Complaints Procedure

Applies to:	Whole College and Great Walstead including EYFS
Responsibility:	Senior Deputy Head
Date Reviewed:	Michaelmas 2026
Next Review:	Michaelmas 2027

Introduction

Wherever the term 'College' is used in this Policy it applies equally to Ardingly College (Senior and Prep Schools) and Great Walstead School.

Ardingly College (including Great Walstead School) has long prided itself on the quality of the teaching and pastoral care provided to its pupils. However, if parents do have a complaint, they can expect it to be treated by the College with care and in accordance with this Complaints procedure. Ardingly College/Great Walstead makes its Complaints Procedure available to all parents of pupils and prospective pupils on the College/School's website and in the School Office during the school day, and Ardingly College will ensure that parents of pupils and of prospective pupils who request it are made aware that this document is published or available and of the form in which it is published or available. In accordance with paragraph 32(1) of Schedule 1 to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, Ardingly College will also make available, on request, to Ofsted, the Department of Education (DfE) or the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), details of this Complaints Procedure and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding School year.

The College will be mindful of its obligations under the Equality Act 2010 in the application of this policy.

Although this Procedure is made available to parents of prospective pupils, it is not available for use by them; it may only be used by parents of current pupils.

Complaints by parents of former pupils will be dealt with under this Complaints Procedure only if the complaint was initially raised when the pupil to which the complaint relates was still registered as a pupil at the College.

Although the College endeavours to manage complaints in an open and transparent manner, parents should be aware that there may be circumstances which mean the College is unable to share complete details about how a complaint has been handled by the College, the evidence collated, steps taken in response or other related matters. This could be the case even when a complaint is upheld. For example, this may be because such information constitutes sensitive third-party data (for example belonging to a staff member, pupil or other parent), legal or regulatory requirements prohibit disclosure, or withholding information is in accordance with specific instructions from a statutory agency. This list is not exhaustive.

"Parent(s)" means the holder(s) of parental responsibility for a current pupil about whom the complaint relates.

What constitutes a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a real or perceived problem. It may be made about the College as a whole, about a specific department or about an individual member of staff, and any matter about which a parent is unhappy and seeks action by the College is within the scope of this procedure. A complaint is likely to arise if a parent believes that the College has done something wrong, failed to do something that it should have done or acted unfairly.

Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints are to be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the Education and Skills Act 2008 requests access to them. There may also be other circumstances in which the College is required to share information relating to a concern or a complaint in order to comply with its legal or regulatory obligations.

The College prioritises its students and parents are assured that their child will not be penalised for a complaint that parents raise in good faith.

Data Protection complaints

There is a specific legal framework and timeline for dealing with complaints relating to data protection matters.

Where parental complaints are about data protection issues, the College will ensure it complies with the statutory requirements for responding to such complaints.

How to Complain

Education Matters
If the complaint relates to the classroom, the curriculum or special educational needs, please discuss it with your child's class teacher (Nursery – Year 2), Form Teacher (Years 3 – 6), Form Tutor (Years 7 – 8) or Housemaster/Housemistress (Year 9 – 13). They will then help you to put your concerns to the appropriate Head of Department or the relevant Deputy Head (Prep or Senior School).

If the complaint relates to the administration of IB in the College's Sixth Form, or the application of IB policies, please refer it to the IB Coordinator and Deputy Head Academic (Senior School) in the first instance.

Pastoral Care
If the concern relates to a matter outside the classroom or in the House, please speak or write to the Deputy Head (Prep School and Great Walstead), Head of Lower School Pastoral (Ardingly College Year 7 & 8) or Housemaster/ Housemistress (Years 9 - 13) in the first instance. They will then put you in touch with the Deputy Head (Pastoral and Co-curricular) in the Senior School, or relevant Head if you wish.

If the matter is related to safeguarding, the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) may also be involved.

Disciplinary Matters
A concern about disciplinary sanctions should be first raised at a tutor level or later with the Housemaster or Housemistress in Ardingly College Senior School, Phase Leaders in Ardingly Prep School or Section Heads at Great Walstead School, who may put you in touch with the member of staff who imposed the sanction for all parties to understand the issue. If not resolved, then you should address your concern to the Senior Deputy Head in the Senior School, or relevant Head if you wish.

Financial Matters
A concern or complaint about a matter relating to fees or extras should be stated in writing to the Finance Director. If not resolved to your satisfaction, please send a copy of the letter of complaint to the Chief Operating Officer.

Data Protection Matters
A concern or complaint about how personal data has been handled (including that of a pupil) should be addressed to the Data Protection Team. If not resolved to your satisfaction, please send a copy of the letter of complaint to the Chief Operating Officer.

The Three-Stage Complaints Procedure

Stage 1: Informal resolution

1.1 It is hoped that most complaints and concerns will be resolved quickly and informally. If parents have a complaint, they should normally contact the class teacher (Nursery – Year 2), Form Teacher (Ardingly Prep Years 3 – 6). Class Teacher (Great Walstead Years 3 – 4), Form Tutor (Years 7 – 8) or Housemaster/Housemistress (Year 9 – 13). Depending on the nature of the complaint (see above), the matter might be referred to Middle or Senior managers.

1.2 The Teacher/Tutor/HoMM will ordinarily make a record of all concerns and complaints and the date on which

1.3 In many cases, the matter will be resolved straight-away by this means to the parents' satisfaction.

1.4 Should the matter not be resolved within **15 working days**, or in the event that the member of staff and the parent fail to reach a satisfactory resolution, parents will be advised to proceed with their complaint in accordance with Stage 2 of this procedure.

1.5 If the complaint is against the Head of either Ardingly College Prep School or Great Walstead School, parents are advised to make their complaint directly to the Head of College.

1.6 If the complaint is against the Head of College, parents are advised to make their complaint directly to the Chair of Governors via ChairOfGovernors@ardingly.com.

Stage 2: Formal resolution

2.1 If the complaint cannot be resolved on an informal basis as described in Stage 1, or if it has not been resolved within 15 working days, then the parents should put their complaint in writing[1] to the Head of College/Prep School/GWS[2], making it clear they are raising a Formal Complaint. Parents should complete the appended Complaint Form (Appendix 1) to proceed to Stage 2. If parents require assistance with their request, for example, because of a disability, the College will be happy to make appropriate arrangements. We ask that you read, check and understand any AI-generated material before including it in communications with the College, to ensure that it is accurate, not repetitive or unnecessarily long, and genuinely reflects your own views and concerns.

2.2 The Head may require further information from the parents to help clarify the scope and nature of their concerns. The respective Head will decide, after considering the complaint, the appropriate course of action to take. In some circumstances they may consider it appropriate to nominate a staff member or independent person to hear the complaint and manage the Stage 2 complaint process.

2.3 In most cases, the Head (or their nominee) will speak (either in person or online/by phone) with the parents concerned normally within 10 working days of receiving the complaint, to discuss the matter. If possible, a resolution will be reached at this stage.

2.4 It may be necessary for further investigations to be carried out. The Head (or their nominee) will determine who should carry out any investigation and this may be someone external to the College. The Investigator may ask for additional information from the complainant and may wish to speak to them personally and to others who may have knowledge of the circumstances including, if appropriate, the complainant's child.

2.5 Written records will be kept of all formal meetings and interviews held in relation to the complaint.

2.6 Once the Head (or nominee) is satisfied that, so far as is practicable, all the relevant facts have been established, a decision will be made, and the parents will be informed of this decision in writing. The Head (or nominee) will also give reasons for their decision. In most cases, the Head (or their nominee) will make their decision and provide parents with reasons within 28 working days of receipt of the written complaint (or following the provision of any further clarificatory information about the complaint to the Head, if so requested).

2.7 If the complaint is against the Head of either Ardingly College Prep School or Great Walstead School, parents should make their complaint directly to the Head of College. The Stage 2 process described above will then be followed as if the references to the Head (or their nominee) are to the Head of College.

2.8 If the complaint is against the Head of College, parents should make their complaint directly to the Chair of Governors via ChairOfGovernors@ardingly.com. The Chair of Governors will nominate someone to determine the complaint. The Stage 2 process described above will then be followed as if the references to the Head (or nominee) is to the individual nominated by the Chair of Governors to determine the complaint against the Head of College.

[1] When we refer to notifications or requests in writing, both letter and email are acceptable.

[2] In the absence of the Head of College/Prep School/GWS contact should be made via the person acting in their capacity, or the COO.

2.9 Parents are asked to reply to the Stage 2 response from the College within ten school-working days. This is to avoid the process being indefinitely open-ended. If parents are not satisfied with the outcome of Stage 2, they should proceed to Stage 3 of this Procedure.

Stage 3 – Panel Hearing

3.1 If parents are not satisfied with the outcome of Stage 2, they may, within 10 working days of receiving the decision at Stage 2, invoke Stage 3 in writing to the Chair of Governors via ChairOfGovernors@ardingly.com, setting out their grounds of appeal along with any supporting evidence. The Clerk to the Governors will acknowledge receipt of the appeal within 10 working days. If extenuating circumstances prevent the parents from submitting their grounds of appeal (and supporting evidence, if any) within the time period specified, they may request an extension. Such request, and the reasons for it, must be submitted in writing to the Clerk to the Governors in advance of the original deadline. If parents are unable to provide their grounds of appeal (and supporting evidence, if any) within the time period stipulated (including any agreed extension) the College reserves the right to conclude the complaint process and not progress the matter to Stage 3.

3.2 The appeal will be referred to the Complaints Panel. The Panel is appointed by the Chair of Governors and will comprise three persons not directly or previously involved in the matters detailed in the complaint, one of whom shall be independent of the management and running of the College. One Panel member shall act as Chair of the Panel. The Clerk to the Governors will schedule an appeal hearing to take place **within twenty working days**.

3.3 The Panel may decide that further investigation or further information regarding the complaint or any related matter is required. Copies of any further written information obtained shall be supplied to all parties **not later than five working days** prior to the appeal.

3.4 If possible, the Panel will resolve the parents' appeal without the need for further investigation. Where further investigation is required, the Panel will decide how it should be carried out.

3.5 The remit of the Panel is at the discretion of the Chair of Governors but shall usually be to consider the parents' grounds for appeal and any supporting evidence, including such further information or investigation as the Panel considers necessary. The manner in which the appeal hearing is conducted is at the discretion of the Panel. It is not the purpose of the appeal hearing to re-hear the parents' complaint.

3.6 The parents may attend the appeal and be accompanied by one other person if they wish. The Stage 2 decision-taker shall also be entitled to attend and be accompanied by one other person if they wish. Legal representation is not appropriate, and no party should be accompanied by a lawyer. The companion may be a relative, teacher or friend. The identity of the companions should be confirmed to the Clerk to the Governors as soon as possible and by no later than two working days before the hearing. The Panel will decide whether it would be helpful for witnesses to attend.

3.7 A note-taker will attend the hearing to take a note. This will not be a verbatim note but an accurate reflection of what was discussed. Notes of the hearing will be shared with attendees as soon as practicable after the hearing. To the extent there is any disagreement about the content of those notes or further comments from the parties, these will be considered by and, where possible, resolved by the Chair. A copy of any comments on the notes will be appended to the notes. Alternatively, with the express agreement of all parties, the hearing will be recorded and the transcript provided to the parents and Panel members as soon as practicable after the hearing.

3.8 After due consideration of the merits of the appeal and all facts they consider relevant, the Panel will make findings as to whether or not the Stage 2 decision was a reasonable one and decide whether to:

- Dismiss the complaint in whole or in part
- Uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
- Make recommendations for the College to consider.

(The Panel cannot require that any financial compensation is paid to parents or otherwise obligate the College to take particular steps.)

3.9 The Panel will write to the parents informing them of its decision and the reasons for it **within 10 working days** of the hearing (although additional time may be required if it is necessary to carry out further investigations following the hearing). The decision of the Panel is final.

3.10 A copy of the Panel's findings and recommendations (if any) will be provided in writing to the parents, and, where relevant, the person complained about as well as the Chair of Governors and the Head/Stage 2 decision-taker. A copy of the Panel's findings and recommendations (if any) will also be available for inspection on the College premises by the Chair of Governors, via the Clerk to the Governors and the Head.

3.11 It is not within the powers of the Panel to impose sanctions on staff, pupils or parents, although they may recommend these actions to the Head of College/Head of Prep/GWS or Governing Body.

3.12 Any complaint about a decision taken by the Head to exclude or require the removal of a pupil under clause 7 of the College's Terms and Conditions will be governed by this Stage 3 of the College's Complaint Procedure. There may be circumstances in which the College considers it necessary and appropriate to deviate from the Stage 3 procedure in the context of appeal for exclusion and required removal, and the College will inform the parents of this.

Timeframe for Dealing with Complaints

4.1 All complaints will be handled seriously, sensitively and within clear and reasonable timescales.

4.2 It is in everyone's interest to resolve a complaint as speedily as possible. The College will endeavour to adhere to the timescales set out within this complaints procedure.

4.3 Please note that, for the purposes of this procedure, **working days** refer to weekdays (Monday to Friday) during term time, excluding bank holidays and half term. This means that during School holidays it may take longer to resolve a complaint although the College will do what is reasonably practicable to avoid undue delay. Although the Nursery operates all year round, it may only be possible to process complaints during the College term-time owing to Senior Management staff availability. It may also take longer to resolve a complaint during periods of significant disruption to College life or as a consequence of unavoidable staff absence, however deviation from the normal timescale for resolving a complaint during term time will only occur on an exceptional basis, and the College will take all reasonable steps to limit any such delay.

4.4 The College expects parents to engage in the process in a reasonable, constructive and responsive manner to help ensure matters can be dealt with in a timely way and in line with the timescales set out in this Procedure.

Recording Complaints and use of personal data

5.1 Following resolution of a complaint, as required by regulation, the College will keep a written record of all formal complaints, whether they are resolved at the formal stage (Stage 2) or proceed to a Panel hearing (Stage 3) and any action taken by the College as a result of the complaint (regardless of whether the complaint is upheld). It will do so in accordance with its Privacy Notice and data retention policy. All records relating to complaints shall be treated as confidential. In addition to where requested by the Secretary of State or an inspector (see above), there may be other circumstances where disclosure of the substance of a complaint or particular confidential records relating to it is required, for example, where there is a legal, regulatory, safeguarding or data protection obligation (e.g. in response to a subject access request) which prevails over the requirement to maintain the records as confidential.

5.2 The College processes data in accordance with its Privacy Notice which can be found on the College or Great Walstead website. When dealing with complaints the College (including any externally nominated investigator and/or Panel member appointed under the Stage 3 process) may process a range of information, which is likely to include the following:

1. Date when the issue was raised
2. Name of parent
3. Name of pupil
4. Description of the issue
5. Records of all the investigations (if appropriate)
6. Witness statements (if appropriate)
7. Name and contact details of member (s) of staff handling the issue at each stage
8. Copies of all correspondence on the issue (including emails and records of phone conversations)
9. Notes/minutes of the hearing, and
10. The Panel's written decision

This may include 'special category personal data' (as further detailed in the College's Privacy Notice and Data Protection Policy, but potentially including, for instance, information relating to physical or mental health) where this is necessary owing to the nature of the complaint. This data will be processed in accordance with the College's Data Protection Policy.

5.3 The number of formal complaints registered during the preceding academic year is available on request.

Persistent correspondence

Where repeated attempts are made by a parent to raise the same complaint after it has been considered at all three stages, this can be regarded as vexatious and outside the scope of this policy.

We hope that our complaints procedures should limit the number of complaints that become protracted or vexatious; and if the procedures are followed correctly to keep the complainant informed of what is happening, this should not become an issue.

However, occasionally, a complainant may remain dissatisfied despite all the procedures having been followed. It may well be a case of not being able to resolve all their concerns and meet all their wishes. Sometimes it is simply a case of 'agreeing to disagree' and moving on.

If the complainant continues to make representations to the College or attempts to re-open the same issue, the Chair of Governors should inform them, in writing, that the procedures have all been followed and that all reasonable action has been taken to try to resolve the issue and that the matter is now closed. In some cases, it may be necessary to seek legal advice to deal with particularly vexatious or persistent complainants. (See Appendix 2 for further explanation and detail).

Threats involving the media and/or legal action will be treated respectfully, whilst reassuring the complainant that the College will respond to any letters or approaches from the media or solicitors in the normal way and in line with the appropriate procedures.

Occasionally, the behaviour of a complainant can pose a threat to the College community. If this occurs, a warning letter will be sent to the person in which it is made clear that unwelcome and threatening behaviour is not tolerated. If required to do so, the College will engage local authorities and may take further legal advice.

Complaints in the Early Years Foundation Stage

Parents of EYFS pupils should follow the three stages of this Complaints Procedure. If parents remain dissatisfied and their complaint is about the College's fulfilment of the EYFS requirements, then parents may take their complaint to the ISI or Ofsted. The College will notify the parents about the outcome of the investigation into their complaint within 28 days from the date the complaint was received.

Ardingly College/Great Walstead will provide ISI/Ofsted, on request, with a written record of all complaints made during any specified period, and the action which was taken as a result of each complaint. The record of any such complaints will be kept in accordance with its Privacy Notice and Data and Document Protection Policy.

Parents may complain directly to Ofsted or to ISI if they believe the provider is not meeting the EYFS requirements.

Ofsted can be contacted on 0300 123 1231 or by email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

Ofsted, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester, M1 2WD

ISI can be contacted on 0207 600 0100 or by email info@isi.net

ISI, CAP House, 9-12 Long Lane, London, EC1A 9HA

Appendix 1

Ardingly College | Ardingly Prep | Great Walstead - Stage 2 Complaint Form

Please read the College's Complaints Procedure before completing this form. It provides information on when and how this form should be completed.

This form should be used to submit a Stage 2 Complaint only.

This form should be completed by those with parental responsibility for a pupil and returned to the Head of College, Head of Ardingly Prep or Head of Great Walstead. If the complaint is about the Head of Prep or Great Walstead it should be sent to the Head of College. If the complaint is about the Head of College, to the Chair of Governors at ChairOfGovernors@ardingly.com.

Your name(s)	
Name of pupil(s), year(s) and your relationship to them	
Contact address	
Contact telephone day	
Contact telephone mobile	
Contact email address	

Details of the complaint
Please provide details of the nature of your complaint. If you have more than one ground of complaint we suggest numbering them so that each is considered in turn. If you require more space you may wish to attach an additional page setting out your complaint.

Action taken to date (including staff member(s) who has/have dealt with it so far) and solutions offered:
The reason(s) that this was not a satisfactory resolution for you:
What action(s) would you like to be taken to resolve your complaint?
Signature(s): **Date:**

Appendix 2

Unreasonable Complaints

1. The College is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. It will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the College. However, the College does not expect staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

2. Where repeated attempts are made by a parent to raise the same complaint after it has been considered at all three stages, this can be regarded as vexatious and outside the scope of the policy.

3. Unreasonable complaints are taken seriously by the College as they put a strain on valuable resources and hinder the progress of proper investigations.

4. The College adopts the Department for Education's definition of unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the College, such as if the complainant:

    i. refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance;

    ii. refuses to cooperate with the complaints investigation process;

    iii. refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaints procedure;

    iv. insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice;

    v. introduces trivial or irrelevant information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales;

    vi. makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced;

    vi. changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds; repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed);

    vii. refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the College's complaints procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed;

    viii. seeks an unrealistic outcome; makes excessive demands on College time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with;

    ix. uses threats to intimidate;

    x. uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence;

    xi. knowingly provides falsified information; publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

5. A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if it is manifestly unjustified, inappropriate, or an improper use of formal procedure.

6. In assessing this, the College shall have regard to all the circumstances of the case and the nature of the complaint itself rather than the nature of the complainant. In assessing all of the circumstances of the case the College will consider a range of factors including:

    i. whether a complaint has reasonable foundation;

    ii. the history and context of the complaint (and any evidence where relevant);

    iii. whether the time and cost of investigating the complaint is proportionate to the issue(s) complained of;

    iv. whether an investigation of the complaint is likely to cause a disproportionate or unjustified level of disruption, irritation or distress;

    v. unexplained delay in raising a complaint or issue;

    vi. if the purpose of the complaint is to obtain an outcome which is unavailable via the complaints procedure, such as a claim for compensation, damages or a refund of fees paid;

    vii. any evidence of a complaint being brought for an improper purpose.

7. Whenever possible, the Head of College and/or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before dismissing a complaint as unreasonable.

8. If the behaviour continues, the College will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and ask them to change it.

9. For complainants who excessively contact the College causing a significant level of disruption, the College may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

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