

This article offers advice in the handling of complaints. We hope that by offering these guidelines, and building on them as other good practices emerge, our handling of complaints will be consistently good across our Trust.

Follow the process

You must use the Southport Learning Trust complaints policy, checking that you are using the most current version. It is important that the policy is followed in detail, and that record keeping is good. Key statements, agreements, and conclusions must be captured. It is a good plan to have a clerk to take notes so that there is a level of independence in record keeping.

As a reminder, the process runs like this:

Stage 1 – Informal complaints, usually managed in discussion with a member of the school staff.

Stage 2 – Formal complaints, usually managed by the Headteacher, or sometimes the Chair of governors.

Stage 3 – Hearing by a panel of governors and trustees.

Further escalation beyond the Trust is possible if there is still dissatisfaction.

Don't be rigid in following the process

This sounds like a contradiction to the previous point, however the prospect of more formality can put some people off, and it is important we address complaints whenever possible.

The complainant may not want to go beyond stage 1 and talk with the headteacher, or perhaps the prospect of facing a panel of governors is deterring them. If they decide to stop the process and withdraw their complaint before

moving to the next stage, try to stay on step 1 or step 2 for another cycle, and see if further conversation could resolve the issue.

Perhaps involve a different person for the second cycle if that makes sense, though consider the risk that this may not progress the conversation as well as continuing with the same people.

Acknowledge the feelings behind the complaint

Complainants may be unhappy, stressed, angry, and feel helpless in the face of authority. These emotions may be a barrier to articulation, and make it difficult to have a constructive conversation. It is worth acknowledging how they are feeling, and empathise with their concerns.

Think before offering “I understand how you are feeling”, as if they perceive you to be part of the problem, they may reject this possibility. If they are very emotional it may be a while before they are ready to move on. This links to the value of having more than one meeting that we mentioned above.

Use evidence

If a complaint is received, ensure that the evidence you need is collected promptly. For some evidence, it may no longer be reliable, such as recalling a conversation of some weeks ago. Nonetheless, collect what you can and note how reliable you think it is, and why. Keep good records, including who you talked to, what you asked, and what they replied. Ensure that the evidence is dated with when it was collected.

If you make an assertion, back it up with data. Assume you are asked: “how do you know?” and provide the evidence that supports your position.

Keep to the relevant points

If something is true it can appear to be relevant even when it is not, and can distract from addressing the complaint. If a complainant persistently brings up items you feel are irrelevant to the complaint, ask whether they want to expand the complaint to include them. If it was an omission, it is best to get it incorporated and dealt with.

As a recent example: a child had been excluded and an objection was made that there is a child in a different school who didn't get excluded for the same behaviour.

This may be true; however it is irrelevant. The relevant information is that the excluded child contravened the school's behaviour policy.

What does the complainant want?

Ensure that you understand what the complainant wants. Are they seeking an apology? Are they asking for someone to be disciplined? Are they asking for our policies to be strengthened?

By understanding what they want, you can better guide the conversation to an acceptable outcome. The easiest way to find out is to ask them. Record what they say, even if you know it is unlikely to be a realistic request.

It can sometimes be difficult to establish what outcome the complainant wants, especially when there is a lot of emotion involved. Maybe they don't know what they want, or perhaps they are cautious about revealing what they would like to happen.

Capture what you think they are hoping to achieve when you get a hint; It could help the conversation later.

Give them what they want if it is reasonable

This example is where wording in a safeguarding report upset the parent. The report referred to a girl being in a relationship with a much older man. The parent found the wording offensive, and claimed the girl was being groomed.

Whilst we responded with recognising that the word “relationship” can have an upsetting connotation, we had to stick to the wording. We explained this was because this was the word used by the children who had reported the situation.

In a different circumstance, we could perhaps have proposed alternative wording such as “the girl is in contact with a much older man”, and ask if this would work. We would likely refuse to use the word “groomed” as this reflects the intent of the man, and we can only refer to the behaviour that we see or is reported to us.

Recognise the value of an unconditional apology

Suppose you have someone who has a non-specific complaint, and are upset and angry with the school. The conversation is not establishing what would be a good outcome. You could try giving an unconditional apology, and it will need to be non-specific too.

I am sorry that we have upset you so much. I want us to resolve the situation and work together. I hope you will accept this apology.

They are unlikely to accept the apology immediately, however just repeat your statement at suitable opportunities. The apology may calm the situation, and may also help the complainant to be more specific about their concerns.

A conditional apology is less effective

Using the previous example, we might say:

I am sorry that we have upset you so much, though we are trying our best to understand the problem.

This weakens the apology, as it shares the responsibility for the situation with the other person.

State difficult truths when they are relevant

A complaint is received about the grades a child is getting and the upset this is causing. The family claim the school is bullying the child by giving such poor marks. The complainant wants to appeal, and have the work re-marked.

The solution in this situation could be to explain that the work has been robustly marked, with supporting evidence of the process that has been used, such as moderation. Once that is understood, the conversation could move to the probability that the poor marks reflect the child’s own lack of effort and attention.

This can be a difficult message to give to someone, and difficult for them to hear, yet has the possibility of delivering a good outcome.

Website

<https://www.southportlearningtrust.org/>

If you have any questions or comments on any aspect of governance, or would like to suggest an article, please send an email to:

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Enhancing Governance

Handling Complaints

Article 7 in a series

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