

Complaints policy

Action	Policy to be reviewed annually		
	Owner	Date	Completed
Review	High Mistress	March 2023	✓
Approved	Board of Governors	21 June 2023	✓

To be published on the following:	
Staff Portal	✓
School website	✓



Complaints policy

Who this policy applies to

This policy is addressed to the Senior Management Team, all members of staff, governors, volunteers and parents.

What this policy is for

The policy provides guidelines for handling complaints. Separate procedures apply in the event of a child protection issue (see the school's Safeguarding (Child Protection) policy), or if the High Mistress expels or requires the removal of a student and the parents seek a Governors' Review of that decision (see the school's *Expulsion, removal and review policy*).

Legal framework

- Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014

Other relevant school policies

- Safeguarding (child protection) policy
- Expulsion, removal and review policy

Content of policy

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 **Circulation:** This policy is addressed to the Senior Management Team, all members of staff, governors, volunteers and parents. A copy can be downloaded from the school's website or is available on request from the school office.
- 1.2 This policy can be made available in large print or other more accessible format, if required. If assistance is required with making a complaint, for example because of a disability, parents should contact the Senior Deputy Head who will be happy to make appropriate arrangements.
- 1.3 **Policy status:** The policy has been approved by the High Mistress and the Governing Body of St Paul's Girls' School (the school). It provides guidelines for handling complaints. It is drafted in accordance with Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (SI 2014/3283). The policy applies to all sections of the school. Some of the procedures can only be carried out during term time.
- 1.4 **Application:** Separate procedures apply in the event of a child protection issue (see the school's Safeguarding (Child Protection) policy published on the website), or if the High Mistress expels or requires the removal of a student and the parents seek a Governors' Review of that decision (see the school's *Expulsion, removal and review* policy on the website).
- 1.5 **Parent(s) / You:** Includes a current parent or legal guardian of a child currently on roll at the school and may include a parent whose child has recently left the school but only if the complaint was initially raised when the student was still on roll at the school.
- 1.6 **Three stages:** This policy describes a three-stage procedure:
- **Stage 1:** informal raising of a concern or a complaint notified orally or in writing to a member of staff
 - **Stage 2:** a formal complaint in writing to the High Mistress
 - **Stage 3:** a reference to the Complaints Panel

Timescales: We aim to resolve any complaints in a timely manner. Timescales for each stage are set out below in the relevant paragraphs. When we refer to **working days**, we mean Monday to Friday, when the school is open during term time. The dates of terms are published on the school's website.

- 1.7 **Parents should immediately notify the person they believe is best placed to take urgent action if they have a concern about their child's safety. Any concerns should be confirmed in writing to the Senior Deputy Head.**

2 Policy aim and statement

- 2.1 **Aim:** Our school ethos promotes open communication with parents and encourages a continuing dialogue between home and school throughout a child's education. The aim of this policy is to ensure that a complaint is managed sympathetically, efficiently and at the appropriate level, and resolved as soon as possible. We will try to resolve every complaint in a positive way with the aim of putting right a matter which may have gone wrong and, where necessary, reviewing our systems and procedures in light of the circumstances.
- 2.2 **Policy statement:** Any issues which arise are normally dealt with informally through discussion and parents are fully involved in key decisions which affect their child's career. Contact details for pastoral and academic staff are available from the school office. We encourage parents to use these channels should an issue arise as we need to know as soon as possible if there is any cause for dissatisfaction or concern. Complaints will always be dealt with in accordance with this policy. Parents and students should never feel (or be made to feel) that a complaint will be taken amiss or will adversely affect a student or her opportunities at this school where the complaint is raised in good faith.

3 Management of complaints

3.1 **Complaints co-ordinator:** The Senior Deputy Head is responsible for the co-ordination and administration of the Complaints Procedure. If the Senior Deputy Head is unavailable or is the subject of the complaint, their duties will be carried out by another senior member of staff. The main responsibilities of the Senior Deputy Head are to:

- be the first point of contact while the matter remains unresolved and keep records
- co-ordinate the complaints procedures in school
- arrange assistance for parents who require this, for example, because of a disability
- maintain an on-going training programme for all school employees in relation to complaints
- monitor the keeping, confidentiality and storage of records in relation to complaints
- report regularly to the High Mistress and the governors' Education Committee with respect to complaints.

4 Stage 1: complaints and concerns

4.1 We expect that most complaints, where a parent seeks intervention, reconsideration or some other action to be taken, can be resolved informally. Examples might include dissatisfaction about some aspect of teaching or pastoral care, or about allocation of privileges or responsibilities, or about a timetable clash or some other aspect of the school's systems or equipment, or a billing error. Complaints of discrimination, harassment or victimisation are taken very seriously and may need to be dealt with formally. Governors are informed of the nature of stage 1 complaints and concerns in order to monitor trends.

4.2 The complaints process for Data Protection matters is set out in the school's Privacy Notice.

4.3 **Notification:** If appropriate, please raise the complaint initially as follows:

- 4.3.1 **education issues:** if the matter relates to the classroom, the curriculum or special educational needs, parents are asked to speak or write to their child's form tutor or relevant head of department as appropriate. If appropriate, the matter may be referred to the Senior Deputy Head.
- 4.3.2 **pastoral care:** for complaints relating to matters outside the classroom, parents are asked to speak or write to their child's form tutor or head of year. If appropriate the matter may be referred to the Deputy Head, Director of Pastoral Care, or to the Deputy Head, Director of Senior School.
- 4.3.3 **disciplinary matters:** a problem over any disciplinary action taken or a sanction imposed should be raised first of all with the member of staff who imposed it, and, if not resolved, with the head of year. If appropriate the matter may be referred to the Senior Deputy Head.
- 4.3.4 **financial matters:** a query relating to fees or extras should be raised in the first instance with the school's Accounts office. If appropriate, the matter may be referred to the Bursar.

4.4 **Acknowledgement:** We will acknowledge a written notification by telephone, e-mail or letter within five working days of receipt during term time. In the holidays the acknowledgement will be made as soon as is practicable and not later than five working days beyond the start of the next term or half term. Depending on the nature of the complaint, the appropriate member of staff will arrange to either speak with the parent over the phone or invite them to a meeting, within ten working days.

4.5 **Unresolved complaints:** A complaint which has not been resolved by informal means to the parent's satisfaction within 15 working days should be notified to the school in writing as a formal complaint which will be dealt with in accordance with Stage 2 below.

5 Stage 2: formal complaint

5.1 **Notification:** If a parent is dissatisfied with the response to the complaint under Stage 1 or feels the need to lodge a formal complaint, details should be set out in writing and addressed to the High Mistress, stating explicitly the wish to invoke the formal complaints procedure and including full contact details. A formal complaint will be acknowledged by telephone, e-mail or letter within five working days during term time, as soon as is practicable in the holidays and not later than five working days beyond the start of the next term or half term, indicating the action that is being taken and the likely time scale.

5.2 **Investigation:** We will treat complaints in as confidential a manner as possible. Discussions of the case will be limited to the High Mistress, those that she needs to consult with, and she may ask a senior member of staff to act as **Investigator** and / or may involve one or more Governors. The High Mistress and/or Investigator[s] may request additional information from parents and will probably wish to speak to parents personally and to others who have knowledge of the circumstances. The outcome of the investigation will be reviewed by the High Mistress who will then notify the parents by letter of her decision and the reasons for it. Written records will be kept of all meetings and interviews held in relation to the complaint.

5.3 **Outcome:** The High Mistress' aim would be to inform any complainant of the outcome of an investigation and the resolution to the complaint within 25 working days from the receipt of the complaint. Please note that any complaint received within one month of the end of term or half term is likely to take longer to resolve due to school holidays and the unavailability of personnel. In these circumstances the resolution will be communicated within 25 working days of the start of the new term or half term.

6 Stage 3: reference to the Complaints Panel

6.1 We hope that any parent will judge that their complaint has been fully and fairly considered. If a parent is not satisfied, they may request that their complaint be referred to the Complaints Panel. A Complaints Panel (**Panel**) hearing is a review of the decision taken by the High Mistress at Stage 2. The Panel is not able to consider any new areas of complaint which have not been previously raised as part of the complaints procedure.

6.2 **The role of the Panel:** The Panel's task 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 parents and the High Mistress.

6.3 After establishing the facts, the Panel will consider whether to uphold the complaint, in whole or in part, or dismiss the complaint. They will make these decisions on the balance of probabilities.

6.4 It is not within the powers of the Panel to make any financial award, nor to impose sanctions on staff, students, or parents. The Panel may make recommendations on these or any other issues to the High Mistress or to the full Governing body as appropriate.

6.5 **Composition:** We will constitute a Complaints Panel of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint comprising school governor members, and an independent member who is independent of the governance, management and running of the school.

- 6.6 **Notification:** To request a hearing before the Complaints Panel parents should write to the Clerk to the Governors within five working days of receipt of the High Mistress' decision. Requests will usually only be considered if the procedures for an informal (Stage 1) and then a formal complaint (Stage 2) have been completed. A copy of all relevant documents and the parents' full contact details should accompany the letter to the Clerk. The letter should also state all the grounds of the complaint and should include a list of the documents which the parents believe to be in the school's possession and that they wish the Panel to see. The Clerk will acknowledge the request in writing within five working days. Requests received during half terms or school holidays will be responded to as soon as practicable and in any case within five working days of the start of the new term or half term. If assistance is required, for example, because of a disability, the Clerk will be happy to make appropriate arrangements.
- 6.7 **Convening the Panel:** The Clerk to the Governors will convene the Complaints Panel as soon as reasonably practicable and the Panel hearing will take place within fifteen working days of the receipt of the request. However, parents should note that the Panel will not normally sit during half terms or school holidays.
- 6.8 **Notice of hearing:** As soon as reasonably practical and in any event, at least seven working days before the hearing, the Clerk will send the parents written notification of the date, time and place of the hearing, together with brief details of the Panel members who will be present.
- 6.9 **Attendance:** Parents will be invited to attend the hearing and may be accompanied by one other person such as a relative or friend. The hearing is not a legal proceeding and so legal representation is not necessary. Parents should inform the Clerk to the Governors at least five working days prior to the hearing if this person is legally qualified and should note that the Panel will wish to speak to the parents directly and this person will not be permitted to act as an advocate. Copies of additional documents that parents wish the Panel to consider should be sent to the Clerk at least five working days prior to the hearing. The Clerk will circulate a copy of the documents to be considered by the Complaints Panel to all parties at least three days prior to the hearing.
- 6.10 **Chair:** The hearing will be chaired by one member of the Panel (chosen by themselves) and will be conducted in an informal manner.
- 6.11 **Hearing:** All statements made at the hearing will be unsworn. All present will be entitled, should they wish to do so, to write their own notes for reference purposes. The Clerk will be asked to take a handwritten minute of the proceedings.
- 6.12 **Evidence:** The Chair of the Panel will conduct the hearing in such a way as to ensure that all those present have the opportunity of asking questions and making comments in an appropriate manner. The hearing is not a legal proceeding, and the Panel shall be under no obligation to hear oral evidence from witnesses but may do so and / or may take written statements into account.
- 6.13 **Conduct:** All those attending 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. If terminated, the original decision will stand. 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 his / her comment will be minuted.
- 6.14 **Adjournment:** The Chair may, at his / her discretion, adjourn the hearing for further investigation of any relevant issue. This may include an adjournment to take legal advice.
- 6.15 **Decision:** After due consideration of the matters discussed at the hearing, the Panel shall reach a decision unless there is an agreed position. The Panel's decision, findings and any recommendations shall be confirmed in writing to the complainant and where relevant the person complained about within seven working days of the hearing. The decisions, findings and any recommendations will be made available for inspection on the school premises by the Governing Body and the High Mistress. Reasons for the decision will be given. The decision may

include recommendations that will be sent to the parents, the Chair of the Governing Body, the High Mistress and, where relevant, any person about whom the complaint has been made.

- 6.16 **Private proceeding:** 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.
- 6.17 The completion of Stage 3 represents the conclusion of the school's complaints procedure.

7 Record keeping

- 7.1 A written record will be kept of concerns and all formal complaints, and of whether they are resolved at stage 2 or proceed to a panel hearing. The number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year are published on the school website.
- 7.2 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 108 or 109 in the Education and Skills Act 2008 requests access to them.
- 7.3 In accordance with data protection principles, details of individual complaints will be kept only for as long as is considered to be reasonably necessary in the circumstances.
- 7.4 A written record will be kept of the action taken by the school as a result of any complaint that reaches stage 2, regardless of whether the complaint is upheld.

Availability of this policy

A copy of this policy may be downloaded from our website <http://www.spgs.org/school-policies> or is available on request from the school office, St Paul's Girls' School, Brook Green, London, W6 7BS (tel: 020 7603 2288). This policy can be made available in large print or other accessible format if required.