



The St Marylebone CE Bridge School

A Special Free School for pupils with Speech, Language and Communication Needs

Herries Street, London W10 4LE

SCHOOL COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Committee:	Governing Body
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Last reviewed:	June 2025
Review cycle:	June 2028
Required to publish on website?	Yes
Statutory:	Yes

1. Context

1.1 The St Marylebone CE Bridge School ("the School") understands that its service to its community includes a responsibility to listen to and address relevant concerns and complaints. This approach is grounded in the School's Church of England ethos.

1.2 From September 2003 governing bodies of all local-authority maintained schools (including nursery schools) are required under Section 29 of the Education Act 2002 to have in place a procedure to deal with complaints relating to the School and to any community facilities or services that the School provides.

1.3 The law does not specify what a complaints process should look like; procedures should therefore be reviewed regularly in light of experience and legislative change.

1.4 Since 2010, academies and free schools must comply with Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (as amended 2023). The Regulations require that the procedure:

- a) is in writing;

- b) is made available to parents of pupils;
- c) sets out clear time scales for the management of a complaint;
- d) allows for a complaint to be made and considered initially on an informal basis;
- e) establishes a formal written procedure where informally unresolved;
- f) provides, if still unresolved, for a hearing before a panel of at least three people not directly involved in the complaint;
- g) ensures that one panel member is independent of the management and running of the School;
- h) allows the parent to attend and be accompanied at the panel hearing;
- i) requires the panel to make findings and recommendations which are sent to the complainant and (where appropriate) the person complained about, and are available for inspection by the Chair of Governors and Head of School;
- j) provides for a written record to be kept of all formal complaints and their outcomes;
- k) ensures that correspondence, statements and records are kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or an inspectorate requests access.

1.5 The Department for Education's *Best Practice Guidance for School Complaints Procedures* (January 2021, updated March 2024) has informed these revisions.

2. Principles

2.1 In line with the School's Church of England ethos, the School recognises its duty to listen, understand and support all members of its community.

2.2 *Concern or complaint?* Almost all complaints start as a concern expressed by an individual about something that matters to them. **A timely, reasonable response at this stage often prevents escalation.** Concerns can become complaints if the initial response is perceived as unreasonable or dismissive.

2.3 The School will not treat the complainant (or their child) adversely because they have raised a concern or complaint.

3. Complaints happen in all organisations

3.1 The School recognises that comments and complaints will arise even though we aspire to operate as effectively and fairly as possible. Complaints can provide valuable feedback or indicate that practices may need to change.

4. Aims of this procedure

4.1 The School's complaints procedure:

- encourages informal resolution wherever possible;
- is easily accessible and published;
- is simple to understand and use;
- is impartial, non-adversarial and objective;

- allows swift handling with established time limits;
- ensures a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary;
- permits a third-party representative to raise a complaint with the complainant's consent;
- Respects the confidentiality of all parties;
- addresses all the points at issue with appropriate redress where necessary;
- identifies areas of agreement between the parties and clarifies any misunderstandings;
- provides information to leaders so that services can be improved.

4.2 **Who can complain?** This procedure is open to parents of current pupils and to any member of the public who wishes to raise a complaint about the School's provision or services. At the School's discretion, we may consider complaints from parents of former pupils if raised within six months of the pupil's leaving date (provided the complaint relates to events that occurred while they were on roll).

4.3 **Time limit** – Current parents should raise complaints within three months of the event (or last related event).

– Parents of former pupils have up to six months after their child's departure to raise complaints about events during their time at the School.

- Complaints outside these timeframes will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

4.4 **Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated.** The Head of School or Chair of Governors will determine whether the complaint warrants investigation.

4.5 **Where another statutory or regulatory process (for example child-protection investigation, police inquiry, LADO referral, tribunal or court proceedings) is in progress, this complaints procedure will be suspended until those external processes are complete.** The governance professional will inform the complainant of the suspension in writing.

4.6 **A complainant may withdraw their complaint at any stage by notifying the School in writing or by e-mail.** The School will confirm the withdrawal in writing and close the file.

5. Freedom of Information and Confidentiality

5.1 The School considers the UK GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018, Human Rights Act 1998 and Freedom of Information Act 2000 to be relevant in the context of complaints.

5.2 The School will make it clear to everyone involved that any information they provide, written or verbal, may be shared with other relevant parties for the fair investigation and resolution of the complaint.

5.3 Investigators are aware that any individual involved is entitled, under data-protection legislation, to access their written or electronic personal records, including notes of meetings and conversations.

5.4 Everyone involved must be assured that the complaint and its investigation will remain confidential within the confines of this procedure.

5.5 Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless required as a reasonable adjustment. Prior consent of all parties must be obtained and recorded.

6. Equal Opportunities

6.1 The School will ensure that no one is discriminated against because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or any other protected characteristic or for any other reason. Advice will be sought as appropriate to ensure that a complainant with any protected characteristic(s) is treated without prejudice.

6.2 Translations and/or interpreters will be made available if necessary.

6.3 The School will not treat the complainant (or their child) adversely because they have made a complaint.

6.4 Reasonable adjustments – such as wheelchair-accessible meeting rooms or alternative formats (e.g. large-print, braille, audio) – will be provided on request.

7. Training

7.1 The School will train staff as appropriate in how to deal with complaints, notably how to manage difficult conversations and conflict, uphold equal opportunities and know when to seek specialist advice.

7.2 The School recognises that people who feel anxious, annoyed or worried might speak or act in a negative or confrontational way, or might find it hard to express their concern. Staff therefore receive guidance on de-escalation techniques, active listening and constructive questioning to help complainants feel heard.

7.3 No member of staff is expected to suffer abuse or harassment, and it is reasonable to expect complainants to communicate respectfully. The School's "Dealing with Harassment" policy explains the steps that will be taken if staff experience abusive behaviour.

7.4 Regular refreshers ensure staff remain confident in the complaints procedure and understand when, and how, to signpost complainants to the next stage.

8. Publicising this procedure

8.1 The School will publicise this procedure:

- in the information given to new parents when their child joins the School;
- on the School website; and
- via staff induction and the internal staff portal.

8.2 By publicising these procedures, the School demonstrates its genuine interest in the views of parents and others in our community and makes clear how a concern or complaint will be addressed.

8.3 A short, plain-language guide is available on request.

9. Resolving complaints

9.1 At every stage the School will seek resolution. If the complaint is upheld (in whole or part) the School may offer:

- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event complained of will not happen again;
- an explanation of the steps taken to ensure it will not happen again and relevant timescales;
- an undertaking to review relevant policies or practices;
- an apology.

9.2 All responses issued to a complaint will be clear, open and honest, addressing all points raised as appropriate.

9.3 If a complainant requests specific disciplinary action against a member of staff, we will explain that:

- Any disciplinary decision is a separate HR process, governed by the School's Staff Disciplinary Procedure;
- The complaints outcome letter can confirm that "appropriate action has been taken or will be taken," but will not identify individual sanctions;
- Should the complainant wish to pursue misconduct concerns, these should be raised under the Staff Grievance or Whistleblowing policies (as appropriate).

10. Vexatious, Serial or Unreasonable Complaints

The School adopts the DfE definitions of 'vexatious', 'serial' and 'unreasonable' complaints (March 2024 update). Behaviour that hinders investigation — for example, excessive demands, aggressive language, or repeated complaints on the same issue — may lead to restricted contact or, in extreme cases, banning from site. The Head of School or Chair of Governors will always write to explain any such restrictions, which will be reviewed after six months.

10.1 Each complaint will be dealt with fairly and individually, and the complainant treated with respect.

10.2 The School's complaints procedure is designed to minimise the number of complaints that become vexatious. However, if a complainant attempts to reopen a previously closed or resolved issue, the Chair of Governors will inform them in writing that the matter is now closed.

10.3 Where an individual's behaviour becomes disturbing, distressing, intimidating or harassing, the School will follow its "Dealing with Harassment" policy. The Chair of Governors

and/or London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS) adviser will be consulted and legal advice sought if appropriate.

11. Where are complaints recorded?

11.1 All complaints (formal and informal) are logged by the HoS or Governance Professional. This record includes dates, key actions, outcomes and any follow-up.

11.2 Detailed panel minutes and correspondence are held securely by the Governance Professional, separate from pupil or staff personnel files.

12. The role of the Local Authority (LA)

12.1 Since the School is an academy/free school, the LA does not have formal authority to investigate general school complaints or impose remedies.

12.2 However, the School acknowledges that parents and members of the public often contact the LA first with concerns. LA officers will refer complainants back to the School with advice on how to proceed. The LA may also provide impartial advice to ensure that the complaint has been dealt with in accordance with this procedure and that governors have acted reasonably and properly.

13. What's not covered?

13.1 This procedure does not cover complaints or appeals about:

- the delivery of the National Curriculum, collective worship and religious education;
- disapplication of the National Curriculum;
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) assessments by external professionals;
- admissions or admissions appeals;
- exclusions;
- staff grievance, capability or disciplinary matters;
- allegations of child abuse or other child-protection issues;
- allegations of financial impropriety or criminal activity.

13.2 Separate statutory or internal procedures exist for each of these areas. If in doubt, the Head of School will seek guidance from the Governing Body, London Diocesan Board for Schools (LDBS) and/or the School's legal advisers.

Complaints Procedure

1. Complaints Procedure

The procedure is set out below. It is important to note the way a complaint can progress. Most complaints can be resolved at an informal stage, compassionately, reasonably and professionally. If a complaint cannot be effectively resolved informally, it becomes a formal complaint.

2. Dealing with concerns and complaints informally

2.1 The School recognises that most concerns can be resolved at this stage, whereby the complainant speaks directly with the most appropriate member of staff. If a complaint is received by the Governors, this will be referred to the Head of School in the first instance.

2.2 At this stage it may be unclear whether the person is asking a question or expressing a concern rather than making a complaint. This is an opportunity to clarify the matter and identify what sort of outcome the person is looking for. At the end of the discussion the person dealing with the concerns should be sure that the complainant is clear what action (if any) is agreed, and what to do if the concern recurs or is not resolved. Although this stage is informal the School will keep a record of the issue and responses made.

2.3 Staff are reminded to use the guidance in this policy to support their approach when listening to, receiving and planning to respond to a concern or complaint. It is often useful to seek advice from a line-manager or member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

3. Stages of referral

3.1 It is important that a complaint is addressed at a level commensurate with the nature of the complaint. For this reason, the School issues guidelines on its website about whom to contact about what kind of issues.

3.2 When a concern or complaint is first raised, it may come to a teacher, a member of support staff, a middle leader, senior leader, Head of School or, via the governance professional, to the Governors. The School cannot control who the complainant might contact in the first instance. Whoever receives the concern or complaint should consider whether they are the most appropriate person to address this. They should seek advice from their line-manager, Head of Learning / Head of Year or any member of SLT. Ideally, the concern would be raised at classroom-teacher level and from there, if not resolved:

- the complaint is passed to the Head of Learning or Head of Year;
- if unresolved, it is referred to the Key Stage Lead or SLT line-manager for that team / department;

- if unresolved, it is referred to the Head of School, who may delegate it to an SLT member if appropriate;
- if the Head of School cannot resolve the issue, the complaint is referred to the Governing Body.

The School understands that it is appropriate in some cases to skip one or more of these levels in order to resolve the complaint effectively.

3.3 If the complaint regards a serious safeguarding issue, a child-protection issue, an allegation of abuse or a matter with serious disciplinary implications, it will be referred to the Head of School for immediate attention. The appropriate policy and procedures will then be followed (see 12.1 above).

3.4 If the complaint is about the Head of School, it will be referred to the Chair of Governors via the governance professional to the Governing Body.

3.5 At the initial stage, the complaint is likely to come by phone, email or letter. The School will not insist that complaints are put into formal written form at this stage, recognising that insistence could deter genuine complainants. The School serves people from many different cultural, social, religious and racial backgrounds and understands how this can affect concerns and communication.

3.6 At each stage, the member of staff dealing with the concern or complaint will:

- a) Acknowledge the communication within **2 School working days** and give a reasonable deadline by which a response will be provided.
- b) Provide an opportunity to discuss the issue.
- c) Listen and ensure the complainant has an opportunity to be fully heard.
- d) Establish what outcome the complainant is seeking.
- e) Avoid rushing to answer or defend; seek first to understand.
- f) If information is required from others, explain this and give a timescale.
- g) Keep a dated record of all communications and evidence gathered.
- h) Reach a conclusion and explain any next steps and further rights if the complainant is dissatisfied.

3.7 Formal or informal?

A complaint need not become formal. However, if the complainant states that they are making a formal complaint at any point, the matter escalates to the Head of School (or delegated SLT). Written responses may still follow dialogue if preferred by the complainant.

4. Referral to the Chair of Governors (or other designated Governor)

4.1 If the Head of School's response has not resolved a formal complaint, the complainant should write to the Chair via the governance professional (clerk@stmarylebonebridgeschool.com).

4.2 The complainant should explain why they are complaining, to whom they have already spoken and what they want from a further review.

4.3 The Chair will investigate what has been done so far and seek a mutually agreeable resolution.

4.4 The Chair will:

- a) Acknowledge the complaint within **5 School working days** and set a response deadline, usually within **20 School working days**;
- b) Meet or correspond with relevant parties, keeping notes;
- c) Seek advice if needed;
- d) Communicate findings or proposals to the complainant;
- e) Offer the option of a Governing Body panel review if still dissatisfied.

5. Review by the Complaints Panel of the Governing Body

5.1 Complaints will not be considered by the full Governing Body because panel members must remain impartial and confidential.

5.2 A panel of two Governors and one independent member will therefore hear any complaint reaching this stage (“the Panel”).

5.3 The governance professional convenes the Panel and provides administrative support.

5.4 The governance professional will ask the complainant to set out, in writing, why they remain dissatisfied and what outcome they seek.

6. Preparation

6.1 Upon receipt, the governance professional will:

- a) Convene the Panel ad hoc;
- b) Ensure the two Governor members have had no prior involvement;
- c) Elect a Panel Chair;
- d) Acknowledge receipt to the complainant within **5 School working days** and advise that the Panel will meet within **20 School working days**;
- e) Invite both parties to submit documentation at least **5 School working days** before the meeting;
- f) Ask about reasonable adjustments for disability or language barriers.

6.2 The Head of School is informed immediately and may comment on the proposed procedure.

7. Procedures

7.1 The Panel Chair decides whether to hold:

7.2 **A formal meeting** – all parties attend; opportunity to present evidence and question each other; minutes taken; decision communicated within **5 School working days**.

7.3 **An investigatory approach** – parties seen separately; notes shared; decision communicated within **5 School working days**.

7.4 The Chair will ensure proceedings remain as informal as circumstances allow, recognising potential stress for complainants.

7.5 **Accompanying persons:** Parties may bring a companion (not normally a legal representative) by prior agreement. The Panel may refuse a companion considered unsuitable or potentially biased. Students will not be authorised to attend complaint hearings.

8. Outcomes

8.1 The Panel aims to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation. Where this is not possible, it will establish facts and make recommendations.

8.2 The Panel will:

- reach a unanimous or majority decision;
- decide what action should be taken;
- suggest changes to systems or procedures if appropriate.

8.3 A written statement outlining the decision and reasons will be sent by the governance professional to the main parties. Where action concerning staff is required, only the phrase “appropriate action has or will be taken” will be used.

8.4 The governance professional retains all correspondence and minutes separately from pupil records.

9. Ofsted

9.1 Under the Education and Inspections Act 2006, parents may complain about a school to Ofsted. Ofsted will refer individual cases to an appropriate channel but may investigate more general concerns about schools.

9.2 Ofsted can investigate complaints about the work of the School as a whole but cannot investigate matters relating to individual children.

9.3 Ofsted will usually refer complaints back to the School or to the Local Authority. Complainants are therefore encouraged to use this procedure first.

10. Repairing Relationships

10.1 The School's open approach seeks to promote positive relationships whatever the outcome of the complaint. Where needed, external mediation may be used to restore constructive dialogue.

11. Recording Complaints

11.1 The School maintains a reliable system for recording complaints and their progress. Staff receiving a complaint keep records of all communications. Once a complaint exceeds the initial stage, a timeline is started by the relevant line-manager or SLT member.

11.2 The Governing Body monitors trends without identifying individuals. If multiple complaints arise about the same issue, Governors will ensure appropriate action, starting with discussion with the Head of School and keeping the matter under review.