

The school complaints landscape in 2025

Insights and priorities for reform

September 2025

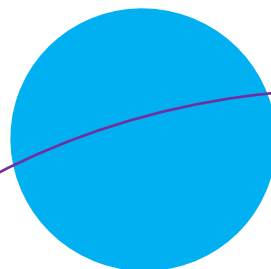
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Insight

A research study by the
National Governance Association



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Acknowledgements

With over 80,000 members, NGA is proud to engage with a growing community through surveys, networks, forums, and conversations via our Gold Advice service.

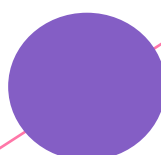
We are grateful to the governance community for generously sharing their experiences, which have helped shape the conclusions of this report.

Special thanks to Megan Tate, Senior Policy and Research Officer, for research design and analysis, and to Sabreen Marashli, Senior Advice Officer, for research planning and reporting.

“This is an important piece of research from NGA. For too long, schools have struggled to prioritise parental engagement, even though poor engagement drives many of the challenges schools face, such as complaints and absence.

It is encouraging to see policymakers now placing parental engagement at the heart of school improvement. The evidence is clear, when parents feel respected and involved, schools are stronger and children do better.”

Jason Elsom, Chief Executive of Parentkind



Foreword

In recent years, a familiar issue has been shared by a huge number of schools. The rise in complaints and reports of a breakdown in relations with some parents is now widely recognised as one of the most prevalent issues impacting the sector. NGA's research has identified this as a leading cause of elevated governance workload.

When announcing the Department for Education's (DfE) plans for reform earlier this summer, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson acknowledged that the complaints system is not working. NGA, along with many other sector bodies and influential voices, has been busy contributing to the debate around how we tackle this. But there is no quick fix or blanket approach that can solve this problem. Society – our relationships, families, and expectations of schools – has become more complex, contributing to the changing nature and causes of complaint. However, we do know that governance can and must be part of the solution – both in preventing complaints arising and helping to treat the symptoms of this phenomenon that has grasped the sector so tightly in recent years.

This report adds to the sector's understanding of the complaints landscape, evidencing the increase in complaints as well as the main topics underlying them. It starts from a neutral base point: this is not a story of us versus them, and NGA is keen to stress that attempts to blame overzealous parents is unhelpful and incorrect. There are improvements to be made by all parties, including how boards approach and engage in impactful discussions about school culture.

Many of the topics at the heart of the rise in complaints reflect systemic issues that have grown rapidly and deviate from well-rehearsed patterns in societal behaviour. In the education sector, we therefore need to go beyond previous approaches and understanding. This is not simply a matter of improving school-level policy or seeking to reduce incidents – we must learn more about the causes and what perpetuates them. Perhaps most notably we also need to explore the prevalent connection between complaints and the challenges gripping the SEND system.

Whilst it is essential that the government tackle wider systemic issues, this is not just a national challenge – communities come in all shapes and sizes, and school context is key to discovering the answers we need. This report draws out patterns and trends to highlight potential improvements and solutions, however, we know that contextual application is vital.

Nonetheless, there is still much that schools and trusts can do to manage concerns as they arise. While many have demonstrated exemplary stakeholder engagement and complaints management practices with parents, there is more to be done across the sector. We simply cannot afford to fall into the trap of portraying parents as villains. As society has evolved, so have the expectations of schools and parent bodies, and the relationships between them need to be nurtured.



We must also face the reality of the toll that vexatious complaints – sometimes made by highly agitated, even aggressive, complainants – have on school staff and leaders. Nothing in this report attempts to belittle that experience; one that no member of staff should face. And that is why part of NGA's response is to urge governing boards to continue to be a supportive ear; one that is both sympathetic and direct in pointing towards potential solutions.

Governors and trustees are spending more time than ever before focusing on strategic contributions to reduce the burden of complaints. In doing so, they are striving to maintain the right balance and ensure parental voices continue to be heard. We know that the sector is united in seeking a more constructive and collaborative relationship between schools and parents that will benefit both groups.

Building on our research, we have set out several recommendations for government to take into consideration when shaping their reform proposals. Our recommendations aim to improve the procedures and practices surrounding complaints to reduce volume, improve efficiency and achieve better outcomes. This should in turn lessen workload demands of staff and those governing, helping to repair the state of relations between parents and schools and trusts.

Sam Henson, NGA Deputy Chief Executive



Introduction

In the past year alone, over five million formal complaints are estimated to have been made by parents about schools¹. This figure reflects a clear and sustained increase in both the volume and complexity of parental complaints in recent years. While this trend is often recognised anecdotally, the data illustrates just how challenging the situation has become. It places significant pressure on school staff, leaders, and governing boards, and risks undermining relationships between schools/trusts and their parent communities.

The government is currently undertaking reforms to the complaints system, with the DfE's Policy Lab conducting research into the issue and new guidance for schools and parents expected in due course.

The publication of this report is therefore timely. It seeks to support the ongoing policy conversation by providing evidence and insight into the nature and themes of complaints received by schools and trusts. Drawing on a range of data sources that present the unique perspective of governors and trustees, it identifies where reform could be most effectively targeted to reduce complaint volumes and strengthen the overall system.

Methodology

This research draws on a range of primary data to provide insight into the volume, nature and themes of complaints received by schools and trusts. The following sources were used:

- **Annual Governance Survey 2024 and 2023:** A national survey capturing responses from governors and trustees across a wide range of schools and trusts. It provides insight into governance perspectives on the handling and impact of complaints.
- **Poll (May 2025):** An informal poll conducted during an NGA webinar with school leaders, governors and trustees. While not representative, it offers anecdotal insight into current attitudes and experiences related to school complaints.
- **Gold Advice case history (January 2024 – May 2025):** Anonymised case records from NGA's Gold Advice service were reviewed to identify recurring themes and areas where schools and trusts are seeking support in relation to complaints.
- **Website searches (June 2023 – May 2025):** Analysis of internal website search terms and page views provided supplementary context on the types of information sought by users, highlighting areas of uncertainty or concern.

We also conducted a small, purpose-designed survey ('**snap survey**') to gather more targeted insights. A total of 205 individuals responded to the NGA survey, which was carried out via Smart Survey between 5 June and 25 June 2025.

The survey was self-selecting and promoted through various NGA communication channels, including our newsletter and events. It comprised six questions designed to gather feedback on respondents' experience of parental complaints. Most respondents governed in a local authority maintained school. Most respondents also governed in primary phase settings.

¹ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/school-complaints-report-2025>

Snap survey demographics

School type	No.	%
Local authority maintained school	87	42%
Single academy trust	19	9%
Multi academy trust	55	27%
Local governing body	44	22%
Total number of respondents	205	

Table 1: What type of governing board do you sit on?

School phase	No.	%
Nursery	30	15%
Primary	141	69%
Secondary	88	43%
All-through	6	3%
Special	16	8%
Alternative provision	5	2%

Table 2: What type/phase of school do you govern at? (select all that apply)

The findings presented in this report are based on the triangulation of these sources to identify common themes and patterns. Whilst some data is anecdotal or self-reported, the combination of sources offers a well-rounded view of current issues and challenges within the complaints landscape.

Key findings

- 82% of governors and trustees say that complaints have increased in their setting over the past 3 to 5 years, with half (50%) reporting significant increases.
- The rising volume of complaints over the past 3 to 5 years is more prevalent for secondary phase settings (where 93% of respondents reported a rise) compared to primary (79%).
- Main topics of complaint relate to special educational needs and disability (SEND), teacher interaction, bullying, school management, and attendance.
- Schools and trusts are also receiving a notable amount of vexatious and unreasonable complaints.
- The top 3 actions governors and trustees think schools/trusts could take to reduce complaints include:
 - have strong parental/stakeholder engagement and communication (42%)
 - take early intervention to prevent escalation (16%)
 - have more effective complaints management processes (11%)
- The top 3 actions governors and trustees think the DfE could take to reduce complaints include:
 - provide more SEND funding (15%)
 - design more robust complaints procedures (13%)
 - manage parents' expectations of schools (11%)

Volume of complaints

A significant proportion of schools and trusts report a rise in parental complaints. 38% of respondents in the Annual Governance Survey (AGS) 2023 stated that their school/trust had seen an increase in the previous 12 months, with 25% reporting an increase in 2024. While 56% of respondents said that complaints had not increased in their setting in AGS 2024, it does not distinguish whether rates had stayed the same or decreased.

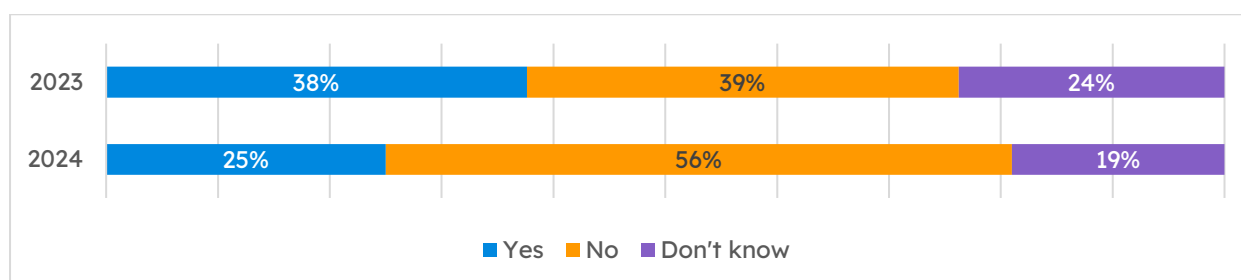


Figure 1: AGS 2024 - Has your school/trust seen an increase in parental complaints in the past 12 months?

More detail can be found in our snap survey which asked about the varying volume of complaints over 3 to 5 years. In this data source, a much larger 82% of respondents said that complaints had increased, with significant increases reported by half of respondents (50%). For the remaining 18%, the majority reported the volume of complaints staying the same (12%) rather than decreasing (3%) or not knowing (3%).

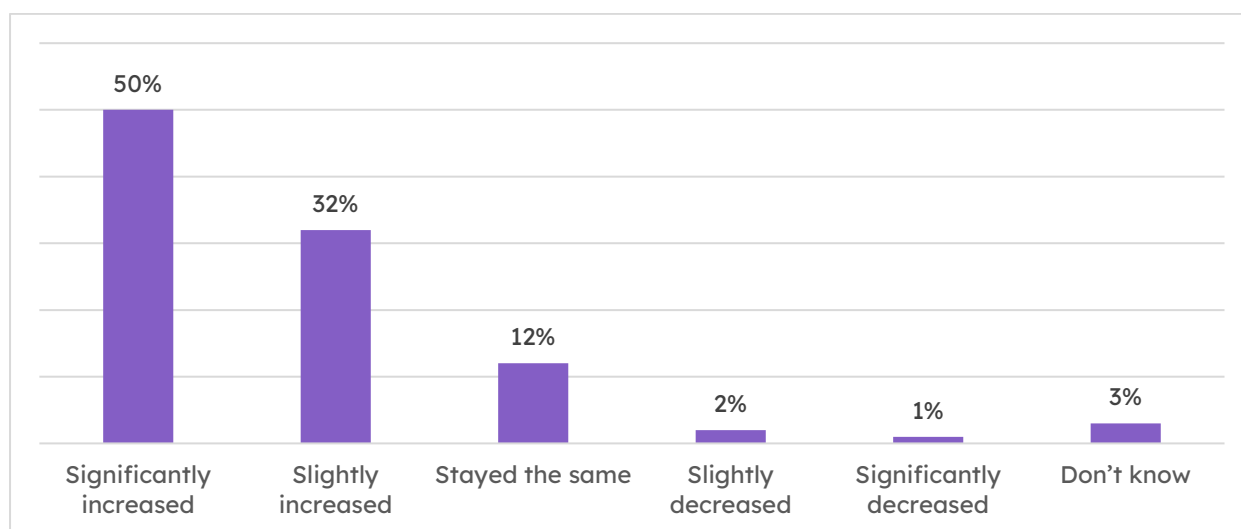


Figure 2: NGA snap survey - Over the past 3-5 years has the volume of parental complaints in your school/trust...?

Demand for support

When viewing the number of searches related to complaints on NGA's website, there has been an overall 64% increase when comparing searches over one year (June 2024 – May 2025) to the same period the year before. This suggests that our members increasingly require support in this area, aligning with the general increase in complaints that schools and trusts are receiving.

By school phase and type

The data shows that the rise in complaints volume varies across school phases. Over the past 3 to 5 years, complaints have increased more sharply in secondary schools, where 93% of respondents reported an increase, compared to 79% in primary schools. Secondary schools have also been more likely to report a significant increase (58%) compared to primary schools (47%).

This trend is reflected in the AGS 2024, which found that complaints grew by 32% in secondary schools and 21% in primary schools over the past 12 months.

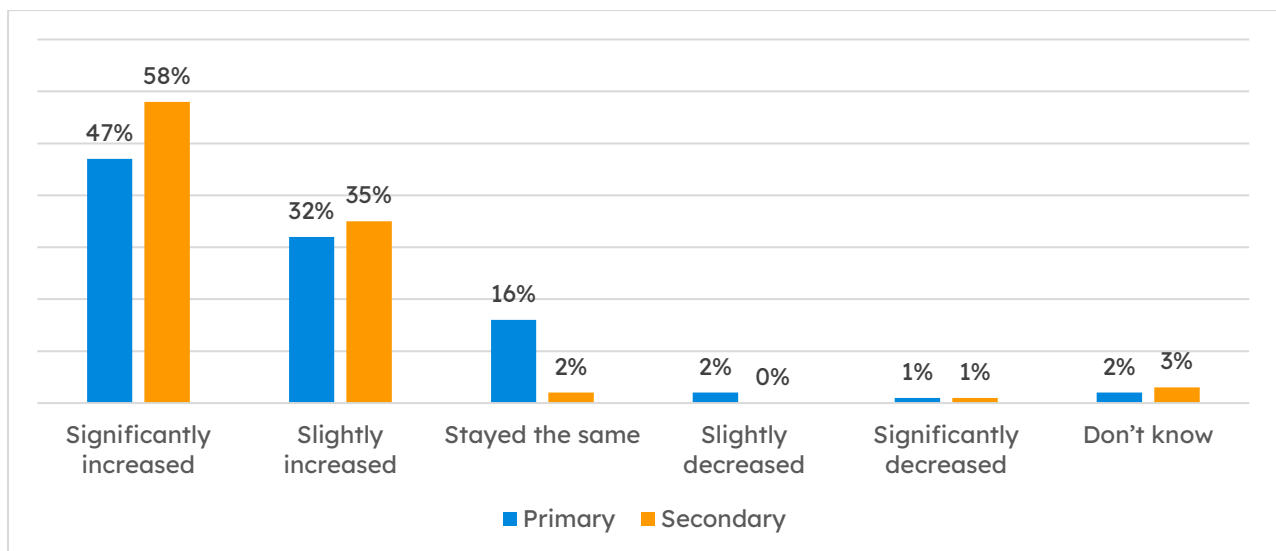


Figure 3: Snap survey, by phase: Over the past 3-5 years has the volume of parental complaints in your school/trust...?

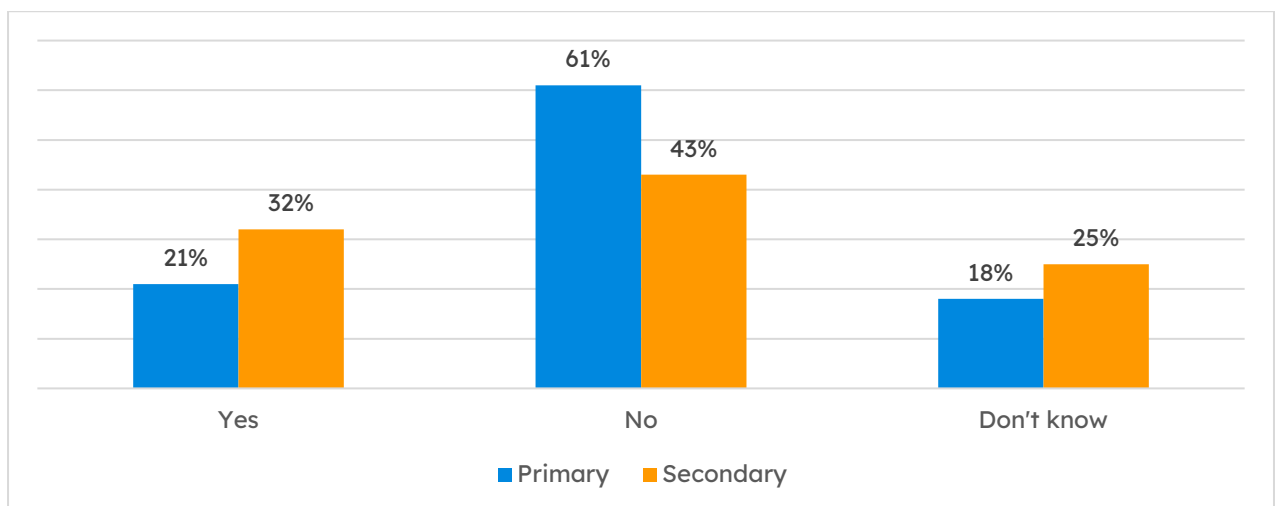


Figure 4: AGS 2024, by phase: Has your school/trust seen an increase in parental complaints in the past 12 months?

There was no notable distinction in volume of complaints by governing board type.

Complaint topics

Our analysis identified five primary categories of complaints received by schools and trusts:

1. SEND

Issues surrounding provision and support for pupils with SEND emerged as the top complaint topic in both the snap survey and poll results, selected by 71% and 63% of respondents respectively. AGS 2024 survey responses also highlight SEND as a significant complaints theme. The details of these complaints mainly centred on a lack of provision; with many parents feeling their children's needs were not being adequately met. The diagnosis and assessment processes for obtaining Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) were also a common reason for complaint.

2. Teacher interactions

This was the second greatest cause of complaint in both the snap survey (59%) and poll (46%). It also took third place in the AGS 2024 (29%).

3. Bullying

Bullying was the third most popular topic of complaint in both the snap survey (42%) and poll (35%). It was also the most common theme in the AGS 2024, reported by 38% of respondents.

4. School management

This was the fourth most common topic of complaint in all data sources, cited by 22% of respondents in the AGS 2024, 35% in the snap survey, and 21% in the poll. Further, complaints against school management, most commonly the headteacher, were the main topic of complaint when members contacted us through NGA's Gold Advice service, referenced in 25% of complaints-related queries.

5. Attendance

While attendance did not feature within the top five topics in the snap survey (11%) and poll (19%), it ranked second in the AGS 2024 (30%).

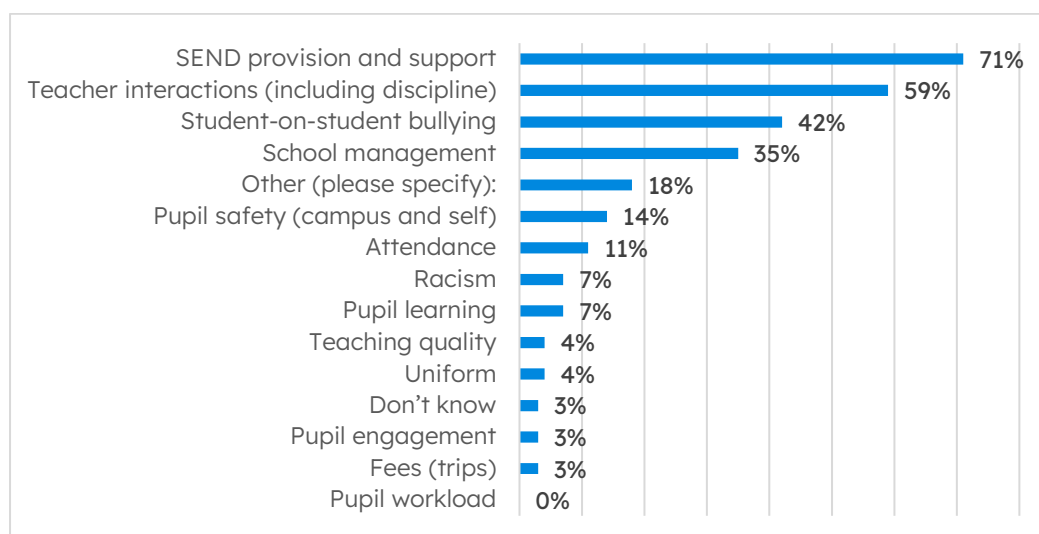


Figure 5: Snap survey – Which topics of complaints does your school/trust receive most frequently?

By school phase and type

Analysis of NGA data highlights that secondary schools receive more complaints related to SEND, bullying, teacher interactions, school management, and uniform. In primary schools, fees (trips) related complaints were more common.

Topic	AGS 2024		Snap survey	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
SEND	n/a	n/a	68%	78%
Bullying	35%	47%	45%	45%
Teacher interactions	26%	38%	56%	72%
School management	21%	25%	33%	43%
Uniform	5%	15%	2%	8%
Fees (trips)	19%	9%	5%	0%

Table 3: Topics of complaint received by schools/trusts by phase.

Variation in data for complaint topics by governing board type largely reflected the trends by phase.

Vexatious and unreasonable complaints

Our research also highlights the prevalence of vexatious and unreasonable complaints in schools and trusts. These accounted for 5% of Gold Advice cases related to complaints, often involving aggressive or threatening behaviour from parents. This finding was further supported by open-text responses in the snap survey, where many respondents reported experiencing such complaints, along with inappropriate behaviour by complainants, particularly through social media.

“Complaints can be vexatious, and complainants make recurring complaints about things dealt with from years previous.”

“We rarely have a complaint that is upheld. Most of the complaints we receive are vexatious based on school enforcing behaviour and other policies. We have also seen an increase in malicious complaints against individual children by groups of parents.”

Reducing complaints

Our snap survey asked respondents what action could be taken by both schools/trusts and the government to reduce complaints.

What schools and trusts could do

- Have strong parental/stakeholder engagement and communication (42%)
- Early intervention to prevent escalation (16%)
- More effective complaints management processes (11%)
- Have strong and consistent policies and procedures (8%)
- Manage parental expectations (6%)
- Complaints management training for staff (6%)

A further 17% of respondents felt that there is not much more that schools can do to reduce complaints.

“They are trying everything they can, but with funding cuts, changes in parental attitudes etc. it is very hard to keep everyone happy.”

“Policies need to be consistently monitored and followed by all staff. School procedures to be stuck to and parent communication to be consistent and timely.”

“We have worked closely with families around their concerns and also CPD with staff has decreased our number of concerns/complaints.”

What the DfE could do

Responses mainly covered the following three themes:

- **Changes to the complaints system** (36%) – including design more robust complaints procedures (13%), reduce the number of bodies parents can complaint to (7%), and provide more support to schools in dealing with vexatious complaints (5%).
- **Changes to the SEND system** (34%) – including provide more SEND funding (15%), improve SEND provision (6%), and quicker assessment and diagnosis processes (4%).
- **Government communication** (27%) – including manage parents’ expectations of schools (11%), assert the authority of schools (6%), and counter the rise in complaint culture (5%).

“Start promoting a positive image of schools and talk about reasonable expectation rather than a sense of entitlement and right to complain if you do not get what you want.”

“Most complaints are around SEND provision, or the impact of SEND pupils on the rest of the class. If the government could fund SEND properly without crippling schools’ budgets and allowing them to increase staff numbers a lot of these complaints would not exist in the first place.”

Recommendations for the DfE

1. Training for school staff

Teachers and leaders sometimes struggle to effectively engage with parents and foster good relations. **Substantive training on working with parents should be a core component of the routine professional development undertaken by school and trust employees.** It should include support on handling difficult conversations and preventing unnecessary escalation, helping to reduce the proportion of complaints which are formalised.

The DfE can consider how this may best be incorporated into existing staff training and CPD programmes (such as the ITT, ECT and NPQs programmes) for maximum reach, reflecting the importance of parent engagement in modern day school practices.

2. Address systemic challenges and collect complaints data

Complaints cannot be isolated from systemic challenges. Without the DfE addressing the sources of complaints, which are often beyond schools' direct control to resolve, schools and trusts will be unable to meaningfully reduce their number. Our research highlighted the prevalence of complaints related to SEND, behaviour, and attendance, showing the need for reform in these areas, and we expect they will receive attention in the upcoming white paper. **We recommend that the DfE collate national data on complaint volumes and topics** to better understand the systemic issues driving complaints in schools, helping to inform priorities for policy makers and evaluate the success of any subsequent reforms.

3. Clarify and coordinate external agency involvement

Complainants increasingly complain to multiple bodies simultaneously, creating confusion and unnecessary workload. We suggest reducing duplication by **creating a centralised system for formal complaints to be raised within**, which are then allocated to either schools or other external agencies in line with the relevant remits. This should be alongside **clarifying the remits of different agencies** to reduce overlap and define clear pathways for escalation.

“Reduce the opportunities for parents to go to external bodies as well as the school e.g. LA, DfE, Ofsted. It's a shocking waste of resources.”

4. Streamline school processes

School-level complaints processes are often slow and burdensome for both schools and parents, while schools are often forced to spend too long on a tiny minority of disruptive parents. We suggest **procedural changes to reduce workload, tackle vexatious complaints and ultimately achieve quicker resolutions.**

Examples include:

- limiting the amount of documentation that both parents and leaders may submit
- standardised complaints forms which manage expectations and ensure complainants specify their desired outcome(s)
- clarifying the circumstances in which appeals are permissible
- establishing the ability for schools to reject complaints from parents who have been abusive or complained excessively in a short period of time

The DfE should explore how to best implement procedural changes, utilising guidance and model policies where possible, while recognising others may require legislative change.

5. Focus on solutions and handle appeals internally

Complaints are often misunderstood as quasi-trials, with the objective of litigating specific incidents to apportion blame. Instead, the focus of the complaints procedure is twofold: conflict resolution, so schools and parents can work together to best serve the child in question; and learning lessons, so schools can review practices and identify areas for improvement. In both senses, **it is right that appeals are handled internally by those governing whenever possible**, so they can seek to find a resolution where executive leaders and parents have failed to do so, and to identify where existing practices have failed and require review as part of governance's ongoing scrutiny work.

External panels might be perceived as more robust by parents, but there is no evidence they are more successful in finding sustainable resolutions between schools or parents, or in delivering successful changes to school-level practice. Instead, we would suggest the opposite, as external panels can make the process more adversarial, pushing the parties towards unconstructive positions of prosecution and defence rather than encouraging transparency and compromise.

Further, given the workload implications for governors and trustees in dealing with complaints, it should be stressed that the actions recommended above are taken to reduce complaint volume and cases of escalation overall so that the governance role remains sustainable.

About us

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning to shape stronger governance. Together, we're raising standards and ensuring every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.



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