



When Complaints Escalate: What Should the Chair Do?

Practical guidance for Chairs of Governors and Academy Trustees

Complaints about schools are increasingly being pursued through several channels at once. A parent or other complainant may raise concerns with the school, write to individual governors, contact the Department for Education (DfE), submit a complaint to Ofsted, use online webchat services and continue sending emails while the school's own complaints procedure is still underway.

For Chairs, this can create considerable pressure. Staff and governors may feel that they are constantly defending the school, responding to repeated allegations and dealing with external enquiries rather than concentrating on their core responsibilities.

It is important to remember that **a complainant's decision to contact several organisations does not, in itself, mean that the school has acted improperly. Equally, it does not mean that the Chair must personally respond to every communication or repeatedly reopen matters that have been properly concluded.**

The Chair's responsibility is to ensure that complaints are handled fairly, that legitimate concerns are addressed and that the school's governance arrangements remain effective.

1. Take control of the process, not the complainant

When complaints begin to escalate, the Chair should take a step back and establish a clear overview of the situation.

The first questions should be:

- What exactly is being complained about?
- Has the school's published complaints procedure been followed?
- Who is responsible for investigating or determining the complaint at its current stage?
- Has the complainant received a clear response to each substantive issue?
- Are there any new allegations or evidence that require further consideration?
- Are there safeguarding, legal, employment or other statutory issues requiring a separate process?

The Chair should ask the clerk to maintain a central record of the complaint, the correspondence received, the actions taken, the decisions reached and any outstanding matters.

Where correspondence is being sent to multiple governors, trustees, staff and external organisations, the school should establish a coordinated response. This will help avoid contradictory replies, unnecessary duplication and different individuals becoming involved without a clear purpose.

The Chair should not automatically take over the investigation. Their role is to ensure that the correct process is followed and that responsibility for each stage is clear.

2. Do not allow external complaints to undermine the school's procedure

Parents and members of the public are entitled to contact external organisations. A Chair cannot prevent this, and should not discourage a complainant from exercising their rights.



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However, external escalation does not necessarily replace the school's own complaints procedure.

Ofsted explains that complaints should ordinarily be raised with the school first and that it does not resolve individual disputes or determine the outcome of a school's complaints process. It may use relevant information to inform its inspection activity. The DfE also expects complainants to complete the appropriate internal procedure in most circumstances, although exceptions apply, including certain safeguarding concerns and situations where a complainant is prevented from progressing their complaint.

The Chair should therefore:

- Continue to follow the published complaints procedure unless there is a sound reason to do otherwise.
- Respond appropriately to legitimate enquiries from the DfE, Ofsted or another competent authority.
- Ensure that the school supplies accurate, relevant and appropriately authorised information when requested.
- Keep a record of any external correspondence and the response provided.
- Avoid treating an external referral as proof that the school has done something wrong.

A complaint to Ofsted does not automatically trigger an inspection, and an external organisation may decide that a matter falls outside its remit.

The Chair should remain focused on the substance of the complaint and the school's responsibilities, rather than becoming preoccupied with the number of organisations contacted.

3. Appoint one appropriate point of contact

Where complaints generate a large volume of correspondence, it is usually helpful to establish a single, clearly identified point of contact.

Depending on the circumstances, this might be the clerk, the headteacher or another appropriately authorised person. Where the complaint concerns the headteacher or the Chair, an alternative arrangement will be needed.

The Chair should ensure that all relevant correspondence is directed through the agreed route. Individual governors and trustees should not conduct separate investigations, offer personal opinions or enter into competing exchanges with the complainant.

A coordinated approach does not mean that the school can ignore correspondence. It means that communications are handled consistently by those with the appropriate authority. The school should acknowledge new and substantive concerns, provide realistic timescales and explain clearly which stage of the complaints procedure is being followed.

4. Distinguish between a persistent complaint and unreasonable correspondence

Some complainants remain dissatisfied even after a thorough investigation and a carefully reasoned decision. Others continue to raise substantially the same allegations, demand repeated reconsideration or send extensive correspondence that places a disproportionate burden on the school. The Chair must distinguish between these situations.



A complainant should not be labelled unreasonable simply because they disagree with the decision, ask difficult questions, challenge the governing body or contact the DfE or Ofsted. However, where the published procedure has been completed and the same matters are repeatedly raised without new evidence or a substantive new issue, the school may be able to apply its policy for managing serial or unreasonable complaints.

Before taking this step, the Chair should be satisfied that:

- The substantive concerns have been properly investigated.
- The complainant has had a fair opportunity to complete the complaints procedure.
- A clear, reasoned response has been provided, including information about any appropriate next steps.
- Any genuinely new evidence or separate complaint has been considered.
- Further correspondence is substantially repetitive or is causing an unreasonable level of disruption.

The DfE's best-practice guidance for maintained schools advises that the decision to stop responding must not be taken lightly. It also recommends a published policy for managing serial and unreasonable complaints. Academy trusts should ensure that their own arrangements are consistent with their applicable requirements and published procedure.

Where appropriate, the school may introduce a proportionate communication strategy. This could specify one contact person, require correspondence to be sent through a designated channel and explain that repeated correspondence about a matter already concluded may not receive a further substantive response.

Any restrictions should be reasonable, proportionate and regularly reviewed. They must not prevent genuine new concerns, safeguarding disclosures or other matters requiring action from being considered.

5. Protect the headteacher, staff and governors

Prolonged complaints can have a significant impact on staff wellbeing and the effective operation of the governing body.

The Chair should ensure that staff are not left to manage repeated or hostile correspondence without appropriate support. Where necessary, the Chair should agree with the headteacher how communications will be managed and ensure that governors understand their own boundaries.

The Chair should also avoid becoming personally drawn into arguments. A measured, factual response is generally more effective than a defensive or emotional exchange.

Where correspondence includes threats, harassment or abusive language, the school should assess the circumstances and consider appropriate steps to protect those affected. Serious threats should be referred to the relevant authorities where necessary.

Complaints involving allegations of misconduct, safeguarding or employment matters must still be directed through the appropriate procedures. A communication strategy must never be used to avoid investigating a legitimate concern.



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6. Know when to seek external advice

Some complaints are too complex or sensitive for the Chair to manage alone.

Advice may be needed where allegations concern the Chair, Vice-Chair, the whole governing body or trust board; where there are significant conflicts of interest; or where there are concerns about the lawfulness of decisions, safeguarding or employment matters.

In these circumstances, the Chair should consult the clerk and seek appropriate advice from the local authority, the academy trust, HR or legal professionals, as relevant. In a Catholic school, advice from the Diocese may also be appropriate where the matter falls within its remit. If the board is itself the subject of the complaint, it may be necessary to arrange independent investigation or an impartial panel. The Chair should not assume that the board can appropriately investigate its own conduct.

Seeking independent assistance is not an admission of failure. It can protect the integrity of the process and give confidence that concerns are being considered objectively.

7. Keep governance in perspective

A high volume of complaints can consume a disproportionate amount of time and attention. Nevertheless, the governing body must continue to discharge its wider responsibilities for educational standards, safeguarding, financial oversight, leadership and strategic direction. The Chair should ensure that complaints are managed through an appropriate process rather than allowing them to dominate every meeting or draw the board into operational matters. Where complaints reveal a genuine weakness in governance, the board should address it. Where concerns have been properly investigated and the procedure completed, governors should be able to move forward while maintaining appropriate records and oversight.

The Chair should also reflect on whether repeated complaints indicate a wider problem with communication, decision-making or the way concerns are initially handled. Sometimes improving the school's early response can prevent a concern from escalating unnecessarily.

Final thoughts

The Chair's role is not to stop complaints or to defend every decision made by the school. It is to ensure that concerns are handled fairly, proportionately and in accordance with the relevant procedures.

When complaints escalate across the DfE, Ofsted, webchat and other channels, the Chair should bring structure and consistency to the response, protect staff and governors from unnecessary duplication, and ensure that legitimate concerns are not overlooked.

A well-managed complaints process should be fair to the complainant, fair to the school and sustainable for the people responsible for running it.

Further reading

- [DfE: Best-practice guidance for maintained school complaints procedures](#)
- [DfE: Complaining about an academy](#)
- [Ofsted: Complain about a state school](#)

This article provides general governance guidance for schools in England. Chairs should consult their own complaints procedure and seek appropriate professional advice where necessary.



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