciplinary grounds should review that policy and follow its provisions.
- Requests for financial awards, such as claims for compensation, damages or fee refunds, are also beyond the scope of the School's complaints procedure and should be addressed to the Head of Finance and Resources, whose contact details are available from the School Office.
- All parents should be aware that regardless of the nature of a complaint and whether or not it is upheld, parents are generally not entitled to details of any related sanctions imposed on staff, students or other parents.

Regulatory framework

This policy has been prepared to meet the School's responsibilities under:

- Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014;
- Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, January 2024);

- Education and Skills Act 2008;
- Children Act 1989 as amended;
- Childcare Act 2006;
- Children and Social Work Act 2017;
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR);
- Equality Act 2010;
- Responsibilities under Working Together to Safeguard Children and Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance as regularly updated.

This policy should be read in conjunction with the parent contract.

Responsibility statement and allocation of tasks

The Governing Body has overall responsibility for all matters which are the subject of this policy.

To ensure the efficient discharge of its responsibilities under this policy, the Governing Body has allocated the following tasks:

Task	**Allocated to**	**When/ frequency of review**
Operational responsibility and formal annual review	The Head	Annually

Publication and availability

This policy is published on the School website and available in hard copy on request.

This policy can be made available in large print or another accessible format if required.

Information regarding the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure of this policy (ie Stages 2 or 3) during the preceding school year is included at the end of this policy and available to parents of students and parents of prospective students and, on request, to the Chief Inspector, the Secretary of State or an independent inspectorate.

Definitions and interpretation

Where the following words or phrases are used in this policy:

- References to the Governing Body are references to the Board of Governors, known as the Council.
- References to **working days** mean Monday to Friday, when the School is open during term time. The dates of terms are published on the School's website. In the event that the application of this definition is likely to introduce excessive delays, due to intervening School holidays, the School's approach is to take sensible and reasonable steps so as to minimise any hardship or unfairness arising from such delays.

Timescales for each stage of the complaints procedure are set out below in the relevant paragraphs.

It is expected that the management of every complaint will progress in a timely manner.

The School aims to resolve all complaints efficiently and promptly and parents are encouraged to bring any matter causing concern to the School's attention as soon as possible.

Where there are exceptional circumstances resulting in a delay to the timescales for a stage of the complaints procedure, the School will notify the parents and inform them of the new timescales as soon as possible.

Management of complaints

The School's policy allows for complaints to be considered at three stages:

Stage 1:Informal raising of a complaint by any means. Further details of this procedure are set out in Appendix 1.

Stage 2: A formal complaint in writing. Further details of this procedure are set out in Appendix 2.

Stage 3: Reference to a complaints panel. Further details of this procedure are set out in Appendix 3.

Expected standards of behaviour

Attention is drawn to the information included in Appendix 4 which is drawn from the Department for Education's Best practice advice for school complaints procedures 2020, updated January 2021.

Record keeping and confidentiality

All records created in accordance with this policy are managed in accordance with the School's policies that apply to the retention and destruction of records.

The School keeps a written record of all formal complaints, including the following:

- whether they were resolved at Stage 2 or Stage 3.
- timelines for complaints, acknowledgements and responses by the School.
- the action taken by the School as a result of the complaints (regardless of whether they are upheld).

In accordance with data protection principles, details of individual complaints will be kept only for as long as is reasonably necessary in the circumstances.[1]

Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential except where access is requested by the Secretary of State or where disclosure is required in the course of an inspection or under other legal authority or court order.

[1] In accordance with the terms of reference of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse all schools are required to retain information which relates to allegations (substantiated or not) of organisations and individuals who may have been involved in, or have knowledge of child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation; allegations (substantiated or not) of individuals having engaged in sexual activity with, or having a sexual interest in, children; institutional failures to protect children from sexual abuse or other exploitation. Details of any complaints made about such matters will be retained.

A complaint about the fulfilment of the School's EYFS requirements will be made available to Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (**ISI**) on request.

The records created in accordance with this policy may contain personal data. The School has a number of privacy notices that explain how the School will use personal data for the benefit of students and parents. The privacy notices are published on the School's website. In addition, staff must ensure that they follow the School's data protection policies and procedures when handling personal data created in connection with this policy. This includes the School's data protection policy and information security policy.

Complaints to Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate

Ofsted can be contacted at enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk or on 0300 123 4666.

ISI can be contacted at concerns@isi.net or on 020 7600 0100.

Training

The School ensures that regular guidance and training is arranged on induction and at regular intervals thereafter so that staff and volunteers understand what is expected of them by this policy and have the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out their roles.

The level and frequency of training depends on the role of the individual member of staff.

The School maintains written records of all staff training.

There was one formal complaint during the academic year 2024/2025.

Appendix 1 Stage 1: informal complaint

Informal resolution of a complaint

We expect that most complaints can be resolved informally. For example, dissatisfaction about some aspect of teaching or pastoral care or a billing error should be able to be resolved by the relevant member of staff.

Who to contact

Where appropriate, complaints should initially be raised as follows:

- **educational issues and pastoral care**: if the matter relates to the classroom, the curriculum, special educational needs, or pastoral care, please speak or write initially to the student's form teacher (at the Junior School) or tutor (at the Senior School). Your complaint may be passed to a more senior member of staff if appropriate;
- **disciplinary matters**: a problem over any disciplinary action taken or a sanction imposed should be raised first with the member of staff who imposed it, or a member of the Junior School Leadership Team (at the Junior School) or the appropriate Assistant Director (at the Senior School);
- **financial matters**: a query relating to fees or extras should be addressed in writing to the Head of Finance & Resources.

An informal complaint will be acknowledged promptly by telephone, email or letter and in any case within three working days of receipt, indicating the action that is being taken and the likely timescales. Such action may include an investigation and / or a meeting with the parent.

Wherever appropriate, the School will ask the parent at the earliest stage what they think might resolve the issue.

The parent will receive a response to the complaint within 15 working days.

If the parent is dissatisfied with the response to the informal complaint or if the complaint cannot be resolved by informal means, the parent may make a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure as set out in Appendix 2.

Complaints about the Head

The procedure for dealing with an informal complaint about the Head of the School is set out below:

- parents may choose to raise complaints directly with the Head if they feel that the matter is capable of resolution informally. The complaint may be raised orally or in writing. If in writing, the School will not automatically treat the complaint as a formal (Stage 2) complaint and the Head will endeavour to resolve the complaint informally under Stage 1;
- the Head will acknowledge informal complaints within three working days and will seek to resolve the matter under this Stage 1 by means of direct conversation or a meeting with the parents, to be held within 15 working days of the initial complaint;
- if the parent is dissatisfied with the Head's response to the informal complaint or if the complaint cannot be resolved by informal means, the parent may make a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure as set out in Appendix 2.

Alternatively, parents may choose to make their complaint about the Head in writing to the Chair of Governors via the Secretary to the Governors. In this case, the complaint will be treated as a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure as set out in Appendix 2.

Appendix 2 Stage 2: formal complaint

How to make a formal complaint

Complaints will usually only progress to Stage 2 after first being considered at the informal stage and only then if the parent indicates that they intend to escalate a matter to the formal stage.

The formal complaint must be in writing addressed to the Head of the School and should include:

- a copy of all relevant documents and full contact details; and
- details of all the grounds of the complaint and the outcome desired.

The complaint will be acknowledged by telephone, email or letter within three working days, indicating the action that is being taken and the likely timescales.

Investigation

The subject matter of the complaint will be investigated in the most appropriate manner, which may include some or all the following steps:

- delegation of the investigation to a senior member of staff;
- involvement of one or more Governors;
- request for additional information from the parent, including what they think might resolve the issue (if not already requested under Stage 1); and
- request for a conversation and / or a meeting with the parent personally and / or others with relevant knowledge of the circumstances.

Written records will be kept of all meetings and interviews held in relation to the complaint. Where the investigation has been delegated to a senior member of staff, they will prepare a report on the investigation which will be considered by the Head. Personal data may be redacted, and names anonymised or cyphered in line with data protection principles.

Decision

The Head or their designated senior member of staff will notify the parent by email or letter of their Stage 2 decision and the reasons for it within 15 working days from the receipt of the formal complaint.

If the parent is dissatisfied with the Stage 2 response to the complaint, the parent can request that the complaint be referred to a complaints panel under Stage 3 using the procedure set out in Appendix 3. This request must be made within 15 working days of the receipt of the Stage 2 decision.

Early Years Foundation Stage (**EYFS**): in compliance with guidance that specifically relates to the EYFS, parents of students in this setting will be notified of the outcome of the investigation within 28 calendar days of the complaint being received.

Complaints about the Head

The procedure for dealing with a formal complaint about the Head of the School is set out below:

- The complaint should be put in writing to the Chair of Governors. The written complaint should include a copy of all relevant documents and full contact details and details of all the grounds of the complaint and the outcome desired.

- The Chair of Governors (via the Secretary to the Governors) will acknowledge the complaint by telephone, email or letter within three working days of receipt and indicate the action that is being taken and the likely timescale. Such action may include an investigation and/or a meeting with the parent. The parent will receive a response to the complaint within 15 working days.

- If the parent is dissatisfied with the response to the complaint, the parent can request that the complaint be referred to a complaints panel under Stage 3 using the procedure set out in Appendix 3. This request must be made within 15 working days of the receipt of the Stage 2 decision.

- If the complaint about the Head relates to their handling of an existing formal complaint, it will be treated as part of that complaint and managed either under Stage 2 or Stage 3 of the process as appropriate.

Appendix 3 Stage 3: complaints panel

Complaints panel hearing

If a parent is dissatisfied with the Stage 2 response to the complaint, the parent can request a complaints panel hearing within 15 working days of receipt of the Stage 2 decision.

A complaints panel Hearing (**Hearing**) is a Hearing to consider those elements of the Stage 2 response to the parent's complaint with which the parent remains dissatisfied. The panel is not obliged to consider any new complaints which have not been previously raised.

How to request a Hearing

A request for a Hearing must be put in writing to the Chair of Governors and unless exceptional circumstances apply, will only be considered if the procedure at Stage 2 has been completed.

The written request should include:

- a copy of all relevant documents and full contact details;
- details of all the grounds of the complaint and the outcome desired;
- a list of the documents which the parent believes to be in the School's possession and wishes the complaints panel to consider; and
- whether the parent proposes to be accompanied to the hearing by someone who is legally qualified.

If assistance with the request is required, for example because of a disability, please inform the Clerk to the Governors who will be happy to make appropriate arrangements.

The Chair of Governors will acknowledge the request for a Hearing in writing within three working days of receipt.

Every effort will be made to enable the Hearing to take place within 15 working days of receipt of the request.

Parents may withdraw their request for a Hearing at any point up to and including the intended date of the Hearing.

Planning the Hearing

The Clerk to the Governors will send written notification to each party of the date, time and place of the Hearing at least ten working days before the date of the Hearing.

Copies of any documents (addition to those outlined above) that the parent wishes the complaints panel to consider should be sent to the Clerk to the Governors to be received at least seven working days prior to the Hearing.

The Clerk to the Governors (via the Secretary to the Governors) will circulate a copy of the bundle of documents to be considered by the complaints panel to all parties at least three working days prior to the Hearing.

The parent may be accompanied at the Hearing, for example by a relative or friend. The Hearing is an internal proceeding, not legal proceedings, and legal representation is unnecessary.

Parents are required to notify the Clerk to the Governors in their initial request for a Hearing if they wish to be accompanied by someone who is legally qualified. Parents should note that the complaints panel will wish to speak to them directly. The legally qualified person will not be permitted to act as an advocate or to address the Hearing unless invited to do so by the Chair of the complaints panel.

A person will be appointed to take minutes of the Hearing by the Clerk to the Governors.

Composition of the complaints panel

The complaints panel will comprise at least three individuals who have no detailed prior knowledge of the circumstances of the complaint, including at least one panel member who is independent of the management and running of the School.

The parent may ask the Clerk to the Governors to inform them who has been appointed to sit on the complaints panel ahead of the Hearing. Fair consideration will be given to any reasonable objection to a particular member of the panel.

The complaints panel members will appoint one of themselves to be the Chair of the panel throughout the proceedings.

Role of the complaints panel

The role of the complaints panel is to establish the facts surrounding the complaints that have been made by considering:

- the documents provided by both parties; and
- any representations made by the parties; and
- to reach a decision, on the balance of probabilities, as to whether or not to uphold each complaint.

The Hearing

The Hearing should proceed notwithstanding that the parent may decide not to attend. In these circumstances, the complaints panel should consider the parent's complaint in his / her absence and issue findings on the substance of the complaint.

During the Hearing, the parties shall have the opportunity to ask questions and make comments in an appropriate manner. The Hearing is not a legal proceeding, and the complaints panel shall be under no obligation to hear oral evidence from witnesses but may do so and / or may take written statements into account.

All statements made at the Hearing will be unsworn. The parties will be entitled to write their own notes for reference purposes.

All those present during the Hearing are expected to show courtesy, restraint and good manners or, after due warning, the Hearing may be adjourned or terminated at the discretion of the Chair. Any person who is dissatisfied with any aspect of the way the Hearing is conducted must say so before the proceedings go any further and their comment will be minuted.

The Chair may, at their discretion, adjourn the Hearing if they consider it appropriate to do so. This may include an adjournment for the parties to take legal advice on a specific issue arising.

A Hearing before the complaints panel is a private proceeding. No notes or other records or oral statements about any matter discussed in or arising from the proceeding shall be made available directly or indirectly to the press or other media.

When the Chair of the panel is satisfied that sufficient consideration has been given to the documentation provided and any representations made by the parties, they will conclude the Hearing.

Decision

The complaints panel will make findings about each complaint on the balance of probabilities and may make recommendations.

It is not within the powers of the complaints panel to make any financial award, nor to impose sanctions on staff, students or parents, although the complaints panel may make recommendations.

The complaints panel's findings and any recommendations will be provided in writing to the parents and, where relevant, the person complained about, within 15 working days of the Hearing. The complaints panel's findings and any recommendations will also be available for inspection on the School premises by the Chair of Governors and the Head.

The completion of Stage 3 represents the conclusion of the School's complaints procedure.

Appendix 4 Unreasonable complaints

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high quality service to those who complain. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with us. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

We adopt the Department for Education definition of unreasonable complainants as those who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with the School, hinder our consideration of their or other people's complaints.

Unreasonable complaints are taken seriously by the School as they put a strain on valuable resources and hinder the progress of proper investigations. The School may judge that a complaint is unreasonable by assessing a number of factors, including those that are outlined below.

A complaint may be regarded as unreasonable when the person making the complaint:

- 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 cooperate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved;
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaints procedure;
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice;
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or 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 our complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed;
- seeks an unrealistic outcome;
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with.

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the person making the complaint does so either face-to-face, by telephone or in writing or electronically:

- maliciously;
- aggressively;
- using threats, intimidation or violence;

- using abusive, offensive or discriminatory language;
- knowing it to be false;
- using falsified information;
- publishing unacceptable or inappropriate information such as via social media applications and websites and newspapers.

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if it is manifestly unjustified, inappropriate, or an improper use of formal procedure.

In assessing this, the School shall have regard to all the circumstances of the case and the nature of the complaint itself rather than the nature of the complainant. In assessing all the circumstances of the case the School will consider a range of factors including:

- whether a complaint has reasonable foundation;
- the history and context of the complaint (and any evidence where relevant);
- whether the time and cost of investigating the complaint is proportionate to the issue(s) complained of;
- whether an investigation of the complaint is likely to cause a disproportionate or unjustified level of disruption, irritation or distress;
- unexplained delay in raising a complaint or issue;
- if the purpose of the complaint is to obtain an outcome which is unavailable via the complaints procedure, such as a claim for compensation, damages or a refund of fees paid;
- any evidence of a complaint being brought for an improper purpose.

Whenever possible, the Head will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before dismissing a complaint as unreasonable. The Head will normally only do so after consultation with the Chair of Governors.