

St. Gerard's
School & Support Services



Complaints Policy

Introduction

St Gerard's Special School is committed to working in close partnership with pupils, parents/carers and external agencies to support children and young people with a wide range of complex special educational needs.

The Board of Governors recognises that concerns may arise due to the complexity of pupils' needs, communication difficulties, medical or behavioural challenges, or the involvement of multiple professionals and agencies. This procedure sets out a **clear, fair and accessible framework** for raising and resolving concerns and complaints.

This procedure is based on:

- the **CCMS Model Complaints Procedure**, and
- relevant **Education Authority (EA) guidance for grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland**.

Our Commitment

St Gerard's Special School will:

- Treat all complainants with dignity, respect and sensitivity
- Make reasonable adjustments to support parents/carers and pupils with communication difficulties or additional needs
- Seek to resolve concerns **promptly, proportionately and informally** wherever possible
- Maintain a clear focus on the **best interests, safety and wellbeing of pupils**
- Use complaints constructively to review, reflect upon and improve practice and provision

Complaints in a Special School Context

The Board of Governors recognises that in a special school context:

- Pupils may be unable to communicate concerns independently
- Parents/carers may be under significant emotional, practical or medical pressure
- Issues may arise from behaviour support plans, therapeutic provision, medical needs, transport arrangements or inter-agency working

Parents/carers are therefore **strongly encouraged to raise concerns at the earliest opportunity**, enabling matters to be addressed collaboratively and sensitively before escalation is required.

What Is a Complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about actions taken or a lack of action by the school.

Many concerns can be resolved through clarification, discussion and agreement at an early stage and **do not require progression to a formal complaint**.

Matters Excluded from This Procedure

This procedure does not apply to:

- Staff grievances or employment-related matters
- Child protection or safeguarding concerns (which follow statutory safeguarding procedures)
- Admissions, statutory SEN processes, exclusions or transport decisions (separate statutory appeals procedures apply)
- Whistleblowing concerns (see the Whistleblowing Policy)

Where an issue falls outside this procedure, the school will signpost the complainant to the appropriate statutory process.

Who May Make a Complaint?

Complaints may be made by:

- Parents or carers
- Pupils, with appropriate support where possible
- Advocates acting on behalf of a pupil or parent/carer
- Members of the wider community

The Complaints Procedure

Stage 1 – Informal Resolution

- Concerns should normally be raised with the class teacher, Head of Department or other relevant staff member
- Where appropriate, concerns may be escalated to the Principal
- Additional meetings, review of support plans or involvement of relevant professionals may support resolution
- The school aims to resolve **the majority of concerns at this stage**

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint to the Board of Governors

If the complainant remains dissatisfied:

- The complaint must be submitted **in writing** to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors
- The Board of Governors, or a delegated Complaints Committee, will consider and investigate the complaint in line with CCMS guidance
- The investigation will be **fair, impartial and proportionate**
- Reasonable adjustments will be made to support the complainant throughout the process
- The complainant will receive a **written response** outlining the Governors' findings, conclusions and any actions taken

The **Board of Governors' decision represents the school's final internal response.**

Appeals and Escalation Beyond the Board of Governors

There is **no internal appeal beyond the Board of Governors** once Stage 2 has concluded.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied after receiving the final written response from the Board of Governors, they may escalate the matter to:

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO)

- The Ombudsman considers whether the school has followed a **proper process**, acted **reasonably** and handled the complaint **fairly**
- Complaints must normally be made to NIPSO **within six months** of the school's final response

The Ombudsman does **not reinvestigate the substance of decisions** but reviews the **complaints handling process** in line with public sector standards.

Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints will be considered at the discretion of the Board of Governors, taking account of:

- The seriousness of the issue raised
- Safeguarding or pupil welfare implications
- The credibility and specificity of the information provided

Unacceptable or Vexatious Behaviour

The school recognises the significant pressures faced by families; however, behaviour that is aggressive, abusive or unreasonable will not be tolerated.

Where necessary, the Board of Governors may take action to manage such behaviour in line with **CCMS guidance on unreasonable complainant behaviour**, while continuing to meet the school's statutory duties.

Monitoring and Review

The Board of Governors will:

- Monitor complaints themes and trends to inform school improvement
- Review this procedure regularly to ensure continued alignment with **EA guidance**, CCMS requirements and the needs of a special school community.