

Need to Complain?

No one likes having to complain, but sometimes we find we have to. If you do need to make a complaint, it is important to do it properly to ensure you are heard and your complaint is dealt with.

Every Organisation must have a published **complaints policy**. It is usually available on their website, but if you can't find it, contact them and ask them for a copy of their complaints policy or procedure.

Most policies will make a distinction between **formal and informal complaints**. If complaints can be dealt with informally, generally outcomes are much better all round, so it is always better to try this first. But sometimes we need to complain formally. Procedures for complaining formally are often very well defined and will come with a timetable by which the complaint will be dealt with, so it is key that you follow the process in order to make the organisation follow their timetable and deal with your complaint effectively.

Schools and other Education Settings

Every school will have a complaints procedure on their website, and they are all different, so it is important to check. When you are complaining about the school it is very important to follow the complaints procedure or you may end up with your complaint not being dealt with. Generally the procedure will direct you to complain to the person with whom you have most contact, and then to their line manager if the complaint is about them. Schools will try to resolve complaints at the first opportunity, informally, so this is always the fastest method. But if you aren't satisfied you then can complain further up the chain, ultimately to the Head. Tempting though it might be to email the Head or Chair of Governors in the first instance, this can cause problems as you are immediately jumping to formal complaint, and it always adds weight to your complaint if you have tried to resolve things informally but been unable to.

If you get as far as complaining to the Governors and the issue is still not resolved, the next steps will depend on the type of school, so again it is important to refer to their policy. Academies, Faith Schools and Local Authority schools will all have different places to complain to. Generally OFSTED do not accept complaints from parents about schools, and will just direct you back to the school's policy.

It's important to note that some schools do not accept complaints from parents of children who are no longer on role at the school.

Childrens' Services

If you have an issue with services provided by your local Council's Children's Services, be it Education Services like SEN or Advisory Services, or Social Care services like 0-25 Together or Families First, then there is a formal mechanism to complain to within the Council that is separate from those teams. You can complain informally directly to the team or team manager, but if this doesn't resolve things, a formal complaint through the Customer Services department is the next step. Complaints made through this process have a strict response time and are logged centrally and monitored both by the council and by outside agencies such as Ofsted, DfE and LGO. The Local Authority will very much want to avoid a complaint escalating to Level 2 or 3 without being resolved.

Details on how to complain formally are available on the Local authority website. Often it is a simple form to fill in online or an email to a central email address.

While emailing senior officers in the Local Authority can be tempting, often this is not logged formally, and is simply passed back to the team involved to deal with informally; the person you are complaining about may write the response for their boss to send you. Sometimes it can be a successful strategy as more senior officers may be able to make better decisions but only if it is an issue that can be resolved in this way, for example a mistake has been made that can be rectified. Other times it can just drag things out.

Complaining to elected representatives.

It can often be an effective strategy to complain to your elected representative if you have an issue with a service. However, to be most effective it is important to complain to the right person, who is part of the organisation you are complaining about.

For example, District Councillors are the best bet if the issue is with a service provided by the District Council, such as Housing, bin collection, local facilities etc.

County Councillors are the best people to contact for issues with Children's services, Education, Social Care, etc. The officers of the County Council must answer to the County Councillors, and it is good to raise any issues that may exist with them so that they are aware when change is needed.

MPs are the best people to complain to about services funded directly by Government, such as Health, Benefits, Immigration issues. While MPs will take on complaints around services delivered by the County and District councils, they will generally write to the relevant senior officer and get the same response you did when you wrote, whether this is helpful or not.

Vexatious Complaints, and knowing when to call it a day...

Most Complaints policies will have a section on Vexatious Complaints, about what they will do when they think someone is complaining inappropriately. You can run the risk of your complaint being seen as vexatious if you have complained more than once about the same issue, and have not been happy with the response, and then complain again. It can also cover complaints that seem personal in nature rather than rooted in an action that has not been done/done incorrectly. If your complaint is deemed vexatious then the service may refuse to investigate it further.

Sometimes services will investigate a complaint as per their complaints policy and the result of the investigation is not what you had hoped for. There may be scope for escalating your complaint, but at some point you will reach the top. It is always worth keeping in mind what you want to get out of any complaints process. If you need something to change then make sure it is possible you can get that outcome from complaining- it might be that you need to take another course of action to get the change. Sometimes we get to the point where we have exhausted the complaints process and it comes down to one person's judgement and they don't agree with us. While we may not be happy about this it's important we know when to let it go. At least we will know we tried everything we could.