Hope Tree School

Where difference is valued

COMPLAINTS POLICY

Hope Tree School

Independent Special School

Proprietors	Fiona D'Arcy and Rebecca Sands
School leadership	Fiona D'Arcy - Head of Pastoral Care Rebecca Sands - Head of Learning
Governance	No formal governing body. The school has an Advisory Board with no governing or decision-making powers.
Policy basis	Part 7, paragraph 33 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014
Review cycle	At least annually, and sooner where legislation, guidance or school arrangements change
Approved by	The Proprietors

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1. Purpose and regulatory basis

Hope Tree School is committed to dealing with parental concerns and complaints fairly, promptly, consistently and proportionately. Wherever possible, concerns should be resolved through open and respectful communication at the earliest stage.

This policy is the school's complaints procedure for the purposes of Part 7, paragraph 33 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (the Independent School Standards or ISS). It is drawn up and implemented by the Proprietors, Fiona D'Arcy and Rebecca Sands.

The procedure provides the three stages required by the ISS: Stage 1 - informal resolution; Stage 2 - a formal complaint in writing; and Stage 3 - a hearing before a complaints panel.

The Advisory Board is advisory only. It is not a governing body and has no governing, proprietorial or decision-making authority under this policy.

2. Scope: the ISS Part 7 parental complaints procedure

This procedure applies to complaints made by a parent of a Student who is currently being educated at Hope Tree School. For the purposes of this policy, 'parent' includes a person with parental responsibility for the Student and, where appropriate, a person who has care of the student.

The ISS does not require this procedure to apply to prospective Students, to complaints first made after a Student's placement has ceased, or to complaints made by members of the public. Where a complaint was started while the Student was in placement at the school, the school will normally allow the procedure to be completed.

The school may, at its discretion, consider concerns raised by other persons or by Students outside this procedure, but doing so does not convert those matters into an ISS Part 7 complaint.

3. Matters dealt with under other procedures

This policy is not intended to replace another statutory, safeguarding, employment or specialist procedure. Where a matter is more appropriately dealt with under another procedure, the school will explain this to the parent.

- safeguarding or child protection concerns, which will be handled under the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures and relevant statutory guidance;
- staff grievances or employment matters, which will be dealt with under the school's employment procedures;
- staff conduct or disciplinary matters, where the school may need to use its disciplinary procedures. A parent will not normally be given confidential details of any disciplinary action;
- admissions decisions concerning prospective Students, which are outside the minimum scope of Part 7;
- matters subject to police, local authority safeguarding, tribunal, court or other statutory proceedings, where it may be necessary to pause or adapt the complaints process.

4. Principles

- Complaints will be considered objectively, fairly and without avoidable delay.
- No person will determine a complaint or sit on a panel where they were directly involved in the matters complained about.
- The school will make reasonable adjustments where required to enable a parent to use this procedure.
- The school will seek to establish the substance of the complaint, the relevant facts and the outcome sought.
- The fact that a complaint is made will not adversely affect the Student.
- Information will be shared only with those who need it for the proper handling of the complaint, subject to legal and regulatory requirements.

5. How to raise a concern or complaint

For the purposes of this policy, a concern will be treated as a Stage 1 concern where the parent indicates that they are raising a concern or complaint which they would like the School to address under this policy. Parents are encouraged to make this clear when contacting the School.

A Stage 1 concern may be raised in person, by telephone or in writing. A Stage 2 formal complaint must be made in writing. A parent who requires assistance to put a complaint in writing should contact the school; reasonable support or adjustments will be considered.

Routine communications, requests for information, or requests to discuss day-to-day matters (for example, an email asking to speak with a member of staff about something that happened during the school day) will not ordinarily be treated as a Stage 1 concern under this policy. However, where the substance of a communication indicates that the parent is expressing dissatisfaction and seeking a response or resolution from the School, the School may treat the matter as a Stage 1 concern even if the parent has not expressly referred to this policy.

Complaints addressed under this policy should normally be sent to the school and marked 'Private and Confidential - Complaint'. The school will ensure that the complaint is directed to an appropriate person who has not been directly involved in the matter.

Where a complaint concerns either or both Proprietors, the complaint will be directed by the school to a nominated representative of the Proprietors. That representative must be sufficiently impartial and must not have been directly involved in the matters complained about. The school will provide the current contact details for the nominated representative on request and as soon as they are available.

6. Timescales and school days

A complaint should normally be raised within three months of the incident complained about or, where there is a series of related incidents, within three months of the most recent incident. The school may consider a complaint made outside that period where there are exceptional circumstances.

For this policy, 'school day' means a day on which the school is open to Students for normal teaching. A complaint received during a school holiday will normally be treated as received on the first school day after the holiday.

Where a stated timescale cannot reasonably be met, the school will inform the parent, explain the reason and provide a revised timescale.

7. Stage 1 - Informal resolution

The parent should initially raise the concern with the member of staff most closely connected with the matter or, where that would be inappropriate, with another suitable member of staff. The purpose of Stage 1 is to understand the concern and, where possible, resolve it promptly.

- clarify the concern and the outcome sought;
- establish the immediately available facts;
- provide an explanation or clarification;
- correct misunderstandings;
- agree practical actions where appropriate.

The school will normally aim to resolve a Stage 1 concern within five school days. More complex matters may take longer; if so, the parent will be kept informed.

If the parent is not satisfied with the response at Stage 1, they may proceed to Stage 2. The school may also move a matter directly to Stage 2 where its seriousness, complexity, safeguarding implications or other circumstances make informal resolution inappropriate.

8. Stage 2 - Formal complaint in writing

If the parent remains dissatisfied following Stage 1, they may make a formal complaint in writing. The complaint should identify, so far as reasonably possible, the matters complained about, relevant dates or events, any steps already taken to resolve the matter, and the outcome the parent is seeking.

The school will acknowledge a formal complaint within three school days of receipt.

8.1 Appointment of the Stage 2 decision-maker

The Proprietors will ensure that the complaint is allocated to a suitable person who was not directly involved in the matters complained about. The investigation may be delegated, but the person responsible for the Stage 2 outcome must be able to consider the matter fairly and objectively.

Where the complaint concerns either or both Proprietors, the Stage 2 process will be managed by a nominated representative of the Proprietors who was not directly involved in the matters complained about. The nominated representative may appoint an appropriate investigator where necessary.

8.2 Scope and investigation

The person managing the complaint may clarify the issues with the parent before or during the investigation. The investigation will be proportionate to the nature, seriousness and complexity of the complaint and may include reviewing documents, speaking with relevant staff or other persons, and keeping written records of meetings or interviews.

New and materially different complaints raised during the investigation may be treated as separate complaints where this is necessary for fairness and orderly handling.

8.3 Formal outcome

The school will normally provide a written Stage 2 outcome within 15 school days of receipt of the formal complaint. The response will explain the issues considered, the investigation undertaken, the findings reached and, where appropriate, any action the school will take.

The outcome letter will explain the parent's right to proceed to Stage 3 if they remain dissatisfied. A parent does not have to establish a separate ground of appeal before exercising the right to request a Stage 3 panel hearing.

8.4 Right to proceed to Stage 3

Where a parent remains dissatisfied after receiving the Stage 2 formal response, the school will not screen the request by reference to grounds of appeal, prospects of success or whether the parent has identified a procedural defect. The parent's continuing dissatisfaction engages the Stage 3 process. This ensures that the school's procedure gives practical effect to the three-stage structure required by Part 7 of the Independent School Standards.

9. Stage 3 - Complaints Panel Hearing

If the parent remains dissatisfied following the Stage 2 formal response, they are entitled to request a hearing before a Complaints Panel. The Stage 3 hearing is not discretionary and the parent is not required to demonstrate that the Stage 2 decision was unreasonable, procedurally flawed, or otherwise meet a separate threshold before a Panel will be convened. A written statement that the parent remains dissatisfied and wishes to proceed to Stage 3 is sufficient. The request should normally be made in writing (including email) to the school within 10 school days of the Stage 2 outcome.

A late request may be accepted where there are exceptional circumstances. The school will acknowledge the request within three school days.

9.0 Mandatory ISS safeguards at Stage 3

Every Stage 3 hearing under this policy will incorporate the following mandatory safeguards:

- the Panel will be appointed by or on behalf of the Proprietors;
- the Panel will consist of at least three people;
- no Panel member will have been directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint;
- at least one Panel member will be independent of the management and running of Hope Tree School;
- the parent will be permitted to attend and to be accompanied if they wish;
- the Panel will make findings and recommendations in writing;
- the findings and recommendations will be provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about;
- the findings and recommendations will be retained and made available for inspection on the school premises in accordance with the Independent School Standards;
- the school will maintain the prescribed written complaint record, including whether the matter was resolved following the formal procedure or proceeded to a Panel hearing and the action taken by the school, regardless of whether the complaint was upheld; and
- correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will remain confidential except where access is requested by the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the Education and Skills Act 2008.

9.1 Appointment and composition of the Panel

The Panel will be formally appointed by or on behalf of the Proprietors. In order to comply with Part 7 of the Independent School Standards, the Panel will consist of at least three people, none of whom was directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. At least one member of the Panel will be independent of the management and running of Hope Tree School.

For these purposes, independence requires more than simply being outside the school's workforce. The independent member must not be a Proprietor, must not be involved in the management or running of Hope Tree School, and must not have another role or relationship with the School which amounts to involvement in its management or running or otherwise compromises their independence. For example, a professional adviser who regularly acts for the School may not be sufficiently independent, depending on the nature of that relationship.

A member of the Advisory Board may sit on a Panel only where they meet the requirements applicable to that particular Panel. Membership of the Advisory Board does not itself confer governing authority or automatically establish independence. Whether an Advisory Board member can act as the independent member will be considered by reference to their actual role and relationship with the School; a person involved in the management or running of the School cannot act as the independent panel member.

Where the complaint concerns either or both Proprietors, the arrangements for appointing the Panel will be made on behalf of the Proprietors by a nominated representative or other suitable person who has had no direct involvement in the matters complained about.

9.2 Arranging the hearing

The school will normally seek to convene the Panel within 20 school days of receiving the Stage 3 request. The arrangements will be reasonable and will seek to facilitate the parent's attendance.

The parent has the right to attend the Panel hearing and to be accompanied if they wish. The school will make reasonable arrangements to facilitate the parent's attendance. The accompanying person may be a friend, relative or other supporter. This right does not of itself confer a right to legal representation to make representations on the parent's behalf, although the Panel may permit legal representation where appropriate.

If the parent chooses not to attend, or is unable to attend after reasonable arrangements have been offered, the Panel will still be convened and may determine the complaint on the written material available.

9.3 Papers and conduct of the hearing

The person administering the Panel will normally provide the parties with the relevant papers at least five school days before the hearing and will set a reasonable deadline for any further written submissions.

The hearing will be held in private. It will be conducted fairly and with appropriate regard to confidentiality, accessibility and the welfare of the Student. The Panel may ask questions, clarify disputed points and consider the material reasonably necessary to determine the complaint.

The Panel is not required to reproduce every step of the Stage 2 investigation, but it must consider the complaint fairly and sufficiently to make its own findings and recommendations. Significant new matters that fall outside the original complaint may be referred for separate consideration.

9.4 Panel findings and recommendations

The Panel will make findings and may make recommendations. It may uphold the complaint in whole or in part, not uphold it in whole or in part, and/or recommend appropriate action or improvements to school practice, systems or procedures.

The Panel will make written findings and recommendations. These will normally be issued within five school days of the hearing. A copy of the findings and recommendations will be provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about.

The Panel's findings and recommendations will be retained at the school and made available for inspection on the school premises by the Proprietors and, where applicable, the person occupying the role of head teacher for the purposes of the Independent School Standards.

Stage 3 completes the school's ISS Part 7 complaints procedure.

10. Complaint records

In accordance with Part 7 of the Independent School Standards, the school will keep a written record of every complaint made in accordance with Stage 2 of this procedure. The record will state:

- whether the complaint was resolved following the formal procedure or proceeded to a Stage 3 panel hearing; and
- the action taken by the school as a result of the complaint, regardless of whether the complaint was upheld.

The school will also retain sufficient records to demonstrate that the procedure was followed, including relevant correspondence, statements, investigation records, Stage 2 outcomes and Panel findings and recommendations.

In accordance with Part 7 of the Independent School Standards, correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will 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.

11. Confidentiality, data protection and safeguarding

Complaint information will be handled in accordance with applicable data protection law and the school's privacy arrangements. Confidentiality does not prevent the School from sharing information where this is necessary to safeguard a child, comply with the law, obtain appropriate professional advice, respond to a regulator or inspector, or conduct the complaint fairly. Where a complaint concerns the processing of personal data and falls within section 164A of the Data Protection Act 2018, Hope Tree School will also comply with the applicable data protection complaints requirements. This includes facilitating the making of the complaint, acknowledging it within 30 days, taking appropriate steps to investigate it without undue delay, and communicating the outcome promptly. Where a parental complaint falls within both this policy and the data protection complaints regime, the School will operate the procedures together so far as practicable and will ensure that the applicable data protection requirements and timescales are met.

12. Anonymous complaints

Part 7 concerns complaints from parents and does not require the school to investigate anonymous complaints. The school may nevertheless consider an anonymous concern where the information provided indicates a safeguarding, welfare, regulatory or other serious issue requiring attention.

13. Withdrawal and resolution of complaints

A parent may withdraw a complaint at any stage. The school may ask for withdrawal to be confirmed in writing. Where safeguarding, regulatory or other serious issues have been identified, the school may still need to consider or act on those matters notwithstanding withdrawal.

At any stage, an appropriate resolution may include an explanation, acknowledgement, apology, corrective action, review of practice or policy, staff support or training, or another proportionate step. Resolution does not necessarily require the school to agree with every aspect of the complaint.

14. Unreasonable, persistent or abusive behaviour

The school will distinguish between the substance of a complaint and the manner in which it is pursued. A parent will not be treated adversely merely because they make or pursue a complaint.

Where contact becomes abusive, threatening, persistently repetitive or otherwise places a disproportionate burden on the school, the Proprietors may impose proportionate communication arrangements, provided that doing so does not prevent a parent from completing the three-stage ISS complaints procedure in relation to a complaint that is properly within its scope.

This may include:

- requiring communications to be made through a named contact;
- requiring communications to be in writing;
- setting reasonable limits on the frequency or timing of contact;
- declining to respond to repeated correspondence that raises no material new issue after the procedure has concluded;
- ending a meeting where behaviour becomes abusive, threatening or unsafe;
- taking lawful action, including contacting the police, where safety, harassment or criminal conduct is a concern.

Any restriction will be proportionate, explained in writing and reviewed where appropriate. It will not be used to avoid the school's obligations under Part 7.

15. Department for Education and regulatory redress

The Stage 3 Panel is the final stage of Hope Tree School's internal ISS Part 7 complaints procedure. A parent who remains concerned after the procedure has concluded may raise relevant concerns with the Department for Education (DfE).

For an independent school, referral to the DfE is a regulatory route rather than a further appeal stage. The DfE does not act as a further merits appeal body to reinvestigate an individual complaint, substitute its decision for that of the School, or compel the School to alter its decision on that complaint. It may, however, consider information indicating that the School has failed to meet the Independent School Standards, including the requirements governing the handling of complaints, and may take regulatory action in relation to such a failure.

Parents should use the current GOV.UK route for complaints about private/independent schools. The school will provide the relevant details on request. Where there is an immediate safeguarding concern or a child may be at risk, the appropriate safeguarding or emergency route should be used rather than waiting for completion of this procedure.

16. Role of the Proprietors and Advisory Board

The Proprietors are responsible for ensuring that this complaints procedure is drawn up, made available to parents and effectively implemented in accordance with the Independent School Standards.

Hope Tree School's Advisory Board has no formal governing power and does not exercise the functions of a governing body. It may provide advice to the Proprietors and, where appropriate, an individual connected with the Advisory Board may be asked to assist with a complaint or panel. Any such involvement is subject to the requirements of impartiality, prior non-involvement and, where applicable, independence from the management and running of the school.

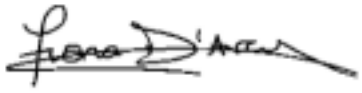
17. Monitoring and review

The Proprietors will monitor the operation of this policy, the themes arising from formal complaints and any actions required to improve school practice. The policy will be reviewed at least annually and sooner where there is a relevant change in legislation, regulatory guidance or the school's leadership or governance arrangements.

In accordance with Part 6 of the Independent School Standards, the School will make details of this complaints procedure available to parents of Students and parents of prospective Students. The School will also make available the number of complaints registered under the Stage 2 formal procedure during the preceding school year. This figure relates to complaints registered under the formal procedure, whether or not they were upheld and whether or not they proceeded to Stage 3.

The School will take reasonable steps to ensure that parents and prospective parents are aware of how the complaints procedure and the preceding school year's formal-complaint number can be accessed. This policy will be available at the request of parents and will be provided free of charge on request, in accordance with the Independent School Standards.

Signed:  Head of Learning

Signed:  Head of Pastoral Care

Date: October 2026

Review Date: October 2027

Appendix 1 - Complaint Form

For use where a parent wishes to make a Stage 2 formal complaint under the ISS Part 7 procedure.

Parent's name	
Student's name	
Relationship to Student	
Address / contact details	
Details of the complaint	
Steps already taken to resolve the matter	
Outcome sought	
Documents attached	

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 2 - Stage 3 Panel Checklist

- Panel formally appointed by or on behalf of the Proprietors.
- At least three panel members.
- No panel member directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint.
- At least one panel member independent of the management and running of the school.
- Parent given reasonable arrangements to attend and informed of the right to be accompanied.
- Relevant papers circulated in advance.
- Hearing held even if the parent elects not to attend, provided reasonable arrangements have been offered.
- Panel makes findings and recommendations.
- Written findings and recommendations provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about.
- Findings and recommendations retained and available for inspection on the school premises as required by the ISS.
- Formal complaint record updated with outcome and action taken.

Appendix 3 - Regulatory reference

This policy is intended to meet paragraph 33 of the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, Part 7 (Manner in which complaints are handled). The school should review this policy against the current legislation and Department for Education guidance whenever it is updated.