



## Safeguarding Children

### Dealing with Complaints ? *Initial concerns*

1. Staff need to be clear about the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints.
2. These key messages deal with complaints but the underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally. In most cases the member of staff or the individual delivering the service in the case of external provision, will receive the first approach. It would be helpful if staff were able to resolve issues on the spot, including apologising where necessary.

### Dealing with Complaints ? *Formal procedures*

3. The formal procedures will need to be invoked when initial attempts to resolve the issue are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the matter further.
4. The Manager will have responsibility for the operation and management of the complaints procedure.
5. An effective Complaints Procedure will:
  - encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible;
  - be easily accessible and publicised;
  - be simple to understand and use;
  - be impartial;
  - be non-adversarial;
  - allow swift handling with established time-limits for action and keeping people informed of the progress;
  - ensure a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary;
  - respect people's desire for confidentiality;
  - address all the points at issue and provide an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary;
  - provide information to the senior management team so that services can be improved.

### Investigating Complaints

6. It is suggested that at each stage, the person investigating the complaint (the complaints coordinator), makes sure that they:

- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved;
- 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;
- interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish;
- conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning;
- keep notes of the interview.

## **Resolving Complaints**

7. At each stage in the procedure staff will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:
  - 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;
  - an undertaking to review council policies in light of the complaint.
8. It would be useful if complainants were encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that Parent Link could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence.
9. An effective procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties. It is also of equal importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

## **Continual Complaints**

10. If properly followed, a good complaints procedure will limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the manager is able to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.
11. Complaints need to be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible. An effective complaints procedure will have realistic time limits for each action within each stage. However, where further investigations are necessary, new time limits can be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

## **The Formal Complaints Procedure**

12. An efficient complaints procedures will have well-defined stages. A flow chart of suggested stages can be found in Annex A. At each stage it would be helpful to clarify exactly who will be involved, what will happen, and how long it will take. There may, on

occasion, be the need for some flexibility; for example, the possibility of further meetings between the complainant and the member of staff directly involved and further investigations may be required by the Manager after a meeting with the complainant.

13. Three stages are likely to be sufficient for most formal complaints:

- Stage one: complaint heard by staff member (though not the subject of the complaint);
- Stage two: complaint heard by Manager;
- Stage three: complaint heard by Parent Link Chair Person/ complaints appeal panel;

14. Regardless of how many stages are necessary, an unsatisfied complainant can always take a complaint to the next stage which will involve a committee member and a complaints panel.

15. An effective procedure will specify how a complaint will be dealt with if it concerns the conduct of staff ..

## **Managing and Recording Complaints**

17. Complaints must be recorded and where necessary passed on to governing bodies, Ofsted or Ombudsman. A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing.

18. At the end of a meeting or telephone call, it would be helpful if the member of staff ensured that the complainant and Parent Link have the same understanding of what was discussed and agreed. A brief note of meetings and telephone calls can be kept and a copy of any written response added to the record.

19. The complaints coordinator could be responsible for the records and hold them centrally.

20. There is a legal requirement for the Complaints Procedures to be publicised. It is up to Parent Link to decide how to fulfil this requirement but details of the Complaints Procedures could be included in:

- The Annual Report;
- the information given to new parents when their children join the Activities or Centre;
- the information given to the children themselves;
- a specific complaints leaflet which includes a form on which a complaint can be made;
- posters displayed in areas of the activities that will be used by the public, such as reception or the main entrance;