



## **COMPLAINTS POLICY**

**Policy agreed:**

**To be reviewed: As required, in line with relevant advice and guidance**

### **Policy Statement**

The policy of the school is to treat all concerns and complaints seriously and confidentially, in accordance with school procedures and General Data Protection Regulations (May 2018) and Belfast Model School for Girls GDPR Policy. Whilst we understand that the cause of a concern can be emotive, we believe that most concerns can be addressed through calm, informal discussion and expect all parties to conduct themselves responsibly when dealing with concerns and/or complaints. If a problem or concern cannot be resolved the school has a formal complaints policy as detailed below.

### **Policy Principles**

The procedures outlined in this policy will:

- provide opportunity for parents and the general public to express their concerns and know they have been heard;
- encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible;
- be simple to understand and use;
- be impartial;
- be non-adversarial;
- allow swift handling with established time limits for action and keeping people informed of progress;
- ensure a full and fair investigation;
- have due regard for the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved;
- respect people's desire for confidentiality;
- address all the points at issue and provide an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary.

### **Aims**

Belfast Model School for Girls has long taken pride in the quality of the teaching and pastoral care that the school provides to its students. However, if parents do have a complaint, they can expect it to be treated by the school in accordance with this procedure.

For a member of the public (not a parent) wishing to make a complaint, please refer to procedures under Stage 2.

Correspondence, statements and records will be kept confidential except where disclosure is required in the course of the school's inspection; or where any other statutory or legal obligation prevails.

## **PRACTICE & PROCEDURE**

**NB: Where parents feel their complaint is of a very serious nature, or relates to the health, safety and/or well-being of a young person, they should move straight to stage 2 and contact the Principal.**

**If a parent wishes to complain about the decision or action of the Principal they should move to stage 2. If the Parental concern is not addressed at this stage they should move to stage 4.**

### **Stage 1 – Informal verbal concern/complaint to a member of staff.**

It is hoped that most concerns will be resolved quickly and informally. If parents have a concern, they should normally contact their daughter's Form Tutor or subject teacher as appropriate. In many cases the matter will be resolved straight away by this means, to the parent's satisfaction.

If the Form Tutor, or subject teacher cannot resolve the matter alone, it may be necessary to involve the appropriate Year Head, Head of Subject or Vice Principal (Years 8-12), or Head of Sixth Form (Years 13 & 14).

If the matter is still not resolved to the parent's satisfaction, parents will be referred to Stage 2.

### **Stage 2- Informal verbal complaint to the Principal**

A telephone call, or appointment (both can be arranged via the Principal's PA) should be made to discuss the matter with the Principal. They will attempt to resolve the issue informally.

If the matter is not resolved satisfactorily, parents will be referred to Stage 3.

### **Stage 3 - Formal Written Complaint to the Principal**

A complaint at this stage should be made in writing by the complainant, or by another person on their behalf and with their consent, and addressed to the Principal. The Principal will acknowledge receipt of the written complaint within 10 working days.

The Principal or a nominated member of senior staff will invite the complainant to meet and discuss the concerns.

If necessary, the Principal or nominated member of senior staff will carry out a full investigation into the issues raised.

A response will be provided after the conclusion of the meeting, or any investigations carried out. This will be no more than 20 working days after the receipt of a written complaint.

A written record of all concerns and complaints, and the date on which they were received and replied to, will be made and retained.

If the complainant refuses the offer of a meeting, a response will be provided based on available information only or the Principal may consider the complaint to be unsubstantiated by reason of non-attendance.

If the matter remains unresolved, the complainant will be advised that they have the option to proceed with their complaint to Stage 4 of the procedure.

#### **Stage 4 – Written complaint to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors**

If a complaint remains unresolved, a letter should be sent to the Chairperson of Governors, detailing all concerns/complaints for consideration. This letter should be addressed to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors and sent c/o Belfast Model School for Girls.

The receipt of this written complaint will be acknowledged within 10 working days. If the complaint is made against or involves the Chairperson they will pass the complaint to another Governor, usually the Vice-Chairperson.

If a complaint has been referred directly to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors and the preceding stages have not been followed, the Chairperson may refer the complainant to preceding stages of this procedure or ask the Principal to undertake an investigation in the first instance.

The Chairperson will convene the Governors' complaints sub-committee who may offer to meet with the complainant to discuss their concerns. The Chairperson will review any previous investigation and/or the Principal's decision.

The Chairperson may:-

- confirm the Principal's decision;
- reach a different decision regarding the whole or part of the complaint;
- seek an investigation or further investigations relating to part or the whole complaint.

The Chairperson may seek advice as needed from HR Advisors of the Education Authority – Belfast Region.

The Chairperson's written decision will be provided as soon as is reasonably practical to do so, usually within 25 working days of the complaint being received by the Chairperson.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they will be referred to the Appeal Stage.

#### **Stage 5 - Appeal Stage**

If the complainant has exhausted Stages 1- 4, they may make written request to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors (within 10 working days of receiving their written feedback from stage 4) to have the case heard by the Appeals Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors.

The Chairperson will ask the Clerk to Governors to convene an Appeals Sub-Committee Meeting so that the complaint can be considered. The meeting will take place within 30 working days of the written appeal.

The Appeals Sub-Committee will consist of 3 Governors who have not previously been involved in matters detailed in the complaint.

If it is considered necessary, the Chairperson of the Committee may require that further particulars of the complaint or any related matter be supplied in advance of the hearing.

Copies of such particulars shall be supplied to all parties no later than 3 working (school) days prior to the meeting.

A complainant may be accompanied to the meeting by one other person. This may be a relative, colleague or friend. Legal representation will not normally be considered appropriate at this stage.

Notice must be given to the Clerk to Governors, of a complainant's intention to be accompanied, including the name of the person attending and their relationship to the complainant. Details of any witnesses must also be provided ahead of the meeting.

Where possible, the meeting will look to resolve the complaint immediately, without the need for further investigation. However, if after hearing all parties relevant to the complaint, the Committee considers further investigation is required, the Committee will decide how this should be carried out and the meeting may be adjourned to a later date to allow such investigations to be conducted.

After due consideration of all the facts considered relevant, the Committee will reach a decision and may make recommendations.

The written decision of the Committee, together with its reasons, will be issued to the complainant.

**The Committee's decision will be final.**

The complainant will have no further right to appeal this decision within the school.

**Further routes for your complaint**

**Before complaining to an external body it should be noted that it would usually be expected that all stages of this procedure have been exhausted.**

At the closure of the complaint at a school level (and within two weeks of the closure of the complaint), we will write to complainants to action our statutory obligation to inform complainants that they can pursue their complaint further via the NI Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

Our written notice will state:

- that the internal complaints process has been exhausted;
- that the complainant may refer the matter to the Ombudsman if he/she remains dissatisfied with the school's response;
- the time limit for making such a referral to the NIPSO (usually being 6 months from the date of the school's letter)
- how to contact the NIPSO

You may also complain to:

Chief Executive Education Authority – Belfast Region	Department of Education	Education & Training Inspectorate
40 Academy Street Belfast BT1 2NQ	Rathgael House 43 Balloo Road Bangor BT19 7PR	Department of Education Room F29 Rathgael House 43 Balloo Road Bangor BT19 7PR

**Repetitious or vexatious complaints**

Please see the associated school policy relating to vexatious or repetitions complaints.

The school reserves the right to reject repetitious or vexatious complaints at any time and may bring the communication to a close. The Northern Ireland Audit Office defines vexatious as:

“A complaint instituted without sufficient grounds and serving only to cause annoyance to the receiver of the complaint; an oppressive complaint (with unjust severity); or otherwise an abuse of the procedures for dealing with complaints or conduct matters”.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office defines repetitious as:

“A complaint that is substantially the same as a previous complaint (whether made by or on behalf of the same or a different complainant); contains no fresh allegations which significantly affect the account of the previous complaint; or no fresh evidence, being evidence which was not reasonably available at the time the previous complaint was made, is tendered in support of it”.

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN HANDLING A COMPLAINT:**

### **Role of Members of Teaching Staff (Stage 1)**

The teacher will:

- listen to the details of the complaint;
- seek to resolve the complaint by informal means;
- keep the Principal informed.

### **Role of the Principal (Stage 2 & 3)**

The Principal will:

- listen to the details of the complaint;
- seek to resolve the complaint;
- keep the Chairperson of the Board of Governors informed;
- respond to formal written complaints by acknowledging receipt of the complaint, carrying out an investigation, notify the complainant of the outcome and implementing any agreements or changes as a result of a complaint.

### **Role of the Board of Governors**

The Board of Governors will:

- ensure that the school has a complaints policy;
- make the policy available;
- ensure that the policy is being implemented within the school;
- seek advice from the Education Authority – Belfast Region;
- follow guidance issued by the Education Authority – Belfast Region;
- ensure that any recommendations arising from a complaint are implemented.

### **Role of the Chairperson of Board of Governors (Stage 4)**

The Chairperson of the Board of Governors will:

- acknowledge receipt of the complaint;
- arrange a Complaints Sub-Committee;

- check that the correct procedure has been followed;

#### Role of Complaints Sub-Committee of Board of Governors (Stage 4)

The Complaints Sub-Committee will:

- consider the complaint in an independent and impartial manner;
- investigate the complaint and gather evidence from relevant parties;
- decide whether or not the complaint should be upheld;
- decide on appropriate action to resolve the complaint;
- inform the complainant of the outcome of the investigation and recommendations.

#### Role of the Chairperson of the Complaints Sub- Committee (Stage 4)

The Chairperson of the Sub-Committee has a key role and will ensure:

- the remit of the Sub-Committee is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case;
- the issues are addressed;
- key findings of fact are made;
- parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such interviews are put at ease;
- that the dates, times and venues of meetings/ interviews are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible;
- proceedings of meetings are recorded;
- interviews are conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy;
- the Sub-Committee is open minded and acting independently;
- no member of the Sub-Committee 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 all parties should have the opportunity to consider it and comment on it;
- all parties are notified of the Sub Committee's decision.

#### Role of Chairperson of Board of Governors (Stage 5)

The Chairperson of the Board of Governors will:

- acknowledge receipt of the request for appeal;
- arrange an appeals Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors;
- ensure correct procedures are followed.

#### Role of Appeals Sub-Committee of Board of Governors (Stage 5)

The Appeals Sub-Committee will:

- consider the appeal in an independent and impartial manner;
- review the evidence submitted by relevant parties;
- give the complainant an opportunity to present their case to the Appeals Sub-Committee;
- interview any other relevant parties if deemed necessary;
- decide whether to uphold the appeal or not;
- inform the complainant of the outcome of the appeal and any recommendations, including the right to make a further complaint to the NIPSO

## Role of the Education Authority – Belfast Region

EABR will:

- provide advice and support to school staff and the Board of Governors on the application of the Complaints Procedure;
- provide professional (and where necessary secure) advice to the Principal and Board of Governors.

If you remain dissatisfied with the outcome of your complaint, you can refer the matter to the Office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

The Ombudsman provides a free, independent and impartial service for handling complaints about schools in Northern Ireland. You have the right to complain to the Ombudsman if you feel that you have been treated unfairly or have received a poor service from a school and your complaint has not been resolved to your satisfaction.

A complaint should normally be referred to NIPSO within six months of the final response from the School. The school must advise in its concluding letter that the complaint may be referred to the NIPSO if you remain dissatisfied.

Contact details for NIPSO are:

### **Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman**

Office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman  
Progressive House  
33 Wellington Place  
Belfast  
BT1 6HN

Freepost: FREEPOST NIPSO

Telephone: 02890 233821

Freephone: 0800 34 34 24

Email: [nipso@nipso.org.uk](mailto:nipso@nipso.org.uk)

Web: [www.nipso.org.uk](http://www.nipso.org.uk)

### **Subject Access Request (GDPR) Complaint Procedures**

Complaints relating to this procedure should be addressed under our complaints procedure outlined above.

Where an individual remains dissatisfied following the completion of the complaints procedure they can refer their complaint to the Information Commissioner. Further advice and information can be obtained from the Information Commissioner's Office, [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk)

