

## HFL Education Complaints Toolkit – Additional Guidance for setting leaders & boards Spring 2026

Dear colleagues,

Please take time to read the following to help ensure all school staff and governors/trustees feel confident in understanding their responsibilities when responding to a concern or school-based complaint. And on the support available through the HFL.

### Is it a concern or a complaint?

- **Concerns** should be addressed promptly at an operational level by school staff, not governors or trustees. Early resolution of concerns helps to prevent escalation into formal complaints.
- If the matter is a **complaint**, please refer to your current school or trust Complaints Policy and the associated process and resources. Eg the HFL toolkit.

### Understand the stages

- Be clear about **who is responsible** for responding or taking action at each stage.
- Understand **when a complaint becomes formal** and when a **panel hearing** is required.
- Please remember do **not** share details of a complaint with the full governing body, as this may compromise impartiality if a Stage 2 panel becomes required.

### Checking whether the complaint qualifies?

- Before progressing, confirm whether the issue qualifies as a formal complaint under your policy. For example, certain matters (such as challenges relating to pupil suspension or exclusion) are dealt with under separate statutory procedures.
- If the matter does not qualify, signpost the individual to the appropriate policy or process.

### Following the process and timelines

The policy sets out clear timelines for each stage. It is important to adhere to these wherever possible. If additional time is needed:

- **Stage 1:** The school must notify the complainant *in writing*, providing the reasons for the delay and a revised timeframe.
- **Stage 2:** The **Chair of Governors** or **Chair of the Panel** must inform both the complainant and the respondent, including the reasons and a revised timeframe.

### Policy compliance

- Please ensure your Complaints Policy is up-to-date, followed precisely and avoid deviating from the published procedure.

### **Preparation before seeking advice**

- Familiarity with your own school's Complaints Policy and procedures is essential before contacting the HFL Governance helpdesk for support or guidance.

### **Staff & Governor training?**

- Provide regular training to all staff, and familiarise Governors, to help them understand how early actions can de-escalate concerns and the importance of informing SLT promptly, and reviewing periodically where any trends or themes are emerging that have been raised as concerns or complaints.  
*(The HFL Education Governance team can provide this training on a traded basis.)*

### **Governor awareness?**

- Governors should understand the need for impartiality and avoid involvement in discussions that may constitute or influence a complaint.
- Always direct individuals to your published Complaints Policy.

### **Attempts to bypass Stage 1?**

- If a complainant contacts the Chair of Governors or another governor directly at the outset, redirect the matter to the Headteacher for Stage 1 consideration. Inform the complainant of this action and provide a copy of the published policy.  
*Note: If the complaint concerns the Headteacher, the Chair of Governors would be the appropriate individual to lead the Stage 1 process.*

### **Supporting parents/carers**

- Reduce the risk of complaints being raised incorrectly by ensuring the Complaints Policy is clearly published on the school website, including a clear "What to do if you have a concern" statement and encouraging use of other supportive communication processes e.g. Home/School agreements.

### **Managing governor contact information**

- To minimise the risk of complainants contacting governors directly, avoid publishing individual governor email addresses on the school / trust website.

### **Right to escalate?**

- Where an issue qualifies as a formal complaint, the complainant must be allowed to escalate through all stages of the procedure if they request this.
- For example, in a scenario where a Headteacher investigates and upholds a complaint at Stage 1, the complainant still has the right to consider and request escalation to Stage 2, in line with DfE expectations.

### **Toolkit access**

- Each subscribing school using the HFL Complaints toolkit is allocated five user licences.
- Please consider how you want to best assign these within your setting, including replacing any leavers, to avoid access issues or potentially delaying a process.