

*"At Hilltop Infant School, everyone will work together in a nurturing environment to provide each child with challenging opportunities that encourage a desire for life-long learning."*



Hilltop Infant School  
What to do if you have a concern about your child

Ratified by the Governing Body in July 2007

Signature David Harwood

Chair of Governors

Due for Review 2009

1. This policy statement sets out the school's approach to dealing with parental concerns and complaints. Further details of how we handle them are contained in our procedures document, What to do if you have a concern about your child, which you can obtain on request from the school office.
2. We value good home/school relations and will, therefore, do everything we can to establish and maintain them. This includes seeking to resolve any concerns or complaints promptly, and to the satisfaction of all concerned.
3. We welcome feedback on what parents feel we do well, or not so well, as a school. We will consider carefully all feedback, whether positive or negative, and will review our policies and practices accordingly.
4. We will treat all concerns and complaints seriously and courteously and will advise parents and others of the school's procedures for dealing with their concerns. In return, we expect parents and other complainants to behave respectfully towards all members of the school community. In particular, any disagreement with the school should not be expressed inappropriately or in front of pupils.
5. All school staff, teaching and non-teaching; and members of the Governing Body, will receive a copy of this policy statement and will be familiar with the school's procedures for dealing with parental concerns and complaints, to which they will have access as required.
6. The school's procedures will be reviewed regularly and updated as necessary.
7. Staff and governors will receive training in handling parental concerns and complaints as appropriate. This may be on an individual basis; or as a group activity for all staff; or for specific groups, such as the office staff or members of the Governing Body.
8. Whilst we will seek to resolve concerns and complaints to the satisfaction of all parties, it may not be possible to achieve this in every case. We will, therefore, use our option to close a complaint before all the stages of the school's procedures have been exhausted, if this appears to be appropriate.
9. The Government and the Local Authority (Essex County Council) advocate resolution of parental concerns and complaints at school level wherever possible, in the interests of maintaining good home/school relations. The role of the Local Authority in advising parents and schools on the handling of concerns and complaints is set out in the school's procedures.

## **Compliments**

These are always welcome and very encouraging to teachers and staff. The school encourages feedback or opinions from pupils and parents. In practice this dialogue is continuous, sometimes directly and also indirectly, for example, through the Parents' Association. It may not always be possible to act immediately but pupils and the school always benefit so please don't hold back.

## **Concerns**

It is natural that parents may, occasionally, be concerned about an aspect of their child's education or welfare at school. This could include issues concerning the school's approach to aspects of the curriculum, homework, behavioural problems or any other issue.

The school welcomes enquiries from parents about any matter. Teachers and staff will explain the school practices, policies, and how they affect the pupils. The vast majority of concerns will be handled by the class teacher or by the subject co-ordinator if this is more helpful. If in doubt, keep asking until you are completely satisfied as all staff are eager to help.

The usual format is to speak to the child's class teacher in the first instance, or to contact the school office to arrange an appointment to discuss your concern with whoever you wish. At all times the staff will help to resolve a problem. If occasionally parents feel they must state their concern formally, this too is not a problem. The school has defined procedures for handling complaints so don't be embarrassed if you feel an issue warrants more attention.

## **Complaints**

The procedure is again to speak to the child's class teacher in the first instance, or contact the school office to arrange an appointment to discuss your complaint with whoever you wish.

The school's policy is to follow the Local Authority (Essex County Council) guidelines when handling concerns and complaints. Just ask if you would like advice or a copy. It would be unusual to deviate from these procedures but the school always retains discretion in these matters.

In summary, the Local Authority procedure is divided into four stages:

Stage 1 aims to resolve the concern through informal contact at the appropriate level in school.

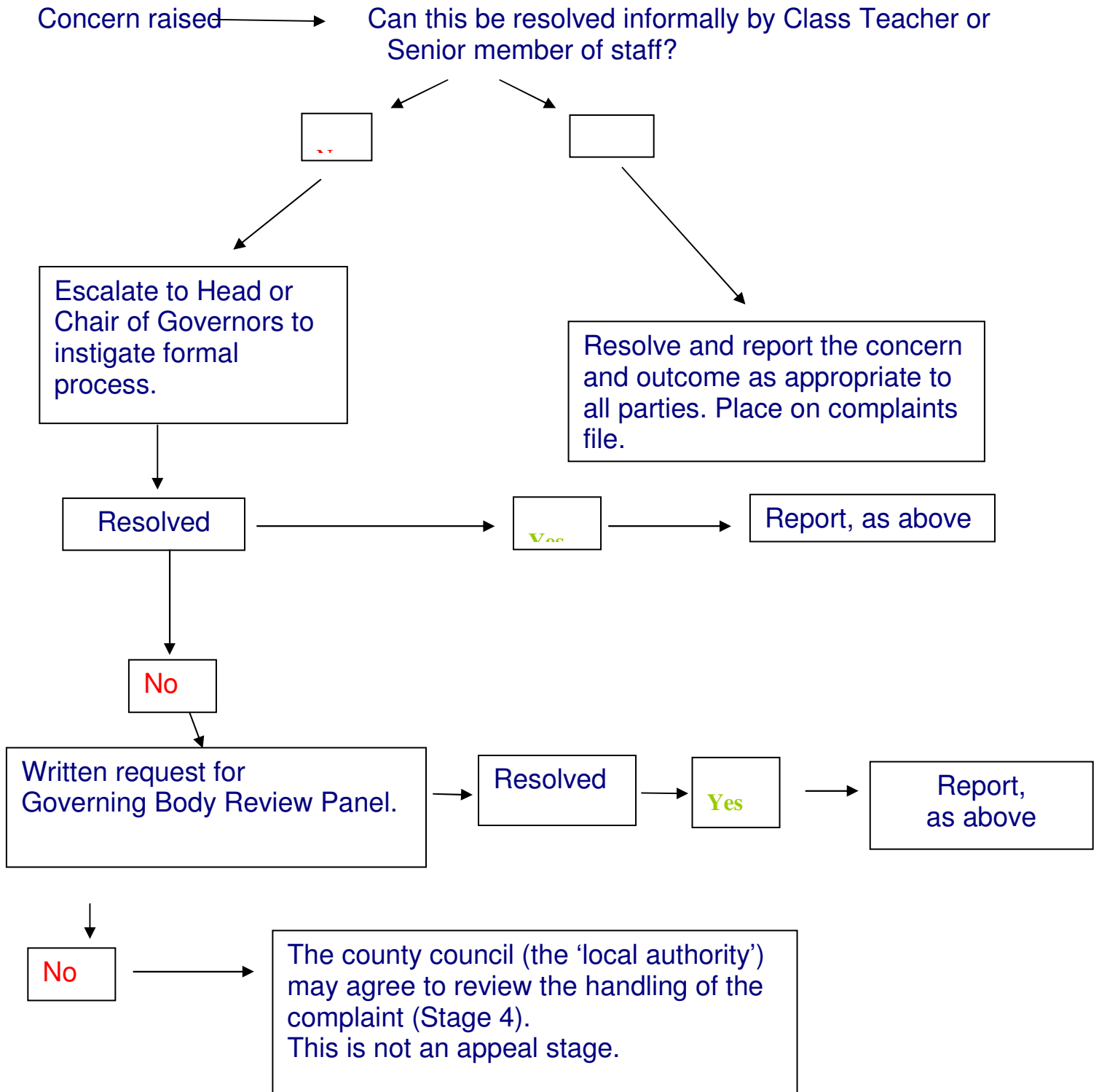
Stage 2 is the first formal stage where written complaints are considered by the headteacher or a designated governor, who has responsibility for dealing with complaints.

Stage 3 is the next step once Stage 2 is complete. It involves a complaints review panel of governors.

Stage 4 is the Final Review stage where the Local Authority will review and comment on the way the school has dealt with the complaint.

In the infrequent event these procedures need referring to, please look in the file or ask the school office. All staff are familiar with the guidelines and have a duty to help parents needing advice. Please don't feel you are making a fuss. These procedures have been carefully compiled and their reference, however rare, is routine to help pupils, parents and the school.

# Action flow-chart



## Our procedures for dealing with general concerns

The majority of concerns from parents, carers and others are handled under the following general procedures.

The procedure is divided into four stages;

**Stage 1** aims to resolve the concern through informal contact at the appropriate level in school.

**Stage 2** is the first formal stage at which written complaints are considered by the headteacher or the designated governor, who has special responsibility for dealing with complaints.

**Stage 3** is the next stage once Stage 2 has been worked through. It involves a complaints review panel of governors.

**Stage 4** is the Local Authority Review stage where the children's services authority (Essex County Council) will review and comment upon the way we have dealt with your complaint.

How each of these stages operates is explained below:

### Stage 1 – Your initial contact with the school

1. Many concerns will be dealt with informally when you make them known to us. The first point of contact should be your child's class teacher.
2. We will see you, or contact you by telephone or in writing, as soon as possible after your concern is made known to us. All members of staff know how to refer, if necessary, to the appropriate person with responsibility for particular issues raised by you. He or she will make a clear note of the details and will check later to make sure that the matter has been followed up.
3. We will ensure that you are clear what action or monitoring of the situation, if any, has been agreed. We will confirm this in writing to you.
4. We will ensure that we speak directly to all appropriate persons who may be able to assist us with our enquiries into your concern.
5. We will discuss with you (normally within ten working days) the progress of our enquiries. You will have the opportunity of asking for the matter to be considered further, once we have responded to your concern.
6. If you are still dissatisfied following this informal approach, your concern will become a formal complaint and we will deal with it at the next stage.

## Stage 2 - Formal consideration of your complaint

This stage in our procedures deals with written complaints. It applies where you are not happy with the informal approach to dealing with your concern, as outlined under Stage 1 above.

1. Normally, your written complaint should be addressed to the headteacher. If, however, your complaint concerns the headteacher personally, it should be sent to the school marked "For the attention of the Chair of Governors".
2. We will acknowledge your complaint in writing as soon as possible after receiving it. This will be within three working days.
3. We will enclose a copy of these procedures with the acknowledgement.
4. Normally we would expect to respond in full within ten working days but if this is not possible we will write to explain the reason for the delay and let you know when we hope to be able to provide a full response.
5. As part of our consideration of your complaint, we may invite you to a meeting to discuss the complaint and fill in any details required. If you wish, you can ask someone to accompany you to help you explain the reasons for your complaint.
6. The headteacher, or chair of governors may also be accompanied by a suitable person if they wish.
7. Following the meeting, the headteacher or chair of governors will, where necessary, talk to witnesses and take statements from others involved. If the complaint centres on a pupil, we will talk to the pupil concerned and, where appropriate, others present at the time of the incident in question.
8. We will normally talk to pupils with a parent or carer present, unless this would delay the investigation of a serious or urgent complaint, or where a pupil has specifically said that he or she would prefer the parent or carer not to be involved. In such circumstances, we will ensure that another member of staff, with whom the pupil feels comfortable, is present.
9. If the complaint is against a member of staff, it will be dealt with under the school's internal confidential procedures, as required by law.
10. The headteacher or chair of governors will keep written/typed, signed and dated records of all meetings and telephone conversations, and other related documentation.
11. Once we have established all the relevant facts, we will send you a written response to your complaint. This will give a full explanation of the headteacher's chair of governors' decision and the reasons for it. If follow-up action is needed, we will indicate what we are proposing to do. We may invite you to a meeting to discuss the outcome as part of our commitment to building and maintaining good relations with you.
12. The person investigating your complaint may decide that we have done all we can to resolve the complaint, in which case we may use our discretion to close the complaint at this point. Please see the next page for further information about this process.
13. If we do not close the complaint after Stage 2, you may wish to proceed to Stage 3, as described below.

## Closure of complaints

- Very occasionally, a school and/or the local authority will feel that it needs, regretfully, to close an complaint where the complainant is still dissatisfied.
- We, and the local authority where appropriate, will do all we can to help to resolve a complaint against the school but sometimes it is simply not possible to meet all of the complainant's wishes. Sometimes it is simply a case of "agreeing to disagree".
- If a complainant persists in making representations to the school – to the headteacher, designated governor, chair of governors or anyone else – or to the local authority, this can be extremely time-consuming and can detract from our responsibility to look after the interests of all the children in our care.
- For this reason, we are entitled to close correspondence (including personal approaches, as well as letters and telephone calls) on a complaint where we feel that we have taken all reasonable action to resolve the complaint. The local authority will support us in this position, and especially where the complainant's action is causing distress to staff and/or pupils.
- In exceptional circumstances, closure may occur before a complaint has reached Stage 3 of the procedures described in this document. This is because a complaints panel takes considerable time and effort to set up and we must be sure that it is likely to assist the process of investigating the complaint.

The Chair of Governor may decide, therefore, that every reasonable action has been undertaken to resolve the complaint and that a complaints review panel would not help to move things forward.

- This does not, of course, prevent you from referring your complaint to the local authority for a review of the way it has been handled, as described below.

## Stage 3 - Consideration by a complaints review panel

- If your concern has already been through Stages 1 and 2 and you are not happy with the outcome, we may agree to set up a complaints review panel to consider it. This is a formal process, and your ultimate recourse at school level. The Chair of Governors has discretion to agree to this form of meeting where he or she feels it would be helpful in resolving the complaint.

The purpose of this arrangement is to give your complaint a hearing in front of a panel of governors who have no prior knowledge of the details of the complaint and who can, therefore, consider it without prejudice.

- The aim of a complaints review panel is to resolve the complaint and to achieve reconciliation between the school and the parent. We recognise, however, that it may sometimes only be possible to establish facts and make recommendations which will reassure you that we have taken your complaint seriously.

The complaints review panel operates according to the following formal procedures:

1. The clerk to the governing body will aim to arrange for the panel meeting to take place within **20 working days**.
2. The clerk will ask you whether you wish to provide any further written documentation in support of your complaint. You can include witness statements, or ask witnesses to give evidence in person, if you wish.
3. The headteacher will be asked to prepare a written report for the panel. Other members of staff directly involved in matters raised in your complaint will also be asked to prepare reports or statements.

4. The clerk will inform you, the headteacher, any relevant witnesses and members of the panel by letter, at least **five working days** in advance, of the date, time and place of the meeting. We hope that you will feel comfortable with the meeting taking place in the school; but we will do what we can to make alternative arrangements if you prefer.
5. With the letter, the clerk will send you all relevant correspondence, reports and documentation about the complaint and ask whether you wish to submit further written evidence to the panel.
6. The letter will explain what will happen at the panel meeting and the clerk will also inform you that you are entitled to be accompanied to the meeting. The choice of person to accompany you is your own, but it is usually best to involve someone in whom you have confidence but who is not directly connected with the school. They are there to give you support but also to witness the proceedings and to speak on your behalf if you wish.
7. With the agreement of the chair of the panel, the headteacher may invite members of staff directly involved in matters raised by you to attend the meeting,
8. The chair of the panel will bear in mind that the formal nature of the meeting can be intimidating for you and will do his or her best to put you at your ease.
9. As a general rule, no evidence or witnesses previously undisclosed should be introduced into the meeting by any of the participants. If either party wishes to do so, the meeting will be adjourned so that the other party has a fair opportunity to consider and respond to the new evidence.
10. The chair of the panel will ensure that the meeting is properly minuted. Please understand that any decision to share the minutes with you, the complainant, is a matter for the panel's discretion and you do not have an automatic right to see or receive a copy. Since such minutes usually name individuals, they are understandably of a sensitive and, therefore, confidential nature.
11. Normally, the written outcome of the panel meeting, which will be sent to you, should give you all the information you require. If, however, you feel that you would like to have a copy of the minutes it would be helpful if you could indicate this in advance. If the panel is happy for the minutes to be copied to you, the clerk can then be asked maintain confidentiality in the minutes.
12. During the meeting, you can expect there to be opportunities for:
  - you to explain your complaint;
  - you to hear the school's response from the headteacher;
  - you to question the headteacher about the complaint;
  - you to be questioned by the headteacher about the complaint;
  - the panel members to be able to question you and the headteacher;
  - any party to have the right to call witnesses (subject to the chair's approval) and all parties to have the right to question all witnesses;
  - you and the headteacher to make a final statement.
13. In closing the meeting, the chair will explain that the panel will now consider its decision and that written notice of the decision will be sent to the headteacher and yourself **within two weeks**. All participants other than the panel and the clerk will then leave.
14. The panel will then consider the complaint and all the evidence presented in order to:
  - reach a unanimous, or at least a majority, decision on the complaint;
  - decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;

- recommend, where appropriate, to the governing body changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that similar problems do not happen again.
15. The clerk will send you and the headteacher a written statement outlining the decision of the panel **within two weeks**. The letter will explain that you are entitled to have the handling of the complaint reviewed by the local authority under Stage 4 of the procedures. That process is not strictly an appeal, as the local authority cannot direct the governing body in most general complaints cases. It is, however, an opportunity to seek the view of an official third party and the outcome, including any recommendations, may be helpful to you in seeking resolution of the complaint, through the Secretary of State for Education and Skills if necessary.
  16. We will keep a copy of all correspondence and notes on file in the school's records but separate from pupils' personal records.

## Stage 4 - The role of Essex County Council, and the Local Authority Review

*The following information is provided by the Children's Services Authority, Essex County Council:*

1. Your local children's services authority (CSA) is Essex County Council. CSAs have limited powers to intervene in matters of school management and, along with central government, Essex County Council encourages parents and others with concerns about schools to discuss the issues firstly with staff at the school, as set out in Stage 1 of the above procedures. The majority of concerns about children's education and welfare can be resolved in this informal way, which helps to build and maintain good relations between the school and parents.
2. The county council can advise you on the route for expressing your concerns or making a complaint and can facilitate the resolution of the complaint by liaising with the headteacher and governing body to ensure that procedures are followed and your concerns dealt with reasonably.
3. **If you come to the local authority without first having gone through the above procedures, we will explain to you that you must go back to the school in the first instance and follow its procedures.**
4. Our role in facilitating the resolution of complaints about schools is a carefully balanced one. We try to maintain an objective stance, giving you and the school the information and any guidance you need to move the matter forward.
5. We have an agreement with schools that, if you send us a written complaint about a school, we will normally forward the complaint to the school for attention. We would use our discretion not to do this if the written complaint includes information of a highly sensitive and/or personal nature, in which case our Human Resources Service would deal with it and contact the school in a discreet way.
6. It is difficult for us to address anonymous complaints, though we do check out any assertions made in them where they appear to be serious. The school has a right to know who is complaining about them and most situations can only be resolved if both sides can get together and work through the problem.
7. Where you have been through the school's internal complaints procedures (with or without recourse to a complaints review panel) and are still unhappy with the outcome or decision from the governing body you can either call the county council's helpline number: 01245 436231 to ask for advice, or you can write to the local authority enclosing full details of your complaint, including correspondence between yourself and the headteacher and governing body.

Please address correspondence to:

The Customer Care Officer  
The Schools Service  
Essex County Council  
PO Box 47  
CHELMSFORD  
CM2 6WN

8. If appropriate, we will then conduct a Local Authority Review. This consists of an examination of the correspondence connected with the complaint and consideration of any statement from the governing body and headteacher about the way the complaint has been handled. We may also seek the views of other county council staff who have contact with the school.
9. The purpose of the Local Authority Review is to establish whether the governing body and headteacher (or designated governor) appear to have followed the school's complaints procedures and whether they have acted reasonably.
10. We will aim to send you, and the school, the outcome of the review within ten working days but will let you know if it is likely to take longer. The letter will state our view of the way the complaint has been handled and will give any appropriate recommendations for yourself and the governing body to consider as a way forward.
11. If you wish to pursue your complaint beyond the Local Authority Review, you can write to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills at the address shown below:

Rt Hon Ed Balls MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 3BT

8. Please enclose with your letter to the DCSF a copy of the Local Authority Review outcome. This will save time in that the DCSF will not need to ask for our view of what has happened.
9. **We would advise parents that, unless the school and/or local authority is shown to have behaved unreasonably or not to have followed their own procedures, there is likely to be little further action that can be taken, as governing bodies are empowered to deal with many issues without reference to either the local authority or the Secretary of State.**

## Other sources of information and advice

If your concern is about an aspect of **special needs provision**, which might include information about relevant voluntary organisations and support groups in Essex, you might like to talk to our **Parent Partnership** team on their helpline: **01245 436036**.