SKYLARK FEDERATION

# Complaints Policy

**Schools covered:** Appleshaw St Peter's CE Primary and Kimpton, Thruxton & Fyfield CE Primary.

- **Date of Policy:** July 2026
- **Date for Review:** July 2027
- **Framework:** This policy is based on the DfE *Best practice guidance for school complaints procedures*. Staff grievances must be handled via the internal *Resolving Workplace Issues Policy* rather than this document.

## 1. Rationale and Aims

The Skylark Federation strives to encourage an open, welcoming partnership with parents, focused on the well-being of pupils. However, if difficulties are experienced, this policy describes our approach to achieving a swift, fair, and impartial resolution.

We aim to:

- Resolve concerns through informal discussions at the earliest possible stage.
- Focus on resolution and service review rather than blame.
- Promote confidentiality, discretion, and a transparent investigative process.
- Deal firmly and fairly with vexatious, abusive, or malicious complaints.

## 2. Who Can Make a Complaint?

This procedure is not limited to parents or carers of registered pupils. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to the federation about any provision of facilities or services we provide. Unless complaints are dealt with under separate statutory procedures (such as Admissions, Special Educational Needs (SEN) Statutory Assessments, Child Protection, or Exclusions), this policy applies.

## 3. Difference Between a Concern and a Complaint

- **A Concern:** An expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought.
- **A Complaint:** An expression of dissatisfaction, however made, about actions taken or a lack of action.

## 4. How to Raise a Concern or Complaint

A concern or complaint can be made in person, in writing, or by telephone. They may be raised by a third party on behalf of a complainant, provided the third party has appropriate, written consent.

**Complainants must not approach individual governors.** Governors have no power to act on an individual basis, and involving them early compromises their ability to remain impartial should they need to sit on a later formal review panel.

**Routing Your Complaint Safely:**

- **Complaints about school staff (except the Headteacher):** Must be addressed to the Executive Headteacher via the school office and marked *Private and Confidential*.

- **Complaints about the Executive Headteacher:** Must be addressed to the Chair of Governors via the school office and marked *Private and Confidential*.
- **Complaints about an individual governor or the whole governing body:** Must be addressed to the Clerk to the Governing Body via the school office and marked *Private and Confidential*.

**Accessibility:** A template complaint form is included at the end of this document. If you require reasonable adjustments to access this procedure due to a disability or protected characteristic, please contact the school office. Complainants may also seek support from independent organisations like Citizens Advice.

### 5. Timelines and Cut-Offs

- **The 3-Month Rule:** Complaints must be raised within **three months** of the incident or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the final incident. Complaints raised outside this timeframe will only be considered under exceptional circumstances.
- **School Days vs. Calendar Days:** To ensure operational consistency, all timescales in this policy refer to **school days** (days on which the school is legally open to pupils).
- **Holiday Periods:** Any complaint received outside of term time or during a school holiday will be recorded as having been received on the **first school day** after the holiday period concludes.
- **Parallel Investigations:** If other bodies (e.g., the police, local authority safeguarding teams, or employment tribunals) are investigating aspects of the complaint, the school's timeline may be suspended until those external investigations are completed.

## The Sequential Complaints Procedure

The federation recognises the immense value of informal dialogue, but operates a clear, structured **two-formal-stage process** to address unresolved concerns.

### Preliminary Stage: Informal Resolution

1. Most difficulties can be resolved informally. Parents are strongly encouraged to arrange a mutually convenient appointment with the class teacher or appropriate staff member via the school office.
2. If a complainant or staff member feels unable to discuss the concern directly with one another, the Executive Headteacher will refer the matter to an alternative, impartial staff member to ensure an objective review.
3. If informal attempts fail to reach a satisfactory conclusion, the complainant may formally escalate the matter to Stage One.

### Formal Stage One: Executive Headteacher Investigation

1. The complaint must be put in writing using the template form and submitted to the Executive Headteacher via the school office.
2. The Executive Headteacher (or designated investigator) will send a written acknowledgment within **3 school days** of receipt.
3. A full, detailed investigation will be carried out. The Executive Headteacher will provide a formal, written response outlining their findings and resolutions within **10 school days** of receipt.
4. *Exception Path:* If the complaint is explicitly leveled *against* the Executive Headteacher, this stage will be carried out entirely by the Chair of Governors (or an independent investigator), maintaining the same **10 school day** timeline.
5. If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the outcome, they must write to the Clerk to the Governing Body within **10 school days** of receiving the Stage One outcome letter to request an escalation to Stage Two.

### Formal Stage Two: Governors' Complaints Panel Review

1. The Clerk will acknowledge the request within **3 school days** and convene a Governors' Complaints Panel hearing.
2. The hearing must take place within **20 school days** of receiving the Stage Two escalation request.
3. **Panel Composition:** The panel will consist of three governors who have had absolutely no prior involvement or knowledge of the dispute.

    - *Federation Safeguard:* If the complaint is against the entire governing body, a single governor, or the Chair, the Clerk will source completely independent governors from outside the federation (via local governance networks or the diocese) to ensure absolute impartiality.
4. **The Hearing:** The meeting will follow a formal agenda, maintaining an objective but welcoming atmosphere. The complainant has the right to be accompanied by a friend, relative, or support companion. (Legal representatives are generally not permitted as this is an internal resolution forum, not a legal tribunal).
5. **The Outcome:** The panel will consider the context and make its determination. The Clerk will send a formal written response to the complainant within **5 school days** of the hearing. This letter will summarise the issues, the main points of discussion, the reasons for the panel's final decision, and any proposed structural outcomes or actions.

**This Stage Two Panel Review completely concludes the school's internal complaints procedure**.

## 6. Next Steps (Escalation Beyond the Federation)

If the complainant believes the school did not handle their complaint in accordance with its published procedure, or acted unlawfully/unreasonably under education law, they can escalate the matter directly to the **Department for Education (DfE)**.

The Local Authority (LA) has no legal remit to review, intervene, or overturn decisions made regarding school complaints; therefore, referrals cannot be made to the LA complaints officer.

The DfE will primarily check whether the school's policy was followed correctly and whether the school adhered to statutory legislation.

- **Online:** www.education.gov.uk/contactus
- **Phone:** 0370 000 2288
- **Post:** Department for Education, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester, M1 2WD

## 7. Managing Serial, Persistent, and Unreasonable Complaints

The federation is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially. However, we will not tolerate behaviour that is abusive, offensive, threatening, or excessively disruptive to school operations.

**Unreasonable behaviour includes:**

- Refusing to specify the clear grounds or desired outcome of a complaint.
- Constantly changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds.
- Introducing excessive, trivial, or irrelevant information with the expectation that it must be heavily detailed and answered immediately.
- Making unjustified or malicious statements about staff members.
- Repeatedly raising the identical complaint after it has been fully investigated and closed.
- Making excessive, daily demands on school staff time through lengthy phone calls or emails while an active investigation is underway.
- Publishing unacceptable, defamatory, or derogatory remarks on public social media forums.

**Interventions for Unreasonable behaviour:**

1. Whenever possible, the Executive Headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss concerns with the complainant informally before taking action.
2. If the disruptive behaviour persists, the Headteacher will issue a formal written warning.
3. For continuous disruption, the school may implement a formal **Communication Plan** (limiting contact to a specific method, an exclusive inbox, or a strict time restriction). This plan will usually be reviewed after **6 months**.
4. In instances of abusive behaviour, aggression, or violence, the police will be informed immediately. The federation reserves the absolute legal right to implement a site ban to protect the safety of pupils and staff.

## Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the appropriate person, as outlined above, who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

| |
|---|
| **Your name:** |
| **Pupil's name (if relevant):** |
| **Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant):** |
| **Address:**<br><br><br><br>**Postcode:**<br>**Day time telephone number:**<br>**Evening telephone number:** |
| **Please give details of your complaint, including whether you have spoken to anybody at the school about it.** |
| **What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?** |
| **Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.** |
| **Signature:**<br><br>**Date:** |
| **Official use** |
| **Date acknowledgement sent:** |
| **By who:** |
| **Complaint referred to:** |
| **Date:** |

---

Here is a summary of the changes made to the **Complaints Policy 2025**

### 1. Restructuring from a 4-Stage to a 3-Stage Process (Resolving "Governor Burnout")

- **Previous Policy:** Utilized a four-step model: Preliminary (Informal) $\rightarrow$ Stage 1 (Headteacher Investigation) $\rightarrow$ Stage 2 (Chair of Governors Investigation) $\rightarrow$ Stage 3 (Governors' Panel Hearing).
- **Updated Policy:** Condensed into a clean three-step structure
- **Governor Rationale:** The DfE explicitly warns against a standalone formal stage for the Chair of Governors. If the Chair acts as an independent investigator early on, they are disqualified from sitting on a subsequent panel due to bias. For a small or federated governing body, "burning through" independent governors makes it nearly impossible to find three completely impartial governors to convene a final panel.

### 2. Removal of the Local Authority Escalation Route

- **Previous Policy:** Stated that if a parent remained dissatisfied at the end of Stage Three, they would be referred to the Local Authority's (LA) complaints officer for further advice.
- **Updated Policy:** Completely removed the LA from the escalation process. The final recourse is now correctly routed to the **Department for Education (DfE)**.
- **Governor Rationale:** This was a critical legal error. Local Authorities have no statutory remit or legal power to investigate, review, or overturn school complaint decisions for maintained schools or academies. Retaining this clause would expose the school to procedural non-compliance.

### 3. Unification of Timelines to "School Days"

- **Previous Policy:** Interchangeably used "working days" and "school days" across various stages.
- **Updated Policy:** Standardized every timeframe explicitly to **school days** (days the school is open to pupils). It also incorporates a standard clause clarifying that any complaints received during holidays are formally logged on the first school day back.
- **Governor Rationale:** Mixing terminology creates massive legal ambiguities, particularly if a timeline lapses over a half-term or summer holiday. This creates an objective, easy-to-track framework for the Clerk.

### 4. Insertion of Mandatory Conflict-of-Interest Routes

- **Previous Policy:** Lacked clear operating instructions for alternative routes if leadership was involved.
- **Updated Policy:** Built in specific routing clauses from the DfE model toolkit:
    - Complaints about the Headteacher bypass staff and go straight to the Chair of Governors.
    - Complaints about individual governors or the whole board go to the Clerk, who is mandated to source an entirely independent panel from outside the federation (via diocesan or local governance networks).
- **Governor Rationale:** Ensures absolute impartiality and protects the governing body from accusations of "self-policing" if a structural complaint arises.

### 5. Standardized "Serial and Unreasonable Complaints" Language

- **Previous Policy:** Included a brief section on persistent complainants but lacked objective parameters.
- **Updated Policy:** Upgraded this section using the exact, legally tested text from the DfE's model policy. It outlines explicit behaviour definitions (such as social media defamation or excessive daily communications) and establishes a formal, proportional **Communication Plan** protocol.
- **Governor Rationale:** Protects staff well-being and school operational time from highly disruptive or abusive behaviour while keeping the framework legally defensible if challenged.