



HANDLING COMPLAINTS POLICY

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SECTION 1: POLICY OVERVIEW

1.1 POLICY DETAILS

Policy Title:	Handling Complaints Policy
Target Audience:	Parents/Guardians, School Stakeholders, Staff
Policy Review Date:	May 2019
Policy Review Lead:	Mr G. Quinn (Senior Leader)
Personnel Involved in the Review of this Policy:	Principal, Vice-Principal, Senior Leadership Team
Policy Consultation Period:	June 2019
This policy was developed through consultation with:	Senior Leadership Team
This policy was presented to the Board of Governors on:	14 October 2019
This policy was ratified by the Board of Governors on:	14 October 2019
This policy is effective from:	4 November 2019
Frequency of Policy Review:	This policy should be reviewed at least every four years.
This policy will be reviewed:	On or before 30 June 2023
Principal	D. Gillespie (Ms)
Chair of Board of Governors	A.M. Campbell (Mrs)

This policy has been reviewed to include reference to the remit of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (NIPSO) in investigating complaints from members of the public in relation to maladministration in publicly-funded schools.

RECORD OF POLICY AMENDMENTS

The following table outlines any significant changes/amendments made to this policy since it was ratified by the Board of Governors on 14 October 2019.

DATE OF REVIEW OR AMENDMENT	SUMMARY OF CHANGES / AMENDMENTS TO POLICY	AMENDED BY

1.2 RELATED SCHOOL POLICIES AND DOCUMENTS

This policy is related to the following school policies and documents:

- External Communications Policy

1.3 POLICY REFERENCES

This policy has been developed with reference to the following relevant sources and publications:

- Education Authority (EA) – Introduction of a Revised Model School Complaints Procedure

1.4 POLICY AIMS

This policy and its associated procedures aim to:

- facilitate the school in providing the best possible service for its pupils and the local community;
- provide an efficient and thorough system through which concerns or complaints raised are effectively addressed;
- encourage resolution of any concerns or complaints raised with the school as soon as possible;
- provide timely responses to any concerns or complaints raised;
- take appropriate action to address any concern or complaint, or to rectify a situation and, as far as possible, prevent it from arising again;
- address concerns and complaints raised in a fair, honest, sensitive and confidential manner within specified timescales;
- treat individuals and groups with openness, equality and inclusiveness;
- ensure that those raising a concern or complaint remain informed of progress and the final outcome of any investigation carried out; and
- be responsive to learning from outcomes which will inform and improve practice within the school.

1.4 POLICY LINK TO SCHOOL VISION, MISSION AND AIMS

This policy reflects the St. Mary's vision for Inspiring Excellence, Fulfilling Potential and the school's mission to provide a stimulating, challenging and caring environment that allows each individual to develop to his/her full potential.

The policy relates directly to the following school aims whereby we:

- challenge and stimulate the minds of pupils through excellent teaching, diverse learning opportunities, and a rich, balanced curriculum;
- provide pupils with every opportunity to flourish academically and to develop their skills, gifts and talents as individuals;
- tailor personalised learning and specialist support to meet the needs of pupils so that they reach their full potential;
- offer an extensive extra-curricular programme that enriches and extends the curriculum, encouraging pupils to explore and develop their personal interests;
- develop wide ranging opportunities for pupil leadership to enable pupils to develop the skills, knowledge and qualities they will need to be leaders in the future;
- support and encourage pupils to play an active and responsible role in society, to develop as global citizens and to use their talents for the service of others; and
- work in close partnership with parents/guardians and members of the wider community to provide the best possible education for all pupils.

1.5 ABBREVIATIONS USED IN POLICY

The following abbreviations are used throughout this policy:

DE	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
NIPSO	Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION

St. Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt is committed to providing a high quality educational service for its pupils, parents/guardians, community and stakeholders. We recognise the importance of open and regular communication between the school and the community it serves. We, therefore, welcome and value the views and feedback of all school stakeholders and use this to maintain and, where appropriate, enhance or improve the quality of our provision. We view all concerns or complaints raised positively as an opportunity to reflect on and, where necessary, review existing practice.

SECTION 3: RATIONALE

This policy has been created to provide information in relation to the procedures to be followed by anyone wishing to raise a concern or complaint about the school and any facilities or services that it provides. The policy seeks to establish a clear mechanism for the resolution of concerns and complaints.

For the purpose of clarity, a concern is considered to be an expression of worry or doubt about an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought. A complaint is regarded as an expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about actions taken or a lack of action on the part of the school, or about the standard of service provided by or on behalf of the school.

SECTION 4: ADDRESSING AND RESOLVING CONCERNS INFORMALLY

While we aim to achieve a high level of satisfaction for the community we serve, we encourage anyone with a concern to bring the matter to our attention as soon as possible so that we may resolve the issue at its earliest stage.

Many issues can be resolved informally simply by talking to the relevant staff member(s) in the school who will be pleased to help. We would encourage anyone with a concern to provide us with the opportunity to address and resolve the matter on an informal basis before embarking on the Complaints Procedure.

We take all concerns raised very seriously and we make every effort to address and resolve matters as quickly as possible.

In the first instance, any concern may be verbally referred to the appropriate member of staff. It is expected that most concerns will be resolved at this initial stage, particularly those which may have arisen through a simple misunderstanding.

If, however, a concern remains unresolved, it may be referred to the appropriate Line Manager. This may, for example, be a Head of Department, a Head of Year, the Facilities Manager or the Office Manager. It may also be a member of the Senior Leadership Team, Vice-Principal or Principal.

Any person raising a concern with the school should expect to have the matter addressed within a reasonable timescale, allowing sufficient time for information relating to the issue to be gathered and a response considered. The member of staff dealing with the concern will provide an indication of the timeframe within which the person raising the concern may expect to receive a response.

If, having raised a concern informally, a person is not satisfied that it has been addressed and/or resolved, a formal complaint may be initiated through the school's two-stage Complaints Procedure.

SECTION 5: FORMAL COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Anyone wishing to make a formal complaint about any aspect of the school should adhere to the school's two-stage Complaints Procedure outlined below. It is important to note that any complaint should be referred to the school as soon as possible. Unless there are exceptional circumstances, complaints will normally be considered within six months of origin of the complaint to the school.

STAGE 1 – WRITE TO THE PRINCIPAL

When making a complaint, the complainant should contact the school Principal who will arrange for the matter raised to be investigated.

If the complaint is about the Principal, the complainant should proceed to Stage 2.

The school requires all complaints to be made in writing. Where this may present difficulties, the complainant should contact the school. We will make reasonable arrangements to support any complainant with this process.

Anyone making a complaint should provide the following information:

- name and contact details;
- what the complaint is about;
- what has already been done to try to resolve it; and
- what they would like the school to do to resolve the complaint.

The complaint will normally be acknowledged within 5 school working days and a response normally made within 20 school working days of receipt of the complaint.

This response will be issued in writing by the Principal and will indicate with reasons whether the complaint has been upheld, partially upheld or not upheld.

Please note that the timeframes outlined above do not apply during school holiday periods.

If the complainant remains unhappy with the outcome at Stage 1, the complaint may be progressed to Stage 2 which is overseen by the Board of Governors.

STAGE 2 – WRITE TO THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

If a complaint is unresolved after Stage 1, it should be referred, in writing, to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors. The correspondence should be addressed for the attention of the Chairperson of the Board of Governors and marked as private and confidential.

Where this may present difficulties, the complainant should contact the school and we will make reasonable arrangements to support the complainant with this process.

As in Stage 1, it will be important for the complainant to provide the following information:

- name and contact details;
- what the complaint is about;
- what has already been done to try to resolve it; and
- what they would like the school to do to resolve the complaint.

The Chairperson will convene a committee to review the complaint.

The complaint will normally be acknowledged within 5 school working days and a final response normally made within 20 school working days from the date of receipt of the complaint.

The response will be issued in writing by the Chairperson of the committee.

Please note that the timeframes outlined above do not apply during school holiday periods.

NORTHERN IRELAND PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN (NIPSO)

If, following completion of Stage 2 of the school's Complaints Procedure, a complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint, they 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. Anyone has the right to complain to the Ombudsman if they feel that they have been treated unfairly or have received a poor service from a school and their complaint has not been resolved to their satisfaction.

A complaint should normally be referred to NIPSO within six months of the final response from the school.

The school will advise in its concluding letter that, if the complainant remains dissatisfied, the complaint may be referred to the NIPSO.

In most instances, the Ombudsman will only investigate a complaint after all the school's internal processes have been exhausted.

The contact details for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman 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 Web: www.nipso.org.uk
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SECTION 6: SCOPE OF THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

The Complaints Procedure outlined in this policy sets out how any expression of dissatisfaction relating to the school will be managed. By taking concerns raised seriously at the earliest possible stage, we hope that issues can be resolved quickly and effectively.

The Complaints Procedure is not limited to the parents/guardians of pupils registered at the school. Any person, including members of the public, wishing to raise a concern or complaint about any aspect of the school's provision should follow the guidance contained in this policy, unless the complaint is of such a nature that it should be addressed under other separate, established and/or statutory procedures and appeal mechanisms. Some examples of such statutory procedures and appeal mechanisms are listed below. The list is not exhaustive. The Principal / Chairperson of the Board of Governors will advise on the appropriate procedure to use when the complaint is raised.

EXCEPTIONS	CONTACT
Admissions / Expulsions / Exclusion of Children from School	Contact www.eani.org.uk Director of Operations and Estates Sara Long
Statutory Assessments of Special Educational Needs (SEN)	Contact www.eani.org.uk Director of Children and Young People's Services Dr Clare Mangan
School Development Proposals	Contact www.eani.org.uk Director of Education John Collings
Child Protection / Safeguarding	Contact www.eani.org.uk Director of Children and Young People's Services Dr Clare Mangan

In addition, where it becomes evident at an early stage that the nature of a complaint may give rise to future disciplinary action, these procedures will be set aside in favour of other established Disciplinary Procedures.

Matters may still be referred to NIPSO, if it is felt that maladministration has occurred.

ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS

St. Mary's will not normally investigate anonymous complaints, unless deemed by the Chairperson of the Board of Governors to be of a serious nature. The decision of whether or not to deal with such complaints will be at the discretion of the Board of Governors. The procedures contained in this policy do not, therefore, provide for a resolution of any complaint brought forward on an anonymous basis.

SECTION 7: WHAT TO EXPECT UNDER THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

7.1 THE RIGHTS OF A PERSON MAKING A COMPLAINT

In dealing with a complaint, we will ensure that the person making the complaint receives:

- fair treatment;
- courtesy;
- a timely response;
- accurate advice;
- respect for privacy – complaints will be treated as confidentially as possible allowing for the possibility of consultation with other appropriate parties about the complaint: and
- clear reasons for decisions.

Where there are grounds to a complaint, we will acknowledge this and address the issues which have been raised. Similarly, we will ensure that a complainant is clearly advised where we believe that there are no grounds to the complaint.

7.2 THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A PERSON MAKING A COMPLAINT

It is important for a person making a complaint to:

- raise issues in a timely manner;
- treat our staff with respect and courtesy;
- provide accurate and concise information in relation to the issues raised; and
- use these procedures fully and engage with them at the appropriate levels.

7.3 RIGHTS OF PARTIES INVOLVED DURING THE INVESTIGATION

The process of investigation is non-adversarial and does not provide a role for any other statutory or non-statutory body.

Where a meeting is arranged and where it is deemed appropriate by the Board of Governors, a complainant may be accompanied but not represented by another person.

Legal representation, or representation by a person(s) acting in a professional capacity, is not permitted within the procedures outlined in this policy.

Any member of staff who is the subject of a complaint will be provided with full details of any allegations made against him/her before being required to respond to the matters raised. This may include providing the member of staff with a copy of the written correspondence in relation to the complaint.

This procedure does not take away from the statutory rights of any of the participants.

7.4 TIMEFRAMES

Where concerns are raised with the relevant teacher or Principal, a response will normally be provided during the meeting or within an agreed timeframe.

STAGE	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COMPLAINT	RESPONSE TO COMPLAINT
1	Normally within 5 school working days	Normally within 20 school working days
2	Normally within 5 school working days	Normally within 20 school working days

If, for any reason, the review of a complaint takes longer to complete, the complainant will be informed of revised time limits and kept updated on progress.

Please note that the timeframes outlined above do not apply during school holiday periods.

SECTION 8: MAKING A COMPLAINT

8.1 EQUALITY

The school requires complaints to be made in writing. Where this may present difficulties, the complainant should contact the school and we will make reasonable arrangements to support them with this process.

8.2 UNREASONABLE COMPLAINTS

The school is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high quality service to those who complain. There will be occasions when, despite all stages of the Complaints Procedure having been completed and the complaint having been reviewed by the Ombudsman, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to re-open the same issue, the Chairperson of the Board of Governors will inform them that the procedure has been completed and that the matter is now closed. If the complainant repeatedly continues to contact the school with the same issue, the school may choose not to respond.

8.3 RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

At each stage in the Complaints Procedure, it is our wish to resolve the complaint. As appropriate, we will acknowledge if the complaint has been upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. In addition, we may offer one or more of the following:

- an explanation;
- an admission that a situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that we will try to ensure that the concern/complaint raised will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps that have been or will be taken to help ensure that it will not happen again and an indication of the timescales within which any changes will be made;
- an undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint; and/or
- an apology.

8.4 WITHDRAWAL OF A COMPLAINT

If a complainant wishes to withdraw a complaint, we will require written confirmation of this decision.

SECTION 9: RECORD KEEPING

The Principal and Chairperson of the Board of Governors will maintain a record of all correspondence, conversations and meetings with a complainant. These records will be held confidentially in the school and will be kept apart from pupil records. All such records will be destroyed five years after the date of the last correspondence on the issue.

SECTION 10: MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF THE POLICY

It is the responsibility of the Board of Governors, in liaison with the Principal, to monitor the effectiveness of this policy. This policy will be reviewed at least every four years but may be updated sooner in response to:

- relevant circulars and publications provided by the Department of Education (DE) / Education Authority (EA);
- a recommendation by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI);
- learning which emerges from issues/situations which arise; or
- a review of other related school policies such as the External Communications Policy.

To appropriately monitor the effectiveness of this policy, the Board of Governors will:

- maintain a record of all complaints received by the school;
- review all complaints received by the school to identify trends and priorities for action; and
- assess the effectiveness of strategies used to resolve complaints received by the school.

St. Mary's
Grammar School, Magherafelt.

