



## Innovation, Aspiration and Excellence

### Complaints Policy

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## 1. Scope

Houlton School seeks to ensure positive relationships are built and maintained with all stakeholders. This policy applies to all parents/carers, staff, volunteers, visitors, AIM Board members, contractors and members of the public connecting with Houlton School.

## 2. Policy Statement

Houlton School will:

Manage complaints in accordance with guidance from relevant legislation including the *Education Act 2002: Section 29* and *Complain about a School Guidance (DfE website, 2019)*.

## 3. Principles

Houlton School will ensure the procedure for complaints:

- is well publicised and easily accessible;
- is simple to understand and use;
- is impartial;
- is non-adversarial;
- allows swift handling with established time limits for action and keeping people informed of the progress;
- allows a mediation process if agreed by the complainant;
- allows for a hearing of a panel of AIM Board members, where appropriate;
- respects people's desire for confidentiality, wherever possible;
- addresses all points of issue, provides an effective response and appropriate redress where necessary;
- provides information to the school's Senior Leadership Team so that services can be improved;
- allows for a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary.

Houlton School will:

- ensure that procedures for complaints are publicised and published via the school's website;
- ensure that the procedures set out in this document are followed equitably and fairly in all cases;
- ensure that all complaints are taken seriously and that all parties involved in such will be kept fully informed in recognition of the school's ongoing commitment to partnership;

- ensure complainants know that the decision of the AIM Board is final and cannot be appealed;
- use all complaints as an opportunity to further review best practice;
- provide complainants with contact details for the Secretary of State whom they may write to if they feel the school has acted unreasonably or not followed set procedures (Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Department for Education and Skills, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1 P 3BT);
- ensure confidentiality and that all correspondence will be treated with discretion and investigators will be sensitive to the feelings of those involved – however some information may need to be shared in order to carry out a thorough investigation;
- ensure that appropriate amendment is made if a complaint is found to be justified;
- ensure all complaints are recorded and monitored by the AIM Board to identify issues and allow any lessons to be learned;
- ensure staff and AIM Board members are appropriately trained and/or briefed to strengthen their skills in dealing with people who wish to complain;
- invoke formal procedures when initial informal attempts have been unsuccessful and the person/s raising the concern remain dissatisfied and wish to take the matter further;
- ensure that staff who may be questioned as part of a complaints procedure are treated fairly and have an opportunity to respond to the issues raised by the complainant – they will also be offered support, if required, to respond to any investigation into a complaint;
- make a decision as to whether to apply disciplinary or capability procedures if it becomes apparent the complaint has the potential to be a disciplinary issue and the complainant will be notified of this as the outcome (e.g. 'The matter has been referred to the appropriate procedures');
- ensure that the Chair of the AIM Board writes to the complainant (with the support of the school's legal advisors) should they become vexatious informing them that the AIM Board has exhausted the procedure and the matter is now closed;
- not consider any complaint about a matter which is more than three months old, unless the Chair of the AIM Board considers the nature of the complaint to be exceptional and in the public's best interest to uphold.

#### 4. Definition of Terms

**Academy/School:** A school, which has academy status and is part of a multi academy trust group.

**Clerk to the Complaint Panel:** The person who will attend the Complaint Panel Hearing and keep a written record of the proceedings, and will write to the complainant notifying them of the decision of the Complaint Panel.

**Clerk to the Board:** The person responsible for making the arrangements to appoint the Complaint Panel and convene the Complaint Panel Hearing. The Clerk to the Board will also usually act as the Clerk to the Complaint Panel at the Complaint Panel Hearing.

**TLET:** Transforming Lives Educational Trust.

**Trust:** A multi academy trust company, which is a charitable company responsible for the management and running of all of the academies within the multi academy trust group. In this policy 'Trust' refers to Transforming Lives Educational Trust.

**Board of Trustees:** The body responsible for the trust.

**AIM Board:** A sub-committee of the Trust. The Trust delegates the day-to-day management and running of the Academy to the AIM Board.

**Chair of AIM Board:** The person elected by the AIM Board to be their chairperson.

**Complainant:** The person or organisation making the complaint.

**Education and Skills Funding Agency:** The government department (a sub-department of the Department for Education) responsible for funding and monitoring standards in academies.

**Parent:** The natural or adoptive mother or father of a pupil, prospective pupil or former pupil, irrespective of whether they are or ever have been married, together with persons with parental responsibility for the pupil, and persons with care of the pupil.

**CEO:** The Chief Executive Officer of the Academy Trust.

#### 5. Procedure

This policy is designed to manage formal complaints from members of the school community or general public pertaining to Houlton School. Complaints about TLET and its operation are covered under a separate policy.

#### 6. Dealing with Concerns

If parents/carers, pupils, members of the public or other stakeholders have concerns the following procedures should be followed. These procedures must be followed in the order set

out below and only escalated further if not resolved at any given stage:

1. Discuss their concerns with the member of staff most directly involved *and, if not satisfied*;
2. Discuss their concerns with a senior member of staff *and, if not satisfied*;
3. Discuss their concerns informally with the Principal.

## **7. Stage 1 of the Formal Process**

If the issue cannot be resolved as above then the complaint should formally be raised with the Principal in writing. A meeting will be scheduled to discuss the concern.

Stage 2 of the procedure will only be pursued if discussions at Stage 1 have failed to reassure or alleviate the concerns that have been raised.

At each stage in the procedure, the school will keep in mind ways in which a concern or complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the concern or complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- an appropriate apology;
- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again;
- a commitment to review school policies in light of the complaint.

Complainants should be encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that the school could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence. Equally, an effective procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties. It is also of importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

Only where **all** these avenues have been tried and found unsatisfactory should the complainant take a complaint to the Chair of the AIM Board whose details can be found on the school's website.

Where the complaint is directly regarding the Principal then the formal process will begin at stage 2.

## **8. Making a Complaint to the AIM Board: Stage 2 of the Formal Process**

Where informal attempts and stage 1 of the formal process have been unsuccessful in resolving a complaint, the complainant should write to the Chair of the AIM Board or Clerk to the AIM Board at the school address. The envelope or email should be marked 'FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION' 'PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL' and staff in the school office will ensure that the letter or email is forwarded without delay.

The complainant will be asked to complete a complaint form (Appendix 1), if they have not already done so, as a way of ensuring that the AIM Board has the relevant information they require to consider the complaint in full. The Chair of the AIM Board or Clerk will offer to help an individual to complete the form if appropriate.

On receipt of the complaint form the Chair of the AIM Board (or other AIM Board member with delegated authority from the Chair) will:

- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;
- meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is necessary);
- clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;
- ensure that the above actions are taken within 5 working days of the Chair receiving the school's complaint form, or as soon as practicably possible (e.g. in the case of a complaint form being received close to or during school holidays, etc.).

At this point the Chair of the AIM Board will decide whether the complaint should go straight to the Aim Board complaints panel or whether a mediation stage should be offered. Mediation can only proceed if the complainant and the Principal are willing for it to be tried. If mediation is not successful, the complaint will be considered by the Aim Board complaints panel. The complainant will be notified of this outcome in writing.

## **9. Mediation**

Mediation can be a good way to resolve a complaint because:

- It gives both complainant and Principal another opportunity to hear each other's points of view (with a third party facilitating);
- It gives the third party an opportunity to help the Principal and complainant identify and build on areas of agreement;
- It gives the Principal and complainant a structure within which they can resolve remaining differences;

- If both complainant and the Principal emerge from the mediation satisfied, that is the best foundation for a continuing positive relationship between them;

Even if the complaint continues to a Governor's panel, the issues to be considered are likely to be much clearer following the mediation.

Mediation may elicit one or more of the responses listed below from either party:

- an acknowledgment that the complaint is valid in whole or in part;
- an appropriate apology;
- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again;
- an acceptance that the complaint needs go no further
- a commitment to review school policies in light of the complaint.

*See Appendix 2 for further information on Mediation.*

## **10. AIM Board Complaints Panel**

Where the complainant is still not satisfied that their complaint has been dealt with fully and properly, they may choose to take it to a panel of AIM Board members.

### **Establishing a Complaints Panel**

The AIM Board will agree the composition of a complaints panel, which will consist of two AIM Board members who have no prior understanding of the complaint and at least one independent panel member from outside the school / school Aim Board.

When the Clerk of the AIM Board receives a copy of the complaint form they will inform the AIM Board that a complaint has been received and that it has been passed to the panel to deal with. **No further information about the complaint should be shared with other AIM Board members.**

**There are several points which any AIM Board member sitting on a complaints panel needs to remember:**

- a) It is important that the hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so. No AIM Board member may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it;

- b) The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant;
- c) The panel Chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is not intimidating and not adversarial.

The Chair of the Panel will be nominated by the Chair of the AIM Board and is responsible for ensuring that both complainant and the Principal are given a fair hearing and that the panel arrives at its judgment without fear or favour.

### **Remit of the Panel**

The Complaints Panel can:

- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part;
- uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
- recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure problems of a similar nature do not recur.

It may:

- Consider and, if appropriate, criticise the way in which an operational decision was communicated - **but cannot overturn the decision itself**;
- Consider the thoroughness with which the Principal investigated a complaint about a member of staff - **but cannot expect the Principal to provide details about confidential discussions with that staff member**;
- Consider the manner in which a complaint about any decision was addressed and ask for the decision to be reviewed - **but cannot expect the Principal to change the decision**;
- Consider and, if appropriate, identify limitations in a policy or procedures - **but cannot make changes to the policy**. (It can, however, recommend that the policy be reviewed by the AIM Board to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur, and individual panel members can subsequently play their part in improving the policy);
- Consider whether it should recommend that the AIM Board offer appropriate redress.

## **Format of a Panel Hearing**

1. Complainant and the Principal will enter the room where the hearing is taking place together.
2. The Chair will introduce the panel members and the clerk and outline the process.
3. The complainant is invited to explain the complaint.
4. The Principal may question the complainant.
5. The panel will question the complainant.
6. The Principal is then invited to explain the school's actions.
7. The complainant may question the Principal.
8. The panel will question the Principal.
9. The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint.
10. The Principal is then invited to sum up the school's actions and response to the complaint.
11. The Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within five working days.
12. Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues.
13. The clerk will remain with the panel to clarify any issues.

## **Notes**

- The hearing should be made as unthreatening as possible to all parties.
- The panel may ask questions at any point. Panel members must find ways to ask probing questions while maintaining impartiality.
- The Principal must have no contact with members of the AIM Board Complaints Panel except when the complainant is present to preserve the principle of neutrality. This means that the Principal and complainant enter and leave the room where the hearing is held together.
- The Chair of the panel should discourage the introduction of fresh documentary evidence at the hearing - there should be every encouragement to produce the evidence in advance so that both sides have time to study it. However, if new and relevant evidence is accepted by the Chair, the Chair will adjourn the hearing for a few minutes to allow everyone to read the document. Both parties must leave the hearing room during the adjournment.

## **Exceptional Circumstances**

For the sake of clarity, the description above does not cover exceptional circumstances which might include:

- The Chair of the AIM Board may not be able to find three AIM Board members who have no prior knowledge of the case.
- If a case has become a major talking point around the community, the Chair can nominate three AIM Board members with minimal prior knowledge. If there are still insufficient AIM Board members able to sit on a panel, the AIM Board will put in place an alternative fair process. This may include consultation with Governor Services (01926 745137) and/or approaching Governors/Trustees from schools within TLET or neighbouring schools.
- A complaint to the AIM Board Complaints Panel will never be against a junior member of staff (it may be against the way the Principal handled a complaint against a junior member of staff) but it is conceivable that a senior manager will appropriately stand in for the Principal. That would need to be considered very carefully but if agreed the senior manager would be 'the Principal' for the purpose of the panel.
- There may be exceptional circumstances in which the complaint is against the Chair of the AIM Board —e.g. for refusing to deal with a complaint. In those circumstances the procedure above would be adapted and every reference to 'Principal' would be read as 'Chair of AIM Board'.

### **Writing the Decision Letter**

The clerk should ensure that they have clear wording stating the panel decision about each of the issues that the panel considered before the panel is allowed to finish. The clerk will use that wording to draft the decision letter. This should be sent to all members of the panel for checking. Once approved by all three panel members, it should be sent to the complainant with a copy to the Principal.

The letter should clearly express how seriously the panel considered the complaint.

The clerk should be careful that the letter sticks to the facts and gives no hint of partiality.

The clerk should ensure that the letter reaches the complainant and the Principal by the deadline stated in a statement by the Chair at the end of the hearing - usually five working days.

### **11. Monitoring Complaints**

As well as addressing an individual's complaint, the process of listening to and resolving complaints would contribute to school improvements. When individual complaints are heard, schools may identify issues that need to be addressed. The monitoring and review of complaints by the school and AIM Board can be useful in evaluating the school's performance.

Any discussion of complaints by AIM Board or others in the school community should not name or be able to identify individuals.

## **12. Equality Statement**

This policy has been equality impact assessed and we believe that it is in line with the Equality Act 2010 as it is fair, it does not prioritise or disadvantage any individual (with due regard to their protected characteristics), and it helps to promote equality across the Trust.

### **13. Monitoring**

It is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees, and those they delegate authority, to ensure that the principles and procedures of this policy are adhered to. The use of this policy will be subject to routine monitoring to ensure its fidelity in practice. The evidence gathered from monitoring at regular intervals shall inform any reviews and future revisions to the policy, and no later than that stated on Page 1 of this policy.

## 14. Appendix 1: Complaint Form

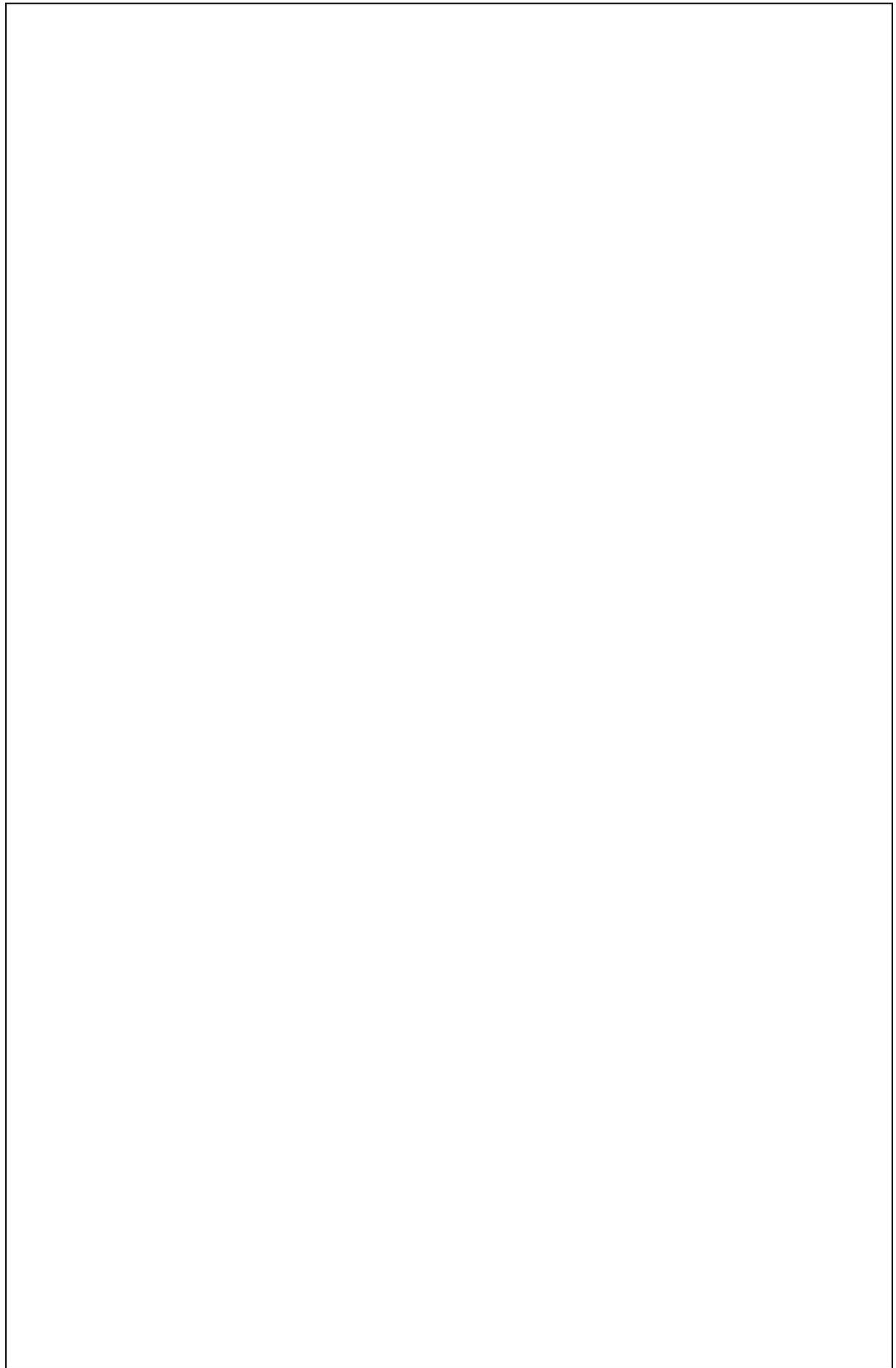
### Transforming Lives Educational Trust (Academy) Complaint Form

Please complete and return to either the Chair or Clerk of the AIM Board at the school address who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Name of Academy complaint relates to:	
Complainant name:	
Complainant address:	
Postcode:	Email:
Daytime telephone:	Evening telephone:
If applicable, name of child(ren) at the school:	
Complainant relationship to the school (Parent, carer, neighbour etc.):	

**Outline below what action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint. (Who did you speak to and what was the response?)**

--



**What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?**

--

**Are you attaching any paperwork? If so please give details.**

--

<b>Signature</b>		<b>Date</b>	
<b>Print Name</b>			

**Official Use Only**

<b>Date of Acknowledgement Sent</b>		<b>Sent by</b>	
<b>Complaint referred to</b>		<b>Date</b>	

## 15. Appendix 2: Mediation

### The Benefits of Mediation

Mediation can be a good way to resolve a complaint because:

- It gives both complainant and the Principal another opportunity to hear each other's points of view (with a third party facilitating);
- It gives the third party an opportunity to help the Principal and complainant explore and build on areas of agreement;
- It gives the Principal and complainant a structure within which they can resolve remaining differences;
- If both the complainant and the Principal emerge from the mediation satisfied, that is the best foundation for a continuing positive relationship between them;
- Even if the complaint continues to a Governor's panel, the issues to be considered should be much clearer.

Mediation may elicit one or more of the responses listed below from either party:

- an acknowledgment that the complaint is valid in whole or in part;
- an apology;
- an explanation;
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again;
- a commitment to review school policies in light of the complaint.

Recourse to mediation must be with the agreement of both parties and is intended to help arrive at a mutually agreeable solution - it is not possible to impose this on either party. Nor does it prevent a complainant having recourse to formal appeals procedures as detailed.

### In-house Mediation

Many Chairs of AIM Boards and other AIM Board members already have the skills, or can acquire the skills to conduct a mediation process between their Principal and a complainant.

The skills and attributes include:

- ability to listen impartially to both sides;
- ability to control a dialogue so that both sides listen to each other;
- ability to summarise the arguments and focus the dialogue;

- ability to identify areas of agreement that might form a basis for resolving one or more of the issues relating to the complaint;
- understanding that solutions cannot be imposed and that both parties need to be satisfied with whatever is resolved;
- understanding that mediation does not always work and there is a further step available to complainants.

### **If the AIM Board Requires Outside Help**

Governor Services offers a mediation service where a trained clerk, governor or adviser acts as mediator.

The mediation 'package' consists of the following elements:

- familiarisation with the background and nature of the complaint (including the reading of supporting documentation and interviews with the complainant, staff and governors as appropriate. These may be 'face to face' or by telephone);
- a mediation meeting between the complainant and a representative of the school;
- a written summary of the mediation meeting including, where appropriate, recommendations in relation to school policies, procedures and actions.

Mediation will be undertaken by a trained clerk, governor or adviser not directly linked to the school in order to ensure complete impartiality.

This service can be accessed on a consultancy basis. The standard cost of the above package is a half day unit. Where the process of familiarisation with the background to the complaint indicates that a half day of consultancy is likely to be inadequate, the school will be advised of this fact before proceeding further.

**To access the mediation service contact Governor Services on 01926 745137.**

### **Support and Training**

For advice or training in relation to the process please contact **Governor Services on 01926 745137.**