

The Culture of Resolution

A practical guide for schools moving from a complaints procedure to a complaints culture.

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A published complaints procedure is the legal minimum. It is necessary. It is not sufficient. A complaints culture is what determines whether the procedure is rarely needed or constantly active.

Every maintained school in England is required to publish a complaints procedure under **Section 29(1) of the Education Act 2002** and the **School Information (England) Regulations 2008**. The DfE sets out best practice for the procedure, refreshed in **January 2026** in joint guidance with Parentkind, Ofsted and partner organisations. The statutory requirements are unchanged; the new guidance focuses on how schools handle complaints well.

A complaints procedure tells a school how to handle a complaint once it has arrived. A complaints culture stops most of them arriving in the first place, surfaces the patterns that matter, and gives the governing body the evidence it needs to support the school's response.

This guide sets out the shift, and the five practical assets a school needs to make it.

How this sits with the January 2026 guidance. The DfE, Parentkind and Ofsted guidance is about handling each complaint well: the conversation, the empathy, the five-step model for the moment a parent raises something. This pack is the layer above it. The guidance handles the conversation; this pack handles the system: how the school logs every concern, sees the patterns and gives the governing body oversight. Use both. The handling guidance and its CLEAR model are free from Parent-Friendly Schools at parentfriendlyschools.org.

SECTION 01

What most schools have, and what most schools don't

Walk through any school office and you will find a published complaints procedure. It is on the website. It sits in the policy folder. It is reviewed at the cadence the DfE recommends. The school is compliant.

What most schools do not have is a record of every concern that came through the door this term, who it came from, what it was about, and what changed in response.

Concerns are different from complaints. A parent mentioning at the school gate that homework feels heavy this half-term is a concern. A grandparent ringing reception about the route home is a concern. A staff query about a parent's email is a concern. Almost none of these will ever escalate to a formal Stage 1 complaint. Most are resolved in the moment by a class teacher, a head of year, or a member of the office team.

When those moments are not recorded, three things happen.

- **Small issues that repeat are invisible.** The same concern, raised by five different parents over a term, looks like five one-off conversations. The school responds five times. The pattern is not seen, so the underlying cause is not addressed.
- **The school's own response is invisible.** The work being done, the conversations, the adjustments, the listening, leaves no trail. When the same parent raises the issue again two months later, the school cannot show what it has already done.
- **The governing body cannot scrutinise what it cannot see.** Boards review the complaints log if there is one. Where the log captures only formal Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints, the board sees four or five entries a year and concludes that complaints volume is low. The school's actual stakeholder feedback is happening in conversations that never reach the report.

A published procedure is what the school does when something has already escalated. A culture of resolution is what the school does to keep most things from needing the procedure at all.

SECTION 02

From handling to preventing

The shift is from a reactive posture to a continuous one.

A reactive posture treats complaints as discrete events. Each one is opened, processed, and closed. The school moves on. The next one will be handled the same way.

A continuous posture treats every concern as data. Every conversation that touches on something the school could be doing differently is logged, however small. Over time, that record becomes the school's most honest source of feedback on its own practice.

For staff

Logging a concern is not an admission that something went wrong. It is part of doing the work properly. A teacher who reassures a parent at pick-up has done the right thing in the moment. Adding

a single line to the register the next morning turns that moment into something the school can learn from at scale.

For parents

When a school can show that it tracks every concern, takes themes seriously, and reports back on what it has changed, parents feel heard. Most parents who escalate to a formal complaint do so because they feel unheard, not because the original issue was insurmountable. A culture of resolution closes that loop before it widens.

For the governing body

The board is not the school's complaints handler. The board's role is to scrutinise the school's complaints work. Those are different jobs. The first requires operational involvement. The second requires evidence and questions. A culture of resolution gives the board the evidence so the questions can be sharp.

SECTION 03

The register

The Complaints and Concerns Register is the single source of truth.

It is one file, held centrally, owned by a named person, updated continuously. It does not duplicate the school's communication log or the SLT shared mailbox. It captures the minimum needed to spot patterns and demonstrate response.

What goes in

Every concern raised in any channel, from any source. Parent emails. Parent phone calls. Conversations at drop-off or pick-up that the staff member judges worth noting. Letters. Third-party concerns raised on behalf of a family. Anonymous concerns where their substance is credible. Concerns raised internally by staff about a pattern they are seeing.

Not every line needs a long entry. A one-line description is enough for most. The richness comes from the volume of entries over time, not the depth of any single one.

What each entry captures

For every entry, the register holds: a reference number generated in sequence, the date raised, the channel, the type (concern or complaint), a subject category from a fixed list, a one-line description, the owner inside the school, initial response date, resolution date, outcome category, theme tags from a controlled list, whether the concern is anonymous, and brief notes on further action.

The fixed subject categories and theme tags are what make trend analysis possible. Free-text categories drift. Controlled categories aggregate.

Who owns the register

One named person owns the register. In most schools that is the School Business Manager or the Clerk. The Headteacher is the accountable officer for complaints work overall. The owner does the upkeep. SLT reviews quality termly: completeness, consistency of categorisation, and outcome data accuracy.

What the register is not

The register is not a public document. It is not shared with parents. It does not replace individual records of complex complaints, which need their own files. It is not a confessional log of every staff frustration. It is the data layer that lets the school see itself accurately.

SECTION 04

Trends analysis

The register is the input. Two reports are the output: a light termly summary, and a deep annual review.

The termly summary (every term)

Every term, the register is summarised into a short paper for the governing body. It is deliberately light: volume in, volume resolved, the stage breakdown, the top themes, and the Headteacher's response to those themes. Five short fields, roughly half a page.

Its job is not deep analysis. Its job is to keep the board close to the data through the year and to give the board a standing challenge question for the Headteacher: what are we doing about these themes? A board that asks that question every term, and hears a substantive answer, is assured the school is taking complaints seriously without anyone having to write a heavy paper.

The termly summary is light on purpose. Headteacher workload is a real constraint. A school should never be producing a deep board paper on a handful of concerns.

The annual review (once a year)

Once a year, the school produces the deep review: full year-on-year volume, category breakdown, themes across the year, repeat themes, resolution times, escalation rate, what the school changed in policy and process, what is different from last year, serial-marked cases, and procedure review status.

This is where the accountability lives. A theme without an action looks like a school that has noticed a pattern and done nothing. A theme with an action, dated, owned, and status-tracked, looks like a school that is learning. The annual review is the school's chance to show, once a year, what it heard and what it changed.

Either way

The Headteacher signs off both reports before they reach the board. The Clerk tables them as a standing item on the relevant FGB cycle. Neither report is sent to the board to be received. Both are sent to the board to be scrutinised.

SECTION 05

The governing body's role

A board's job on complaints work is to ask better questions.

The board is not deciding individual complaints. With the narrow exception of Stage 2 hearings, where a complaint reaches the formal governor panel, the board is one step removed from the casework. The board's value is in the scrutiny layer above the casework: is the system working, are the right themes being addressed, is the school learning.

A board that engages well with complaints work asks three families of question.

Register hygiene

Is every concern raised this term logged, however small? Is the register held centrally and reviewed termly by SLT? Are anonymous concerns considered alongside named ones, where their substance is credible? Who owns the register, and how is its quality assured? These questions establish that the data being summarised is real.

Trends and response

What three themes have emerged across the last twelve months? For each theme, what has the school changed in response? Where the same family or stakeholder appears in the register repeatedly, have their concerns been addressed structurally rather than only individually? Are resolution times getting faster or slower term-on-term? These questions test whether the school is treating the register as a learning tool rather than a filing system.

Governance posture

Where does the complaints summary sit in the FGB papers? Has the published complaints procedure been reviewed in the last two to three years, in line with DfE recommended practice? Is there evidence that the board has scrutinised this work, not only received it? Where a governor is named in a concern or complaint, has that governor correctly recused from related discussions? These questions are about the board's own conduct on the work.

A linked governor for stakeholder voice, or a designated link governor for parental engagement, can hold the working relationship with the school's complaints owner between meetings. That is not a delegated decision-making role. It is a continuity role: visiting the school, looking at the register with the owner, bringing observations back to the board.

SECTION 06

The unreasonable complainant, defended by evidence

A small number of complaints come from individuals whose behaviour or pattern of contact has crossed into the territory the DfE describes as serial or unreasonable. The DfE publishes a model policy for managing such complaints. Most schools adopt it or a close variant.

The model policy is necessary. By itself, it is not the strongest line of defence.

The strongest line of defence is a school that can demonstrate, at the point a complaint is escalated to DfE or referred elsewhere, that:

- Every concern from the individual has been logged, in date order, with channel, subject, and outcome captured
- The school has responded substantively and in writing where appropriate
- The same themes have been considered as part of the school's wider improvement work
- The governing body has scrutinised that work and asked questions about it
- The decision to mark the individual as serial or unreasonable was made on the basis of documented behaviour, with the governing body informed

A school in that position is not relying on the procedure alone. It is presenting a record. The record makes the case.

The opposite position, where the school has the policy but no register, is much weaker. The school has done the work. The school cannot show the work. In that situation, even a measured serial-complainant decision can be reframed as a school that stopped engaging.

The culture is the evidence. The procedure handles the moment. The culture builds the record.

Where to start: which stage are you?

Adopting the full pack at once is not the point. The point is to scale the response to what the school actually needs.

A school with a handful of concerns a year is in a different place from a school where the Headteacher spends half of Monday morning on a Stage 1 letter. Both benefit from the pack. They use it differently.

Most schools sit in one of four stages.

Stage	School state	What runs	Pack pieces used
01 Register-only	Few or no formal complaints. Building the habit.	Log every concern. SLT eyes only. No board paper yet.	Register template
02 Annual SLT review	One year of logging. Internal patterns visible.	SLT reviews the register internally once a year. Tunes categories and ownership. Still no board paper.	Register + Guide
03 Board reporting	The school is ready for the board to engage with complaints work formally.	Light termly summary to the board each term, deep annual review once a year, Scrutiny Checklist alongside both. The target operating state.	All five artefacts
04 Mature culture	Twelve to twenty-four months of continuous evidence.	The same rhythm, embedded as routine. The school can demonstrate year-on-year improvement and is audit-ready.	All five artefacts, embedded

The pattern is: **log first, scrutinise later**. The register is the foundation at every stage. Board reporting enters the picture once there is signal to govern. When it does, the termly summary keeps the board close to the data and the annual review does the deep accountability work.

Headteachers carry an unreasonable amount already. The termly summary is light on purpose, so the board can stay close to complaints work every term without anyone writing a heavy paper. The deep work happens once a year.

The reports and the Scrutiny Checklist are designed for Stage 3 onwards. The Register and this guide are useful at all four stages.

Putting it into practice

A school adopting this approach does not start with a software platform. It starts with five questions.

1. Who owns the Complaints and Concerns Register?
2. What categories and theme tags will the register use?
3. Who summarises the register into the termly summary and the annual review for the board?
4. How will the board scrutinise that report at FGB?
5. What evidence of action against themes will appear in the next report?

If those five questions have named owners and named cadences inside one term, the school has a culture of resolution underway. The published procedure stays where it is. Everything else is new infrastructure on the same legal foundation.

The Culture of Resolution resource pack provides the four supporting assets a school needs to operationalise this work: the Register template, the complaints reports (a light termly summary and a deep annual review), the Governing Body Scrutiny Checklist, and an optional staffroom poster to keep the culture visible day to day. All four are available alongside this guide on the resource pack page.

SOURCES AND STATUTORY GROUNDING

Section 29(1), Education Act 2002 · statutory requirement to establish a complaints procedure · [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

School Information (England) Regulations 2008 · publication requirement · [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

DfE, Parentkind and Ofsted, joint complaints guidance, January 2026 · the current best-practice layer, including the five-step handling model · available via parentfriendlyschoools.org

DfE, *Best practice advice for school complaints procedures 2019/2020* · the model form, stages and review cadence (still live, supplemented by the 2026 guidance) · [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

DfE, *Model policy for managing serial and unreasonable complaints* · [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

This guide does not replace the school's published complaints procedure. It sits alongside it, addressing the practice and culture that determine whether the procedure is rarely needed or constantly active. Free to download, share and adapt within your school. Please retain attribution.