

# POLICY FOR DEALING WITH VEXATIOUS, HABITUAL, UNREASONABLE OR PERSISTENT COMPLAINTS

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Dunkirk Primary School



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**Nottingham**  
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# COMPLAINTS / ANTI SOCIAL TOOLKIT 2025

Complaints Policy (A) (DfE Model)	Policy for dealing with vexatious, habitual, unreasonable or persistent complaints (B)	Anti-social behaviour Policy & Antisocial Use of Social Media (C)	
Informal resolution ↓	Inform complainant that they have been classified as persistent, habitual, unreasonable or vexatious. ↓	Expectations of conduct clearly understood. ↓	Formally write if parent has taken images / video / audio without consent. Make clear permitted usage and request deletion. ↓
Stage 1 – formal complaint ↓		Verbally re-iterate expectations ↓	
Stage 2 – formal complaint (Gov Body complaints committee)  ↓	Decide on appropriate communication plan for unreasonable complainant (a – j in policy)  ↓	Written warning issued ↓	If a social media post is made – legal letter sent to perpetrator. Request made to social media to remove defamatory content. ↓
		Site Ban issued (up to 6 weeks) Legal Letter  ↓	
If complainant dissatisfied – escalate to DfE	Report to police if the behaviour of the complainant constitutes harassment	Site Ban extended (LA informed) ↓	If perpetrator does not cease – use site ban / report to police as harassment
		Lifetime Site Ban (reviewed termly)	

**Best Practice:**

- In all cases – schools should build and retain a chronology of incidents relating to behaviour of the above.
- In all policies listed above, **definitions** are included.
- In all policies listed above – reference to this flow chart is included.
- In all policies listed above – advice is outlined as to how to initially respond to the above behaviours to diffuse and manage volatile situations in the first instance.
- In vexatious complaints and ASB policies listed above – LA contacts are outlined.

## Dealing with Persistent, Unreasonable or Vexatious Complaints/Harassment Policy

### Introduction

At our school, staff deal with specific complaints as part of their day-to-day management of the school in accordance with the **Schools Complaints Policy**.

The majority of complaints are handled in an informal manner and are resolved quickly, sensitively and to the satisfaction of the complainant.

We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the school. However, there are occasions when complainants behave in an unreasonable manner when raising and/or pursuing concerns. The consequences are the actions of the complainants begin to impact negatively on the day-to-day running of the school and directly or indirectly on the overall well-being of the children or staff in the school.

The school has a code of conduct which is in place so that it is well understood how pupils, parents and staff behave whilst on school site. The code of conduct the school can expect Parents/Carers/Members of the public who wish to raise problems with the school include:

### The School's Expectations of Parents/Carers/Members of the Public

- a) Treat all school staff with courtesy and respect;
- b) Respect the needs and well-being of pupils and staff in the school;
- c) Avoid and use, or threatened use, of violence to people, or property;
- d) Avoid any aggression or verbal abuse;
- e) Recognise the time constraints under which members of staff in schools work and allow the school a reasonable time to respond;
- f) Recognise that resolving a specific problem can sometimes take some time;
- g) In the case of a complaint – Follow the School's Complaint Procedure

### The school will:

- b) Respond within a reasonable time;
- c) Be available for consultation within reasonable time limits bearing in mind the needs of the pupils within the school and the nature of the complaint;
- d) Respond with courtesy and respect;
- e) Attempt to resolve problems using reasonable means in line with the school's complaints procedure, other policies and practice and to keep the complainants informed of progress towards a resolution of the issues raised.

This policy applies to all complainants, and identifies situations where a complainant, either individually or as part of a group, or a group of complainants, might be 'persistent, habitual or vexatious' and ways of responding to these situations.

In this policy the term **habitual** means '**done constantly or as a habit**'. The term **vexatious** is recognised in law and means '**denoting an action or the bringer of an action that is brought without sufficient grounds for winning, purely to cause annoyance to the defendant**'. These terms are used in this policy to clarify that we are attempting to deal

with persons who seek to be disruptive or whose requests cause disproportionate and repeated efforts on behalf of the school staff and governors by pursuing an unreasonable course of conduct.

The term complainant in this policy includes requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 1998, and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004, and reference to the complaints procedure is, where relevant, to be interpreted as meaning requests under those Acts. Persistent, habitual and/or vexatious complainants can be a problem for school staff and governors. The difficulty in handling such complainants can place a strain on time and resources. While the school endeavours to respond with patience and sympathy to the needs of all complainants there are times when there is nothing further which can reasonably be done to assist or to rectify a real or perceived problem.

### **AIMS OF THIS POLICY**

The aims of this policy are to:

- uphold the standards of courtesy and reasonableness that should characterise all communication between the school and persons who wish to express a concern or pursue a complaint.
- support the well-being of children, staff and everyone else who has legitimate interest in the work of the school, including governors and parents/carers.
- deal fairly, honestly, openly and transparently with those who make persistent or vexatious complaints and those who harass members of staff in school, while ensuring that other stakeholders suffer no detriment.

### **EXPECTATIONS OF PARENTS/CARERS/MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

The school can expect parents/carers/members of the public who wish to raise problems with the school to:

- treat all school staff with courtesy and respect
- respect the needs and well-being of pupils, governors and staff in the school
- avoid any use, or threatened use, of violence to people or property
- avoid any aggression or verbal abuse
- recognise the time constraints under which members of staff in schools work and allow the school a reasonable time to respond
- recognise that resolving a specific problem can often take some time
- (in the case of a complaint) follow the school's complaints procedure

This policy should only be used in exceptional circumstances after all reasonable measures have been taken to try to resolve complaints under the school's complaints procedures. However, it is not necessary for a complaint to have progressed through all the stages on the complaints policy, before this policy can be invoked. Judgement and discretion must be used in applying the criteria to identify potential persistent, habitual or vexatious complainants and in deciding on the appropriate action to be taken in specific cases.

The policy should only be invoked following careful consideration of all the issues by the Headteacher and the Chair of Governors after an attempt has been made to reason with the complainant and it has been explained to them what it will mean if the Persistent, Habitual and Vexatious Complainants Policy is invoked.

### **DEFINITIONS**

#### **Habitual or Vexatious Complainant**

Each case will be viewed individually and decided on its merits. However, a complainant (and/or anyone acting on their behalf) may be deemed to be habitual or vexatious if previous or current contact with them shows that they may meet any or all of the following criteria, dependent upon degree.

Where complainants:

- persist in pursuing a complaint where the school's complaints procedure has been fully and properly implemented and exhausted (e.g. where several responses have been provided)
- change the substance of a complaint or continually raise new issues or seek to prolong contact by continually raising further concerns or questions upon receipt of a response. Care must be taken not to discard new issues which are significantly different from the original complaints. These might need to be addressed as separate complaints
- are unwilling to accept documented evidence of action
- are unwilling to accept that the governing body has reached a final decision on a chosen course of action
- deny receiving an adequate response in spite of correspondence specifically answering their questions
- persist in pursuing a matter when they have already exhausted other statutory routes
- do not clearly identify the precise issues which they wish to be investigated, despite reasonable efforts to help them specify their concerns
- continue to seek to pursue a complaint where the concerns identified are not within the remit of the governing body to investigate
- focus on a trivial matter to an extent which is out of proportion to its significance and continue to focus on this point. It is recognised that determining what is a 'trivial' matter can be subjective and careful judgements must be used in applying this criteria
- have in the course of addressing a complaint, had an excessive number of contacts with the school placing unreasonable demands on staff time. A contact may be in person or by telephone, letter or email. Discretion must be used in determining the precise number of "excessive contacts" applicable under this section, using judgement based on the specific circumstances of each individual case
- have threatened or used physical violence towards staff at any time. This will in itself cause personal contact with the complainant and/or their representatives to be discontinued and the complaint will, thereafter, only be continued through written communication. All such incidences will be documented. This will also inform the complainant of the action to be taken with regard to any further communication received
- have harassed or been personally abusive or verbally aggressive on more than one occasion towards staff dealing with the complaint. They will document all instances of harassment, abusive or verbally aggressive behaviour
- are known to have recorded meetings or telephone conversations or circulated such records to third parties without the prior knowledge and consent of other parties involved
- make unreasonable demands and fail to accept that these may be unreasonable, for example, insist on responses to complaints or enquiries being provided more urgently than is reasonable or within the complaints procedure or normal recognised practice

### **PERSISTENT COMPLAINANT**

A complainant (and/or anyone acting on their behalf) may be deemed to be a persistent complainant if previous or current contact with them shows that they may meet any or all of the following criteria, dependent upon degree.

#### ***Where the complainant's behaviour may be characterised by:***

- actions which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific and/or repetitious
- prolific correspondence or excessive email or telephone contact about a concern or complaint
- uses Freedom of Information requests excessively and unreasonably
- an insistence upon pursuing unsubstantial complaints and/or unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes
- an insistence upon pursuing complaints in an unreasonable manner

- an insistence on introducing trivial or irrelevant information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented upon, or raising a large number of detailed but unimportant questions insisting that they are answered fully
- making unjustified complaints about the investigator seeking to have them replaced
- an insistence upon repeatedly pursuing a complaint when the outcome is not satisfactory to the complainant but cannot be changed, for example, if the desired outcome is beyond the remit of the school because it is unlawful.

**Harassment is the unreasonable behaviour where an individual or individuals**

- appear to be targeted over a significant period of time on one or more members of school staff
- cause ongoing distress to individual member(s) of school staff
- have a significant adverse effect on the whole/parts of the school community
- are pursued in a manner which can be perceived as intimidating and oppressive by the recipient. This could include situations where persistent demands and criticisms, while not particularly taxing or serious when viewed in isolation, have a cumulative effect over time of undermining confidence, well-being and health
- unnecessarily take up an inordinate amount of staff time, detracting from staff members' ability to undertake legitimate school business

**UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT**

A complainant (and/or anyone acting on their behalf) may be deemed to be an unreasonable complainant if previous or current contact with them shows that they may meet any or all of the following criteria, dependent upon degree. Where the complainant's behaviour may be that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the school, such as, if the complainant:

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance
- refuses to cooperate with the complaints investigation process
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on
- raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced
- 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)
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education (DfE)
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on school 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
- uses threats to intimidate

- uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence
- knowingly provides falsified information
- publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint, while the complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent (either by letter, phone, email or text), as it could delay the outcome being reached.

Whenever possible and if appropriate, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before identifying the action as “unreasonable.”

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

### **STEPS WE WILL TAKE FOR DEALING WITH PERSISTENT, HABITUAL, UNREASONABLE OR VEXATIOUS COMPLAINANTS:**

Where complainants have been identified as persistent, habitual, unreasonable or vexatious under the scope of this policy, taking account of the above criteria, the Headteacher and Chair of Governors or, if unavailable, the Vice-Chair of Governors) will determine what action to take.

The Headteacher and / or Chair of Governors will notify complainants, in writing, of the reasons why they have been classified as persistent, habitual, unreasonable or vexatious and what action will be taken. They will also be notified of the review procedure.

This notification may be copied for the information of others already involved in the complaint or matters closely related to it, e.g. LA officers, local Councillors, staff, Members of Parliament. A record must be kept, for future reference, of the reasons why a complainant has been classified as persistent, habitual, unreasonable or vexatious.

If the school feels it suitable, they may inform a complainant that verbal correspondence will be recorded and ensuring the complainants consent, this evidence may be used to classify a persistent, habitual, unreasonable or vexatious complainant.

#### **It may be decided to deal with complainants in one or more of the following ways:**

- Withdraw contact with the complainant either in person, by telephone, by email, by letter or any combination of these, provided that at least one form of contact is maintained.
- To restrict contact to liaison through a designated member of staff or specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months. The method of any communication will be decided by the school e.g. a generic email address to contact which will be monitored every 28 days and responded to by a designated colleague.
- Notify the complainant in writing that the governing body has responded fully to the points raised and has tried to resolve the complaint but there is nothing more to add and continuing contact on the matter will serve no useful purpose. The complainant should be notified that any form of contact, either orally or in writing, in relation to their complaint, or any further complaints relative to the same period of time, or the same or similar issues as an earlier complaint, is at an end, and that further contact received will be acknowledged but not answered.
- Temporarily suspend, for a period to be specified to the complainant, all contact with the complainant, provided that the governing body shall not, without the consent of the LA, withdraw or not provide any services to which the complainant or his/her family are entitled to receive.
- Inform the complainant that all meetings with a member of staff will be conducted with a second person present and that notes of meetings may be taken in the interests of all parties.
- In the case of physical or verbal aggression, take advice from HR/Legal Services.

g) Consider warning the complainant about being banned from the school site; or proceed straight to a temporary ban.

h) Consider taking advice on pursuing a case under Anti-Harassment legislation.

i) Consider taking advice from HR/Legal Services about putting in place a specific procedure for dealing with complaints from the complainant, i.e. the complainant will not be able to deal directly with the Headteacher / Chair of Governors but only with a third person to be identified by the governing body of the school, who will investigate, determine whether or not the concern/complaint is reasonable or vexatious and then advise the Headteacher / Chair of Governors accordingly.

j) If a parent's behaviour is a cause for concern, the school can ask him/her to leave school premises immediately. In serious cases, the Headteacher will notify them in writing that their implied licence to be on school premises has been temporarily revoked subject to any representations that the parent may wish to make. Although fulfilling a public function, schools are private places. The public has no automatic right of entry. Schools will therefore act to ensure they remain a safe place for pupils, staff and other members of their community.

**The school reserves the right to:**

- cease to respond to complaints of a vexatious nature
- bring legal action for harassment against the complainant
- direct the complainant to the Education and Skills Funding Agency

**DUPLICATE COMPLAINTS**

If we have resolved a complaint under the complaints 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 consider.

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 the complaints procedure again.

**COMPLAINT CAMPAIGNS**

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

- Publishing a single response on the school website.
- Sending a template response to all of the complainants.

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

## Model Letter 1:

**Individual letter informing a complainant that his/her behaviour is considered to fall below a reasonable/acceptable standard.**

### Recorded Delivery.

Dear

This letter is to inform you that the school considers your actions in [*describe actions, dates, behaviour*] on ..... when you .....to be unreasonable/unacceptable [*delete as appropriate*].

We would ask you to bear in mind the fact that such behaviour on a school site can be disruptive and distressing to pupils, staff and parents/carers [*delete if behaviour complained of did not occur on school site e.g. persistent use of e-mail, verbally abusive telephone calls*].

We are aware that you have raised some concerns and would advise you that these are usually dealt with most effectively through the School's Complaints Procedure.

At the moment we are dealing with these issues by [*describe actions being taken to resolve concern*].

Please note that the School's Policy for Dealing with Persistent or Vexatious Complaints/Harassment sets out standards of behaviour expected of all people in their dealings with the School. These include:

The School's Expectations of Parents/Carers/Members of the Public

- a) Treat all school staff with courtesy and respect;
- b) Respect the needs and well-being of pupils and staff in the school;
- c) Avoid and use, or threatened use, of violence to people, or property;
- d) Avoid any aggression or verbal abuse;
- e) Recognise the time constraints under which members of staff in schools work and allow the school a reasonable time to respond;
- f) Recognise that resolving a specific problem can sometimes take some time;
- g) In the case of a complaint – Follow the School's Complaint Procedure

The policy also indicates the steps that we may take if these standards are breached. These include:

- ✓ Making special arrangements for meetings and communication with the school;
- ✓ Considering a ban from the school premises;
- ✓ Considering legal action.

I would ask that you allow school time to resolve the issues according to the correct procedures and assure you that we shall take every step to move this process forward as quickly as possible.

Yours Sincerely

## Model Letter 2

**Informing a complainant that his/her behaviour is now considered to fall under the terms of this policy for dealing with persistent, unreasonable or vexatious complaints/harassment.**

### Recorded Delivery

Dear,

You will recall that I wrote to you on [*insert date*] telling you that I felt your behaviour was unreasonable.

I am now writing to inform you that in view of your behaviour on [date], when you [*describe actions/behaviour*] it has been decided that the School's Policy for Dealing with persistent or Vexatious Complaints/Harassment Policy will apply from the date of this letter.

In the circumstances I have made the following arrangement for your future contact with the school:

[\**Delete A or B as applicable*]

\*A For the foreseeable future, should you wish to meet with any member of staff, I would ask you to note:

- (a) All routine communication, including any request for a meeting between you and the school, will be by letter only. Letters from you need to be addressed to ..... at the school address; email correspondence will not be responded to;
- (b) an appointment will be arranged and confirmed in writing as soon as possible;
- (c) A third party from the school will be present.
- (d) In the interests of all parties, formal notes of this meeting may be made.

\*B For the foreseeable future, all meetings arising from any written communication with the school will not be conducted by a member of staff, but will be conducted by ..... representing the school. I would ask you to note:

- (a) All routine communication, including any request for a meeting between you and the school, will be by letter only. Letters from you need to be addressed to .....at the school address; email correspondence will not be responded to;
- (b) An appointment will be arranged and confirmed in writing as soon as possible;
- (c) A third party will be present;
- (d) In the Interests of all parties, formal notes of this meeting may be made.

Exceptionally, these arrangement do not apply to any emergency involving [*insert name of pupil*] – in which case you should contact the school in the usual way.

While these arrangements are in place, with respect to normal access to information available on parents' evenings, this will be provided in a summary written report.

These arrangements take effect straight away. If you wish to make a representation about the contents of this letter, which may include any expressions of regret on your part and any assurances that you are prepared to give about your future good conduct, you can do so by writing to me at the school by [*state ten working days from the date of the letter*]. If on receipt of your comments I consider that the arrangements outlined above should continue, you will be supplied with the details of how to review a circumstance of your case.

I do hope that the difficulties we are currently experiencing can soon be resolved.

Yours Sincerely