



St Mary's High School, Newry

Complaints Procedure

THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

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THE COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

1. SCOPE OF COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

The Board of Governors together with the Principal are committed to working in partnership with parents/carers to promote the best interests of their daughters education and development. The purpose of the Complaints Procedure is to address complaints raised by parents/carers.

- 1.1** The Complaints Procedure outlined in this document covers all matters relating to the actions of staff employed in the school and the application of school procedures, where they affect individual pupils. However, school staff, and the Board of Governors recognise the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest possible stage will reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints.
- 1.2** **Where it becomes evident at an early stage that a matter should be dealt with according to other established procedures or appeals mechanisms, this Complaints Procedure will be set aside in favour of the agreed procedure such as Child Protection, Special Education, Admissions, Suspensions and Expulsions, Grievance, Discipline, Bullying and Harassment or the Unsatisfactory Teaching Procedure.**
- 1.3** The school will not investigate anonymous complaints, unless deemed by the school to be of a serious nature. Anonymous complaints may be investigated where they relate to alleged Child Protection matters or alleged financial impropriety. This will be at the discretion of the school.
- 1.4** This Complaints Procedure was revised in March 2023 and ratified by the Board of Governors.

2. AIMS

- 2.1** In operating this Complaints Procedure the school aims to:
- encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible;
 - allow swift handling of a complaint within established time-limits for action;
 - keep relevant people informed of progress;
 - ensure a full and fair investigation;
 - have due regard for the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved;
 - respect confidentiality;
 - fully address all aspects of a complaint and provide an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary; and
 - in the interest of continuous improvement, provide relevant information to the school's Senior Leadership Team and Board of Governors.
- 2.2** This Procedure is designed to be:
- easily accessible and publicised;
 - simple to understand and use;
 - impartial; and
 - non-adversarial.

A copy of this Procedure is available on the school's app and website and is also available from the school on request.

3. WHAT TO EXPECT UNDER THIS PROCEDURE

3.1 The complainant's rights as a person making a complaint:

In dealing with a complaint the school will ensure that the complainant receives:

- fair treatment;
- courtesy;
- a timely response;
- accurate advice;
- respect for privacy – complaints will be treated as confidentially as possible allowing for the possibility that we may have to consult with other appropriate parties about complaints;
- reasons for decisions.

Where the complaint is upheld, the school will acknowledge this and address the complaint made. If, after investigation, it is judged there are no grounds to the complaint, the complainant will be advised accordingly.

3.2 The complainant's responsibilities as a person making a complaint:

In making a complaint the school will expect that the complainant:

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

3.3 Rights of parties involved during the investigation:

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

Complainant

Where a meeting is arranged the complainant may be accompanied by another person where it is accepted, by the Board of Governors and the Principal, that this will assist the investigation and resolution of the complaint.

Staff

Staff may seek the advice and support from their professional body or Trade Union and may also be accompanied by another person to meetings where it is accepted, by the Board of Governors and the Principal, that this will assist the investigation and resolution of the complaint.

A 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. In many occasions this may be best achieved by providing the member of staff with a copy of the letter. However, the views of the complainant will be sought before doing so.

Legal Representation

Legal representation or representation by a person, or persons acting in a professional capacity is **not** permitted within this Procedure.

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

3.4 Where the complainant is a Governor

Where the complainant is a member of the Board of Governors, s/he will play no part in the management, or appeal, of the complaint as set out in this Procedure.

4. MAKING A COMPLAINT

4.1 Complaint about a Teacher (other than the Principal)

4.1.1 Informal Stage

Step 1 - Speaking with the Teacher

In the first instance, a complaint should normally be raised verbally with the teacher concerned, so that s/he may have an opportunity to address the issue(s). **The complainant should observe the school's existing protocols for arranging and conducting such meetings and follow the school's policy with respect to access to members of staff.**

This approach will not prevent the complainant from choosing to enter the formal process at a later stage if they believe that to be an appropriate course of action.

Step 2 - Speaking with the Principal

If the complaint remains unresolved following Step 1, the complainant should arrange a meeting with the Principal to discuss the issue(s). In some circumstances the Principal may not be able to deal effectively with the complaint immediately, and she may require some time to investigate and respond. If further time is required, the complainant will be informed of the timescale and the likely date by which the Principal will respond.

4.1.2 Formal Stage

Step 3 - Writing to the Principal

Sometimes it will not be possible for the complaint to be resolved through the informal processes proposed at Steps 1 and 2, or indeed it might be more appropriate to initiate the procedures at Step 3. The complainant should write to the Principal and state the grounds for the complaint, as concisely as possible, addressing specifically the issue(s) that are of concern.

The complainant will receive a written acknowledgement of the letter within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received, and either:

- provide a response to the issue(s) raised; or
- state that the complaint is being investigated and indicate when to expect a response to be issued (normally a maximum of 20 working days from the date on which your letter was received). The investigation may require the complainant to meet the Principal and due notification will be given of such meetings. The Principal may also talk to the parties relevant to the complaint.

Step 4 - Writing to Chairperson of the Board of Governors

If believed that the complaint has not been dealt with in a satisfactory manner following the completion of Steps 1, 2 and 3, the complainant should write to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors, including, if applicable, copies of the original correspondence relating to Step 3. The Chairperson will be responsible for referring the complaint to a Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, which will investigate and respond to the complaint. The Complaints Sub-Committee will have a minimum of three voting members.

The written complaint should be as concise as possible and address specifically the issue(s) that are of concern. A written acknowledgement of the letter will be sent within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received, and either:

- provide a response to the issue(s) raised; or
- state that the complaint is being fully investigated and indicate when a response will be issued (normally a maximum of 25 working days from the date on which your written complaint was received).

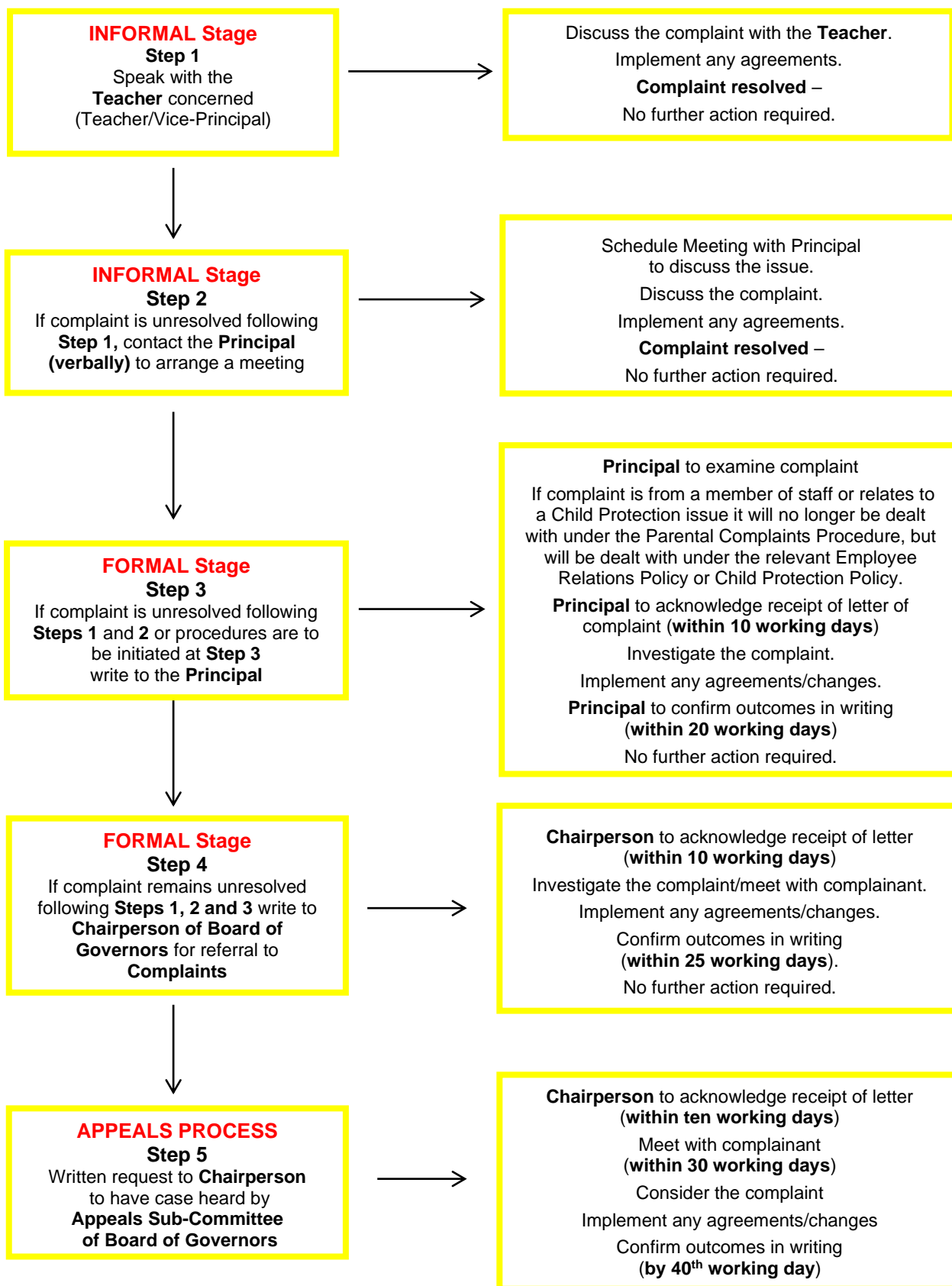
The investigation may require the complainant to meet the Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors and due notification will be given of such meetings. The Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors may also talk to the parties relevant to the complaint.

Step 5 - Appeals Process

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, he/she may appeal the decision to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors. This procedure is outlined in **Annex 1 (Page 11)**.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Appeals Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, they can refer the issue 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. Contact details for NIPSO are referenced in **Annex 2 (page 11)**.

Making a complaint about a Teacher (other than the Principal) (with timescales for responses)



4.2 Complaint about a member of the School's Support Staff

4.2.1 Informal stage

Step 1 - Raising verbally with the Principal

A complaint concerning a member of the school's support staff should be raised verbally with the Principal. A meeting should be arranged with the Principal to discuss the issue(s). In some circumstances, the Principal may not be able to deal effectively with the complaint immediately and may require some time to investigate and respond. If further time is required, the complainant will be informed of the timescale and the likely date by which the Principal will respond.

4.2.2 Formal Stage

Step 2 - Writing to the Principal

Sometimes it will not be possible for the complaint to be resolved through the informal processes proposed at Step 1 or it might be more appropriate to initiate the procedures formally. The complainant should write to the Principal and state the grounds for the complaint as concisely as possible addressing specifically the issue(s) that are of concern.

The complainant will receive a written acknowledgement of the letter within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received, and either:

- provide a response to the issue(s) raised; or
- state that the complaint is being investigated and indicate when to expect a response to be issued (normally a maximum of 20 working days from the date on which the letter was received). The investigation may require a meeting with the Principal and due notification will be given of such meetings. The Principal may also talk to the parties relevant to the complaint.

Step 3 - Writing to Chairperson of the Board of Governors

If the complainant believes that the complaint has not been dealt with in a satisfactory manner following the completion of Steps 1 and 2 they should write to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors, including, if applicable, copies of the original correspondence relating to Step 2. The Chairperson will be responsible for referring the complaint to a Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, which will investigate and respond to the complaint. The Complaints Sub-Committee will have a minimum of three voting members.

The written complaint should be as concise as possible and address specifically the issue(s) that are of concern. The complainant will receive a written acknowledgement of their letter within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received, and either:

- provide a response to the issue(s) raised; or
- state that the complaint is being fully investigated and indicate when to expect a response to be issued (normally a maximum of 25 working days from the date on which the written complaint was received).

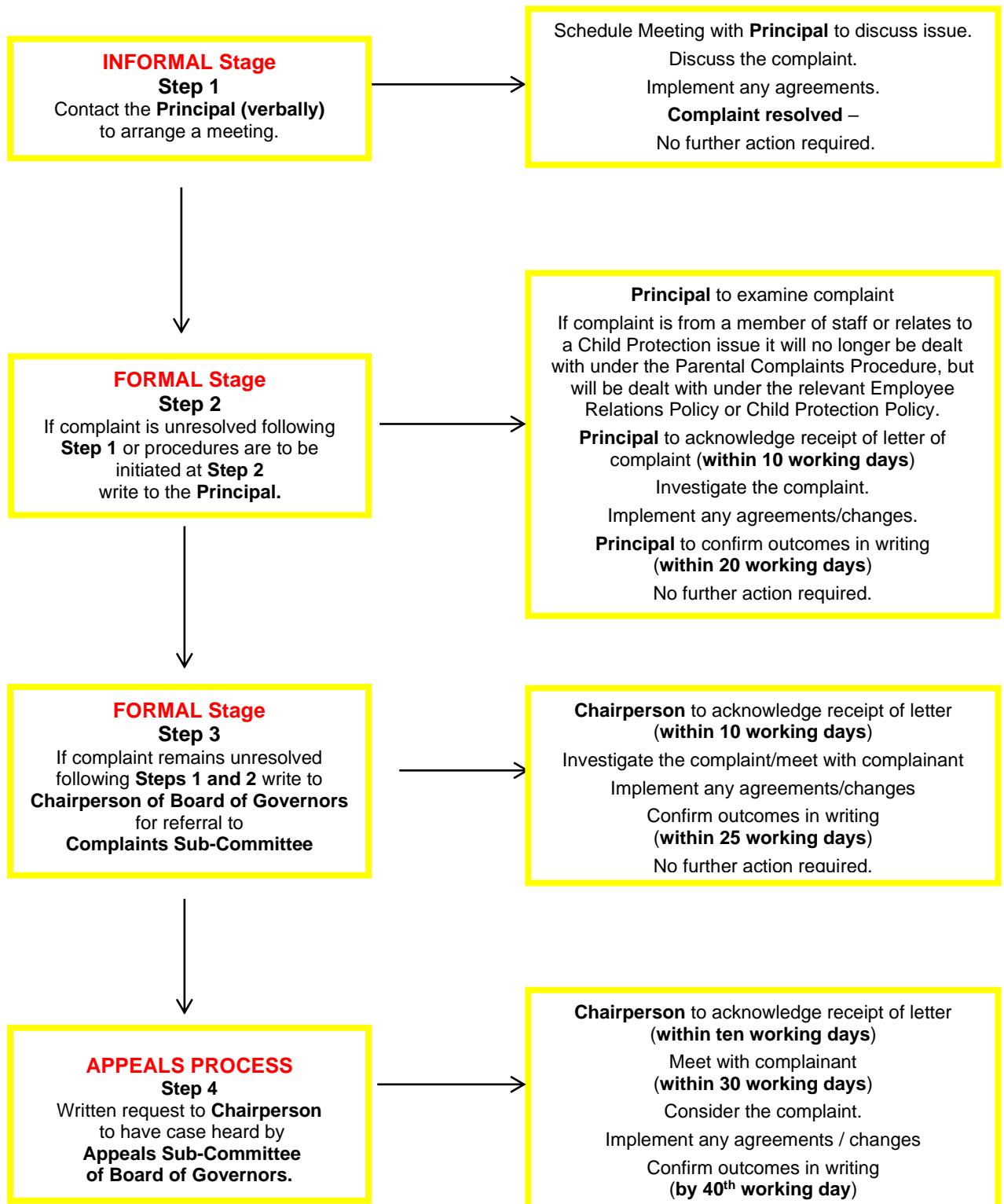
The investigation may require the complainant meeting the Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors and due notification will be given of such meetings. The Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors may also talk to the parties relevant to the complaint.

Step 4 - Appeals Process

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, they may appeal the decision to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors. This procedure is outlined in **Annex 1 (Page 11)**.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Appeals Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, 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. Contact details for NIPSO are referenced in **Annex 2 (page 11)**.

Making a complaint about a member of the school’s support staff *(with timescales for responses)*



4.3 Complaint about the Principal

Where a complaint relates to the Principal the matter will be dealt with formally by the Board of Governors.

4.3.1 Formal Stage

Step 1 - Writing to Chairperson of the Board of Governors

Where a complaint relates to the Principal the complainant should write to the Chair of the Board of Governors, stating the grounds for the complaint as concisely as possible. The Chairperson will be responsible for referring the complaint to a Complaints Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, which will investigate and respond. The Complaints Sub-Committee will have a minimum of three voting members. The complainant will receive written acknowledgement of their letter within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received, and either:

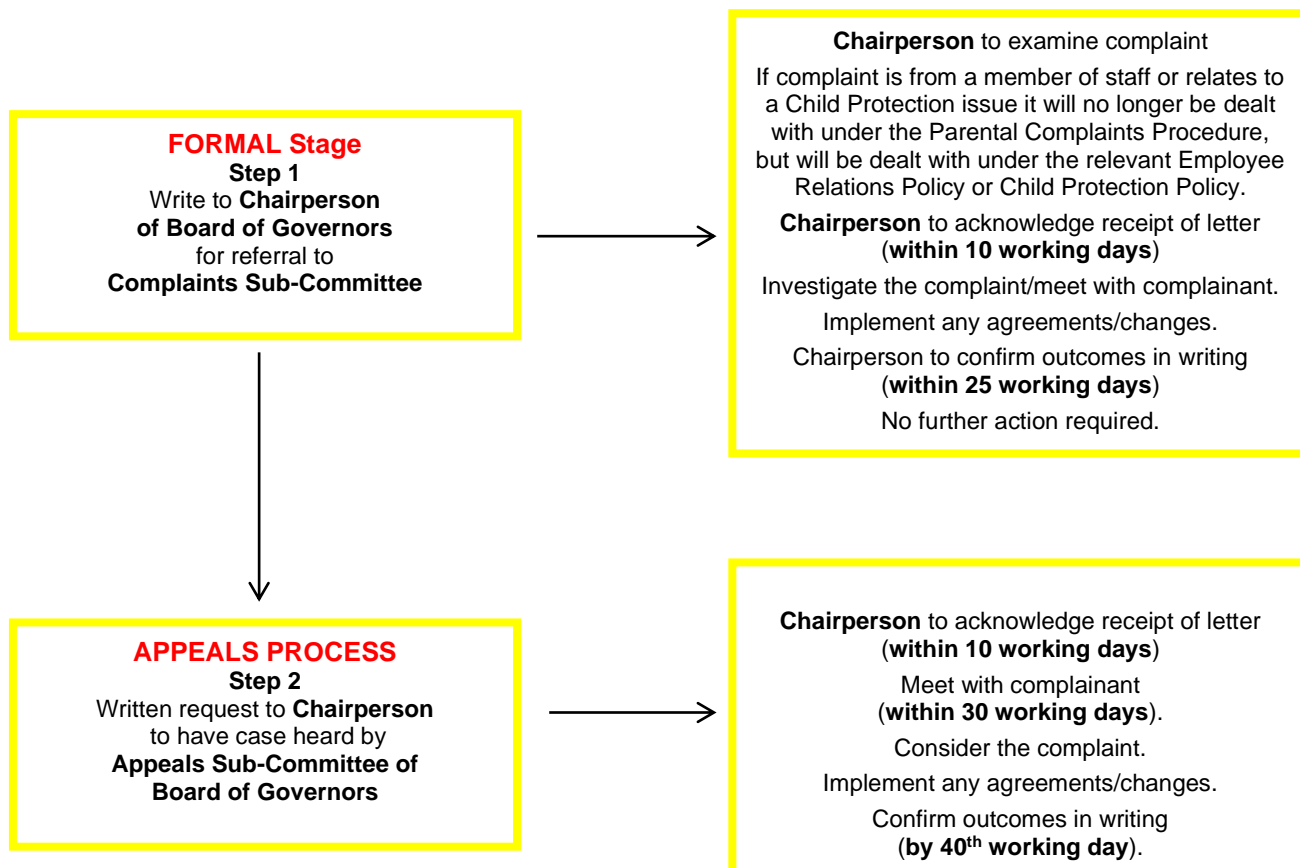
- provide a response to the issue(s) raised; or
- state that the complaint is being fully investigated and indicate when to expect a response to be issued (normally a maximum of 25 working days from the date on which your written complaint was received).

Step 2 - Appeals Process

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, they may appeal the decision to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors. This procedure is outlined in **Annex 1 (page 11)**.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Appeals Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, 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. Contact details for NIPSO are referenced in **Annex 2 on page 11**.

Making a complaint about the Principal *(with timescales for responses)*



5. **RECORD KEEPING**

The Principal and Chairperson of the Board of Governors will maintain a record of all correspondence, conversations and meetings, concerning complaints. These records will be held confidentially in the school and will be kept separate to pupil records. All such records will be destroyed **three years after the date of the last correspondence on the issue.**

6. **FRIVOLOUS OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINTS**

Where the Board of Governors considers the actions of a parent/carer or group of parents/carers to constitute a frivolous or vexatious complaint, it will seek advice from the relevant employing authority in order to protect staff from further such actions.

7. **THE ROLE OF THE OMBUDSMAN**

The Office of Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) was established in April 2016. It replaces and expands the functions of the former offices of Assembly Ombudsman and Commissioner for Complaints, bringing them together into a single statutory office. The Ombudsman provides a free, independent and impartial service for handling complaints about schools in Northern Ireland.

A NIPSO Information Leaflet can be found through the following link:

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/N9-A4-NIPSO-Information-Leaflet-web.pdf>

Signed by Chair of Governors: _____

Date: _____

Signed by Principal: _____

Date: _____

Date of Review: _____ May 2026 _____

ANNEX I

APPEALS PROCESS – APPEALS SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, they may write to the Chairperson of the Board of Governors within ten working days of receiving written feedback from the Complaints Sub-Committee, appealing their decision. The written request should be as concise as possible and set out specifically the grounds for appeal.

The Chairperson will be responsible for establishing an Appeals Sub-Committee comprising of at least three members of the Board of Governors who were not involved in the original investigation. The complainant will be invited to a meeting of the Appeals Sub-Committee where the appeal will be heard.

The complainant will receive a written acknowledgement of their letter within ten working days. This will confirm that the letter has been received and provide the date and time of the meeting with the Appeals Sub-Committee at which the complainant will have an opportunity to explain the grounds for appeal. This meeting will normally take place within 30 working days of the appeal request having been received.

Within ten working days of this meeting, a final written response will be dispatched. This will indicate the Governors' findings, their recommendations and the reasons supporting their decisions.

The decision of the Appeals Sub-Committee is final. At the end of the process the Chairperson will inform the complainant in writing, that the Complaints Procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is considered closed.

ANNEX 2

HOW TO CONTACT THE OMBUDSMAN

Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman
Progressive House
Wellington Place
Belfast
BT1 6HN

Freepost: FREEPOST NIPSO

Telephone: 02890 233821

Freephone: 080034 34 24

Email: nipso@nipso.org.uk

Web: www.nipso.org.uk