

Outdoor Learning Centre

Complaints Policy

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Introduction

The Outdoor Learning Centre welcomes feedback on all aspects of its provision. Such feedback is invaluable in helping us to evaluate and improve our work.

It is therefore essential that we have a clear and easily accessible procedure for complaints (informal and formal) to be raised and responded to.

Aims

Our Centre aims to respond to complaints from parents of students at the Centre, and others.

When responding to complaints, we aim to:

- Be impartial and non-adversarial.
- Facilitate a full and fair investigation by an independent person or panel, where necessary.
- Address all the points at issue and provide an effective and prompt response.
- Respect Complainants' desire for confidentiality.
- Treat Complainants with respect and courtesy.
- Ensure that any decisions we make are lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate; in line with the principles of administrative law.
- Keep Complainants informed of the progress of the Complaints Process.
- Consider how the complaint can feed into Centre improvement evaluation processes.

We try to resolve concerns or complaints by informal means wherever possible. Where this is not possible, formal procedures will be followed.

The Centre will aim to give the Complainant the opportunity to complete the Complaints Procedure in full.

To support this, we will ensure we publicise the existence of this Policy and make it available on the Centre website.

Throughout the process, we will be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved and make any reasonable adjustments needed to accommodate individuals.

Legislation and Guidance

Although the Centre is not a registered school this policy uses guidance set out in Part 7 of the Schedule to the [Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), which states that we must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents of students at the Centre.

It is also based on guidance published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on [creating a complaints procedure that complies with the above regulations](#) and refers to [good practice guidance on setting up complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE).

This document meets the requirements of Section 35 of the Schedule to [the Education \(Non-Maintained Special School\) \(England\) Regulations 2011](#), which states that non-maintained special Schools must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints relating to their School.

It also refers to [good practice guidance on setting up Complaints Procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE).

Definitions and Scope

3.1 Definitions

The DfE guidance explains the difference between a concern and a complaint:

- A **concern** is defined as “an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought”. The Centre will resolve concerns through day-to-day communication as far as possible.
- A **complaint** is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action”.

3.2 Scope

The Centre intends to resolve complaints informally where possible, at the earliest possible stage.

There may be occasions when Complainants would like to raise their concerns formally. This Policy outlines the procedure relating to handling such complaints.

This policy does **not** cover complaints procedures relating to:

- Admissions.
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs (SEN).
- Safeguarding matters.

- Exclusion.
- Whistle-blowing.
- Staff grievances.
- Staff disciplines.

Please see our separate policies for procedures relating to these types of complaint. Complaints about services provided by other providers who use Centre premises or facilities should be directed to the provider concerned.

Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 The Complainant

The Complainant will receive a more effective and timely response to their complaint if they:

- Follow these procedures.
- Co-operate with the Centre throughout the process, and respond to deadlines and communication promptly.
- Treat all those involved with respect.
- Not publish details about the complaint on social media.

4.2 The Investigator

An individual will be appointed to look into the complaint and establish the facts. They will:

- Interview all relevant parties, keeping notes.
- Consider records and any written evidence, and keep these securely.
- Prepare a comprehensive report to the Head of Centre or Director of Education, which includes the facts and potential solutions.

4.3 The Head of Centre

The Head of Centre will:

- Be the contact point for the Complainant, including circulating the relevant papers and evidence before Complaints Committee meetings.
- Arrange the Complaints Hearing.
- Record and circulate the Minutes and Outcome of the Hearing.

4.4 Director of Education

The Director will:

- Chair the meeting, ensuring that everyone is treated with respect throughout.
- Make sure all parties see the relevant information, understand the purpose of the Committee and are allowed to present their case.

Principles for Investigation

When investigating a complaint, we will try to clarify:

- What has happened.
- Who was involved.
- What the Complainant feels would put things right.

5.1 Timescales

The Complainant must raise the complaint within 3 months of the incident. If the complaint is about a series of related incidents, they must raise the complaint within 3 months of the last incident.

We will consider exceptions to this timeframe in circumstances where there were valid reasons for not making a complaint at that time and the complaint can still be investigated in a fair manner for all involved.

When complaints are made out of term time, we will consider them to have been received on the next Centre day.

If at any point we cannot meet the timescales we have set out in this policy, we will:

- Set new time limits with the Complainant.
- Send the Complainant details of the new deadline and explain the delay.

Stages of Complaint (not complaints against the Head of Centre or Director of Education)

6.1 Stage 1: Informal

The Centre will take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter quickly. It may be the case that the provision or clarification of information will resolve the issue.

The Complainant should raise the complaint as soon as possible with the relevant member of staff or the Head of Centre; either in person or by letter, telephone or email. If the Complainant is unclear who to contact or how to contact them, they should contact the Centre office: Telephone: 023 82358562; Email: jwhite@newforestschoo.co.uk

The Centre will acknowledge informal complaints within 3 working days, investigate and provide a response within 5 working days.

The informal stage will involve a communication between the Complainant and a member and the Head of Centre.

If the complaint is not resolved informally, it will be escalated to a formal complaint.

6.2 Stage 2: Formal

The formal stage involves the Complainant putting the complaint to the Head of Centre subject of the complaint:

- In a letter or email.
- Over the phone.
- In person.
- Through a third party acting on their behalf.

The Complainant should provide details such as relevant dates, times and the names of witnesses to events, alongside copies of any relevant documents. The Complainant should also state what they feel would resolve the complaint.

If Complainants need assistance raising a formal complaint, they can contact the Centre office Telephone: 023 82358562.

The Head of Centre will then conduct their own investigation. The written conclusion of this investigation will be sent to the Complainant within 10 working days.

If the Complainant is not satisfied with the response and wishes to proceed to the next stage of this procedure, they should inform the Director of Education in writing within 10 Centre days.

Email: mfry@newforestcare.co.uk

Any formal complaints will be notifiable to New Forest Care's insurers; notification **must** be completed within 3 days of the complaint being raised.

6.3 Stage 3: Review Panel

Complaints will be escalated to the Panel Hearing stage if the Complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal stage.

The Panel will be appointed by or on behalf of the Proprietor/Director of Education and must consist of at least 3 people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint; must also include at least the Director of Education/Proprietor.

The Panel will have access to the existing record of the complaint's progress (see Section 10). The Complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the Review Panel; however, the Review Panel reserves the right to convene at their convenience rather than that of the Complainant. At the Review Panel meeting, the Complainant and representatives from the Centre, as appropriate, will be present. Each will have an opportunity to set out written or oral submissions prior to the meeting.

The Complainant must be allowed to attend the Panel hearing and be accompanied if they wish.

At the meeting, each individual will have the opportunity to give statements and present their evidence. Witnesses will be called, as appropriate, to present their evidence.

The panel, the Complainant and the Centre representative(s) will be given the chance to ask and reply to questions. Once the Complainant and Centre representative(s) have presented their cases, they will be asked to leave and evidence will then be considered.

The Panel will then put together its findings and recommendations from the case. The Panel will also provide copies of the minutes of the hearing, and the findings and recommendations to the Complainant and, where relevant, the individual who is the subject of the complaint, and make a copy available for inspection by the Proprietor/Director of Education and Head of Centre.

The Outcome

The panel can:

- Uphold the complaint, in whole or in part.
- Dismiss the complaint, in whole or in part.

If the complaint is upheld, the Committee will:

- Decide the appropriate action to resolve the complaint (recommended actions against staff will be passed to New Forest Care’s HR Department to continue to review recommendations and agree the appropriate pathway for the employee in accordance with Company Policy and Employment Law).
- Where appropriate, recommend changes to the Centre’s systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

The Centre will inform those involved of the decision in writing within 10 Centre days.

Complaints against the Head of Centre

7.1 Stage 1: Informal

Complaints made against the Headteacher or any member the Directors of New Forest Care should be directed to the Proprietor/Director of Education in the first instance.

Contact: New Forest Care Head Office: 023 80817040

Email Proprietor: markfry@newforestcare.co.uk

Email Director of Education: markfry@newforestcare.co.uk

7.2 Stage 2: Formal

If the complaint is jointly about the Director of Education, then New Forest Care’s Chair, Richard Collier-Keywood will carry out the steps in stage 2 (set out in Section 6 above).

Persistent Complaints

8.1 Unreasonably Persistent Complaints

Most complaints raised will be valid and; therefore, we will treat them seriously. However, a complaint may become unreasonable if the person:

- Has made the same complaint before and it has already been resolved by following the Centre’s Complaints Procedure.
- Makes a complaint that is obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, defamatory or repetitive.
- Knowingly provides false information.
- Insists on pursuing a complaint that is unfounded or out of scope of the Complaints Procedure.
- Pursues a valid complaint, but in an unreasonable manner e.g. refuses to articulate the complaint, refuses to co-operate with this Complaints Procedure or insists that the complaint is dealt with in ways that are incompatible with this procedure and the time frames it sets out.

- Changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation goes on.
- Makes a complaint designed to cause disruption, annoyance or excessive demands on Centre time.
- Seeks unrealistic outcomes or a solution that lacks any serious purpose or value.

Steps We Will Take

We will take every reasonable step to address the Complainant's concerns, and give them a clear statement of our position and their options. We will maintain our role as an Objective Arbiter throughout the process, including when we meet with individuals. We will follow our Complaints Procedure as normal (as outlined above) wherever possible.

If the Complainant continues to contact the Centre in a disruptive way, we may put communications strategies in place. We may:

- Give the Complainant a single point of contact via an email address.
- Limit the number of times the Complainant can make contact, such as a fixed number per term.
- Ask the Complainant to engage a third party to act on their behalf, such as [Citizens Advice](#).
- Put any other strategy in place as necessary.

Stopping Responding

We may stop responding to the Complainant when all of these factors are met:

- We believe we have taken all reasonable steps to help address their concerns.
- We have provided a clear statement of our position and their options.
- The Complainant contacts us repeatedly and we believe their intention is to cause disruption or inconvenience.

Where we stop responding, we will inform the individual that we intend to do so. We will also explain that we will still consider any new complaints they make.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the Police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from our Centre site.

8.2 Duplicate Complaints

If we have resolved a complaint under this procedure and receive a duplicate complaint on the same subject from a partner, family member or other individual, we will assess whether there are aspects that we hadn't previously considered, or any new information we need to take into account.

If we are satisfied that there are no new aspects, we will:

- Tell the new Complainant that we have already investigated and responded to this issue, and the local process is complete.
- Direct them to the DfE if they are dissatisfied with our original handling of the complaint.
- If there are new aspects, we will follow this procedure again.

8.3 Complaint Campaigns

Where the Centre receives a large volume of complaints about the same topic or subject, especially if these come from Complainants unconnected with the Centre, the Centre may respond to these complaints by:

- Publishing a single response on the Centre website.
- Sending a template response to all of the Complainants.

If Complainants are not satisfied with the Centre's response, or wish to pursue the complaint further, the normal procedures will apply.

Record Keeping

The Centre will record the progress of all complaints, including information about actions taken at all stages, the stage at which the complaint was resolved and the final outcome. The records will also include copies of letters, emails and notes relating to meetings and phone calls.

This material will be treated as confidential and held centrally, and will be viewed only by those involved in investigating the complaint or on the Review Panel.

This is except where the Secretary of State (or someone acting on their behalf) or the Complainant requests access to records of a complaint through a subject access request under the terms of the Data Protection Act, or where the material must be made available during a Centre inspection.

Records of complaints will be kept securely; only for as long as necessary and in line with data protection law and our privacy notices.

The details of the complaint, including the names of individuals involved, will not be shared with the whole Directorship of New Forest Care in case a Review Panel needs to be organised at a later point. Where the Directorship is aware of the substance of the complaint before the Review Panel stage, the Centre will (where reasonably practicable) arrange for an Independent Panel to hear the complaint.

Complainants also have the right to request an Independent Panel if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. The decision to approve this request is made by the Directorship at New Forest Care, who will not unreasonably withhold consent.

Whilst transparency and honesty are essential to this process, requirements under the General Data Protection Regulation will be followed and; therefore, action and information relating to the specific individuals, such as students or staff will not be shared with the Complainant where consent has not been provided by the individual(s) concerned.

Monitoring Arrangements

The Director of Education in partnership with Head of Centre will monitor the effectiveness of the Complaints Procedure in ensuring that complaints are handled properly. The Headteacher will track the number and nature of complaints. The Director of Education review all complaints to identify any underlying issues.

The complaints records are logged and managed by Head of Centre.

This policy will be reviewed by the Head of Centre and Director of education every at least once every 2 years.

Links with other Policies

Policies dealing with other forms of complaints include:

- Child protection and Safeguarding Policy and Procedures.
- Admissions Policy
- Staff Grievance Procedures.
- Staff Disciplinary Procedures.