



Griffin Schools Trust

Complaints Policy

Date: May 2021
Next review: May 2023
Approved by: Board of Trustees



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This policy is intended to clarify how a complaint regarding the Griffin Schools Trust (GST), or any school within the Trust, can be raised and how the process will be handled.
- 1.2 It is in everyone's interest that complaints about the School or Trust raised by parents, students and members of the public 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, the school and Trust must be clear about the procedures they will apply when they receive a complaint.
- 1.3 A complaint is defined as, “an expression of dissatisfaction requiring a response”. However, the Trust do not anticipate that all such expressions of dissatisfaction should be dealt with through the formal elements of this complaints process. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will aim to reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints. The underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally.
- 1.4 An anonymous complaint will not be investigated under this procedure, unless there are exceptional circumstances. All complaints will be treated in a confidential manner.
- 1.5 To enable a proper investigation, complaints should be brought to the attention of the school or Trust as soon as possible. In general, any matter raised more than three months after the event, will not be investigated.
- 1.6 GST is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and seeks to swiftly resolve all such matters in line with the Complaints Policy. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with our schools. 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.

2. Purpose

- 2.1 This policy aims to:
 - 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
 - Ensure a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary.

3. Scope

- 3.1 This procedure applies to external complaints relating to all GST schools along with the Trust's Head Office.

4. Equal Opportunities

- 4.1 The Complaints Policy must always be applied fairly and in accordance with the schools Single Equality Policy.

5. Responsibilities

- 5.1 GST is responsible for maintaining a fair and consistent Complaints policy.
- 5.2 The Head has overall responsibility for the internal organisation, control and management of the policy in school.
- 5.3 Each GST school and the central team will have a nominated Complaints Co-ordinator whose responsibility it is to operate and manage the Complaints policy within the school.
- 5.4 The Clerk of the complaints committee will be the contact point for the complainant for Stages 3 of this procedure 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 (recommended at least five school days in advance); meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing; record the proceedings and notify all parties of the panel's decision.
- 5.5 The role of the Chair of the Governing Board or Body is to check that the correct procedure has been followed and if a hearing is requested, notify the clerk to arrange the panel.
- 5.6 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 and 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 (separately, not in the room together) and ask questions and that written material is seen by all parties.
- 5.7 Griffin Schools Trust expects anyone who wishes to raise a complaint to:
 - treat all members of the school community with courtesy and respect
 - respect the needs of pupils and staff within the school
 - avoid the use of violence, or threats of violence, towards people or property
 - recognise the time constraints under which members of staff in schools work and allow the school a reasonable time to respond to a complaint
 - follow the complaints procedure.
- 5.8 Griffin Schools Trust has a right to expect honesty and good faith from complainants. It will regard as unacceptable behaviour which can reasonably be interpreted as dishonest or vexatious, for example in working alone or with others to repeat or escalate complaints which have either been dealt with or are in train within the policy's stated timescales.

Likewise, Griffin Schools Trust will not engage with complainants who are insulting, aggressive or use otherwise inappropriate language in their written or verbal communications.

The Trust will:

- temporarily ban such individuals from visiting the school and communicating with the school and Trust until such time as they make a written undertaking to behave appropriately
- consider legal action against such individuals who persist in order to protect their staff and the Trust's resources

- any threatening or abusive behaviour will be reported to the police and recorded in writing.

6. Timing

- 6.1 Complaint matters should normally be conducted within the timescales laid down in the procedure.

7. The Procedure

7.1 The Stages of the Complaints Procedure:

- Stage 1 (informal): complaint heard and responded to by appropriate staff member
- Stage 2 (formal): complaint heard by Head (unless complaint concerns the Head in which Stage 3 applies)
- Stage 3 (formal): complaint heard by Governors Complaints Panel

7.2 At each stage in the Complaints Procedure, all involved will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved including the following:

- an apology or explanation
- an acknowledgement that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- an assurance that the event will not recur and an explanation of the steps that have been taken.

8. Investigating complaints

8.1 It is suggested that at each stage, the responsible officer makes sure that they:

- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved
- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved
- meet with the complainant or contact them (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.

9. Stage 1: Informal Stage:

Complaint Heard by Staff member

- 9.1 It is normally appropriate to communicate directly with the member of staff that the complaint relates to. This may be by letter, telephone or in person by a pre-arranged appointment requested via the school.

- 9.2 If there is a difficulty in discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff, the Complaints Co-ordinator can be contacted to request to refer the complainant to another staff member. Please contact the school office for information in relation to this.

- 9.3 Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the Complaints Co-ordinator may consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be.

- 9.4 Where the first approach is made to a governor, the Complaints Co-ordinator will be informed. Governors will not respond to complaints outside the formal procedure.

- 9.5 Many concerns can be resolved by simple clarification and it is anticipated that most complaints will be resolved at this informal stage.
- 9.6 Within 5 to 10 school days of receiving an informal complaint, the school will respond with how it intends to proceed, including an indication of the anticipated timescale. A written response of the outcome will be sent to the complainant within 5 days of the informal meeting.
- 9.7 If the complainant is dissatisfied with the result of the informal response, s/he should progress the complaint within 5 days of the written response.
10. **Stage 2 Formal Stage:**
Complaint Heard by Head
- 10.1 If the complaint is not resolved at the informal stage, it should be put in writing to the Head, who will invoke to formal complaints procedure.
- 10.2 Details which might assist the investigation should be included, such as names of potential witnesses, dates and times of events and copies of relevant documents. It is important that a clear statement of the remedy proposed is included.
- 10.3 The Head may invite a complainant (who may choose to be accompanied by a friend) to a meeting to clarify concerns and to explore the possibility of an informal resolution.
- 10.4 Within 5 to 10 school days of receiving a formal complaint, the school will respond with how it intends to proceed, including an indication of the anticipated timescale. A written response of the outcome will be sent to the complainant within 5 days of the investigation.
- 10.5 If the complaint is in relation to the Head, this stage of the Complaint will be heard by the Chair of Governors or a representative of the Griffin Schools Trust.
11. **Stage 3 Formal Stage:**
Complaint Heard by Governors Complaints Panel
- 11.1 If the complainant is not satisfied with the response of the Head, it can be sent to the Chair of Governors to request further consideration. Within 5 to 10 school days of receiving a formal complaint, the Governors will respond with how it intends to proceed, including an indication of the anticipated timescale.
- 11.2 The clerk will convene a panel of three. Two panel members will be governors who have not previously been involved with the complaint. One member of the panel will be required to be independent of the running and management of the school, and will therefore not be a governor or member of SLT. The complainant should submit the details of their concerns, in writing, to the clerk. The clerk will seek similar written responses from the school, where this is necessary.
- 11.3 A meeting of the panel will take place, usually within 10 school days, to consider the matter. The complainant (who may be accompanied by a friend if they wish) and representative(s) from the school (who may also be accompanied by a workplace colleague) may be invited to attend this meeting in order to clarify the matter. As the panel meeting is investigatory in nature, the persons giving evidence or making representations to the panel will attend separately.

- 11.4 When the panel has collected sufficient information, it will deliberate and then inform the complainant, the Head, the governing body and where appropriate, the person complained about of the findings and recommendations in writing, within 10 to 20 school days.
- 11.5 Consideration of the complaint by the governing body and the school, save for any actions that are agreed, will terminate at this point.
- 11.6 A copy of the findings and recommendations are available for inspection on the school premises by the Griffin Schools Trust and the Head.
- 11.7 If the complainant remains unsatisfied, an appeal can be made to the Secretary of State for Education. Complainants should be advised to write to the Complaints Team at:
Education and Skills Funding Agency
Cheylesmore House
Quinton Road
Coventry CV1 2WT

12. Reporting and Record-keeping

A written record of all formal complaints will be held centrally by The Griffin Schools Trust, including at which stage of the complaints procedure they were resolved, and any action taken by the school as a result of the complaint (regardless of whether it was upheld or not).

Where a complaint progresses to stage 3 (Review Panel), the findings and recommendations made by the panel will be sent in writing to all parties and made available for inspection on the school premises by a representative of the Griffin Schools Trust and the Head.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential, except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the 2008 Act requests access to them

- 12.1 Schools should record the progress of the complaint and the final outcome. A formal complaint must be made in writing. An informal complaint may be made and discussed by phone or in person and the member of staff will ensure the complainant and the school have the same understanding of what was discussed and agreed. A brief note of informal meetings and telephone calls will be kept and a copy of any written response to formal complaints will be added to the complaint record, which will be stored confidentially from the date of resolution plus a period of 6 years. The Complaints Co-ordinator at each GST school is responsible for maintaining the records in accordance with current ESFA regulation and is also responsible for ensuring records are copied confidentially to the Complaints Co-ordinator at the Trust.
- 12.2 The Trust complies fully with its obligations under the Data Protection Act 2018 and other relevant legislation pertaining to the safe handling, use, storage, retention and disposal of information in relation to Complaints.

13. Vexatious Complaints

- 13.1 If properly followed, the GST Complaints procedure will minimise the number of complaints that become protracted. However, 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 governors is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed. If the complainant

writes again on the same issue, then the correspondence may be recognised as vexatious and there will be no obligation on the part of the school or Trust to respond.

- 13.2 It is important to note however that, should a complainant raise an entirely new, separate complaint, it must be responded to in accordance with the Complaints procedure. It is not the complainant who is vexatious; it is the complaint.

14. Harassment

14.1 We regard harassment as the unreasonable pursuit of issues or complaints, particularly if the matter appears to be pursued in a way intended to cause personal distress rather than to seek a resolution. Behaviour may fall within the scope of this policy if:

- it appears to be deliberately targeted at one or more members of school staff or others, without good cause
- the way in which a complaint or other issues is pursued (as opposed to the complaint itself) causes undue distress to school staff or others
- it has a significant and disproportionate adverse effect on the school community or the central team in terms of time and resource expended

14.2 In cases of unreasonably persistent complaints or harassment, the school may take some or all of the following steps, as appropriate:

- inform the complainant informally that their behaviour is now considered by the school to be unreasonable or unacceptable, and request a changed approach
- require all future meetings with a member of staff to be conducted with a second person present. In the interests of all parties, notes of these meetings may be taken
- inform the complainant that, except in emergencies, the school/Trust will respond only to written communication and that these may be required to be channelled through the Trust

15. Trust Head Office Complaints

15.1 If a complaint is sent to Head Office, the Trust will refer to this policy and ensure that it is forwarded to the relevant school Complaints Co-ordinator, if appropriate.

15.2 If the complaint relates directly to Head Office, the complaint will be passed to the Chief Executive for review and investigation. Updates as to the progress of the investigation will be given regularly.

15.3 If the complaint relates to the Chief Executive, it will be passed to the Chair of the Board for review and investigation.

16. Serial and Unreasonable complaints

GST defines unreasonable behaviour as ‘that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant’s contact with the school’, such as, if the complainant:

- 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 process
- Refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints process
- Insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints process 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 process proceeds
- Repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous actions to investigate 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 Complaints Policy has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education
- Seeks an unrealistic outcome
- Makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and/or 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 information on social media or other public forums.

16.1 Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint 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.

16.2 Whenever possible the Head will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before determining that the complaint has met the threshold for application of this policy.

16.3 If the behaviour continues the Head will discuss the matter with the Trust CEO ahead of writing to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is not acceptable and asking them to change it.

16.4 For complainants who continue to excessively contact GST causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

16.5 In response to any serious incident of aggression, violence or repetitive behaviour or actions that could be deemed as harassment we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from school premises or Head Office premises.

17. Publicising the Procedure

17.1 This policy is published on all GST school websites, along with the Trust website, to ensure it is available to all staff, parents and stakeholders.

18. Review

18.1 This policy document is reviewed by the Griffin Schools Trust Board every two years.

18.2 The Trust and Local Governing Bodies will monitor the level, nature and trends of complaints, and review the outcomes on a regular basis to ensure the effectiveness of the procedure, making changes where necessary.