



## **Speaking up**

**When children and young people want to complain about school**

**December 2015**

## About the Children's Commissioner's Office

The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield OBE promotes and protects children's rights and best interests. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The Act makes her responsible for working on behalf of all children in England and in particular, those whose voices are least likely to be heard. It says she must speak for wider groups of children on the issues that are not-devolved to regional Governments. These include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales.

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These six young research consultants, with support from Rob Johnson and Liam Cairns at Investing in Children, provided invaluable support for the project as described in the report below.

### **Centre for Research on Families and Relationships**

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) was established in 2001 as a consortium research centre based at The University of Edinburgh, with partners at the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands & Islands and Stirling.

### **Investing in Children**

Investing in Children is an organisation that promotes the human rights of children and young people. One of the things that gets in the way of this is that, in general children aren't taken as seriously as adults - many people still believe that 'children should be seen and not heard'.

Investing in Children tries to change this by creating spaces for children and young people to come together and come up with good ideas, and by working with adults who want to listen and do something about it. This is one of the ways to make the point that children, young people and adults all have the right to have their voices heard – this is a human right.



## Foreword by the Children's Commissioner

Giving children and families an independent voice is at the heart of all I do, and it stands to reason that it's particularly important for this to happen in one of the main places that children spend their time – schools.

School is the place where children grow, learn and navigate their way towards adulthood. As well as the formal business of education and learning it is also a place of relationships, role models and a school community, the experience of which will have a deep impact on children - often for life. It is inevitable that there will be occasions where some children and young people will not be happy with an aspect of their school experience and whilst most of these will be dealt with through dialogue with teachers and school staff it is important that children know that they have the right to make a complaint if they wish to.

This report analyses how schools in England deal with complaints from parents and pupils and highlights the experience of children and young people themselves. It shows that very few schools have a formal complaints procedure and that there is huge variation in the procedures provided. Bullying is a particular issue which children do not believe is being dealt with adequately in schools when reported. Children need to know that when they make a complaint about such an issue, they are going to be taken seriously and that there is a process for dealing with it. This report found that many children do not believe that this is the case.

Schools have a statutory duty to have an effective complaints process. The recommendations in this report aim to improve these processes. Schools should prioritise an open, positive culture where feedback and children's views are valued. Details of how to complain should be included as part of the agreements many schools require parents to sign up to when their children start at a school. Meanwhile information given to parents and carers should also cover the process for escalating complaints beyond the school.

I am also recommending that schools & other statutory bodies should be required to collect data on number and nature of complaints. Finally the Department for Education should release annual aggregated statistics on school complaints.

*Anne Longfield OBE*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Longfield', with a horizontal line underneath.

## Executive summary

### **About this research**

This research explores young people's and parents/carers' experiences of raising, or wanting to raise, school complaints in England. The research sits within The Office of the Children's Commissioner's (OCC) wider remit to investigate complaints procedures open to children and young people. It forms part of a broader programme looking specifically at school complaints procedures.

### *Research questions:*

The research addresses four main and interconnected research questions:

1. Do young people and parents/carers want to raise complaints with schools? If so, what is the nature of these complaints?
2. If young people and parents/carers wanted to complain, did they end up making a complaint?
3. How are complaints dealt with by the school and or other bodies?
4. How would young people and parents/carers like complaints to be dealt with?

### **Methodology**

Researchers from University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research on Families and Relationships<sup>1</sup> conducted the research. Young consultants from Investing in Children<sup>2</sup> informed the research design. The research took place in three local authority areas in England. The fieldwork included group-work with 76 young people, interviews with 22 young people aged between 12 and 18, and interviews with 15 parents/carers.

### **Key findings**

All of the young participants could identify a time when they had either complained about something in school or had wanted to complain about something in school but had not. However, defining a complaint is not straightforward: national policy regarding school complaints makes a clear distinction between concerns at school and school complaints while young people and their families do not. Participants most commonly mentioned two factors when describing something as a complaint: that the situation is having a negative impact on their (or their child's) learning or wellbeing and that they have made a decision to tell someone who they hope can change the situation. Of the young people who had raised a complaint about their school, none had taken this complaint further than their headteacher. Slightly more than half of the parents/carers interviewed had, ultimately, raised their complaint with the school's Governing Body.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crfr.ac.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/investinginchildrencic/home>



Participants identified three common outcomes from complaints: the complaint is resolved; the situation deteriorates as a result of the complaint; or nothing happens. Regardless of the outcome, complaints processes can be very stressful for young people and parents/carers. This is particularly true for parents/carers of children with special educational needs where complaints were often cumulative and took place over an extended period of time. When school complaints are successfully resolved, young people feel listened to, that their views are respected and a sense of pride that they have achieved something. Parents/carers believe that strong leadership from the headteacher is vital for complaints to be resolved quickly and effectively.

Participants perceived that schools took some people's complaints more seriously than others. Young people and parents/carers expressed the belief that once they had gained a reputation for being a 'trouble maker' then they were less likely to be listened to by the school. Participants thought knowledge and support is needed in order to make an effective complaint. Young people thought schools are more likely to listen to parents than to any young people.

None of the young people and only two parents interviewed knew that their school had a formal complaints procedure. Several young people did not realise they could complain to anyone with more authority than the headteacher. Other participants had asked how to complain about their school and had received information that was unhelpful and at times seems to have contradicted the DfE guidelines (2014). Participants wanted schools to provide clear and accessible information about the school's complaints procedure.

Participants repeatedly expressed the view that successful complaints procedures need to be embedded in a positive school culture. The majority of young people and parents/carers thought their school does not have a positive attitude towards complaints. Instead schools are viewed as 'scared' of complaints, as trying to dissuade young people and parents from raising complaints and as 'closing ranks' when a complaint is raised. A positive school culture welcoming feedback would make it less likely that young people and parents/carers would need to complain. If they did need to complain, they would be more optimistic that the complaint would be successfully resolved.

Young people who perceived that they had a strong relationship with at least one teacher in the school tended to express more optimism about school complaints. When they did raise a complaint, these young people were more likely to consider the complaint successfully resolved. Parents/carers felt that small problems at school should be communicated earlier to them. The school and home could then work together to find solutions and prevent minor problems from turning into major problems. Both young people and parents/cares observed that complaints were often a build-up of multiple minor issues that, with better communication from both sides, could have been prevented earlier.

## Introduction: About this report

### **Aim of the research**

This research explores young people's and parents/carers' experiences of raising, or wanting to raise, school complaints in England. The research sits within The Office of the Children's Commissioner's (OCC) wider remit to investigate complaints procedures open to children and young people. It forms part of a broader programme, looking specifically at school complaints procedures.

### **Research questions**

The research addresses four main and interconnected research questions:

1. Do young people and parents want to raise complaints with schools? If so, what is the nature of these complaints?
2. If young people and parents wanted to complain, did they end up making a complaint?
3. How are complaints dealt with by the school and or other bodies?
4. How would young people and parents like complaints to be dealt with?

### **Scope and methodology**

A full methodology is provided in appendix one.

The research, conducted by researchers from the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research on Families and Relationships<sup>3</sup>, focuses upon the perceptions and experiences of young people and parents in three local authority areas in England. The local authorities were selected by the OCC in advance of this research. The research design was supported by a group of six young research consultants from Investing in Children who met with the researcher three times and whose role is described fully in appendix one<sup>4</sup>. The fieldwork, which took place between October 2014 and January 2015, included:

- group-work with 76 young people aged between 12 and 22 (all but five participants were currently attending secondary school)
- face-to-face interviews with 22 young people aged between 12 and 18 (all but one of whom had also taken part in group work)
- interviews with 15 parents (13 by telephone and two face-to-face).

The majority of these participants self-selected in response to information provided by the research team. A minority of participants were identified and directly approached by schools and other organisations (as discussed below), as people who might be interested in the research.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cfr.ac.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/investinginchildrencic/home>

There were no specific criteria for young people to take part in the group work aspect of the research, other than recent experience of a state secondary school. Interviews were conducted with a smaller group of young people and parents who had raised a complaint in their or their child's secondary school, or who had wanted to raise a complaint but had decided not to do so.

It was originally intended that the majority of young people and parents would be contacted through schools but, as described in appendix one, schools (with one exception) chose not to engage with the research. Participants were identified primarily through a wide range of out of school provision. We suggest that this methodological challenge is also a research finding, supporting the views of young people and parents presented in this report, that schools tend not to encourage open communication about complaints processes.

### **Definitions**

In this report the phrase "young people" is used to describe all school students who participated in the research. OCC generally uses the phrase "young people" to refer to people from 14 to 25 years of age. The majority of student participants in this research (68 out of 77) fit this category while seven participants were either 12 or 13 years old.

The research also spoke to young people's parents and carers. Of the 15 parents and carers who participated in the research 14 were parents and one was a grandmother of a school student. Throughout this research the word "parent" is used as shorthand to refer to these participants collectively.

This research seeks to understand how young people and parents understand complaints. However, after young people's definition of a complaint was discussed in group work the following definition (provided by OCC) was offered as a discussion point:

*A complaint is a clear expression of dissatisfaction, however made, by a person or persons with a legitimate interest in the school (but not being employed at the school or on the governing body)*

*A complaint covers the following:*

- *If you are not happy with the school*
- *If you feel that any action by a staff member of the school e.g. headteacher, teacher, or anybody else working under the direction of the headteacher, etc. has affected you child or other pupils*

Differences in how complaints were defined are discussed in the conclusions of the research on page 60.

## Chapter 1: Context

### **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

This research is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by the UK government in 1991. This is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty and states that all children (under the age of 18) are born with over 40 fundamental and universal rights outlined in the 54 articles of the convention. By agreeing to the UNCRC, the Government has committed itself to promoting and protecting children's rights by all means available to them.

Article 12 of the UNCRC promotes children's rights to have their views heard and taken into account in the process of making decisions that affect them. Also, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's general comments provide additional information on children's rights to access a complaint system. The UNCRC's General Comment – the right of the child to be heard - states:

*Legislation is needed to provide children with complaint procedures and remedies when their right to be heard and for their views to be given due weight is disregarded and violated. Children should have the possibility of addressing an ombudsman or a person of a comparable role in all children's institutions, inter alia, in schools and daycare centres, in order to voice their complaints. Children should know who these persons are and how to access them. In the case of family conflicts about consideration of children's views, a child should be able to turn to a person in the youth services of the community. (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009: para 46)*

In addition, the UNCRC's General Comment – the rights of children with disabilities - states:

*Institutions providing care for children with disabilities are staffed with specially trained personnel, subject to appropriate standards, regularly monitored and evaluated, and have accessible and sensitive complaint mechanisms. (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006: para 43(f))*

### **Previous research**

The current research on school complaints is limited, and particularly limited on young people, parent and carers' experiences of raising school complaints. Recent English research by McKenna and Day (2012) found that the majority of school complaints were resolved within individual schools or local authorities. For complaints that were not resolved at a local level, responsibility had changed several times over recent years and the current research takes place as policy continues to change. In such a context, hearing children's views in particular is essential since McKenna and Day find that, "the scarce mention of pupil involvement in complaints was noticeable during the research" (2012: 79). They emphasise the need for further

research to understand children's needs in regard to understanding and accessing school complaints procedures.

The same study suggests that specific groups of young people may be more likely to have complaints in school but may not find school complaints procedures accessible. These groups include, although are not limited to, looked after young people, young people with special educational needs and young carers (McKenna and Day 2012: 79). This mirrors the broader literature on children and young people's participation in decision-making, which suggests that some groups of young people may be less likely to participate and emphasises the need for processes and approaches that are sensitive to their specific needs (see, for example, Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Children in Scotland, 2012).

Research has considered the school experiences of young people who have been identified as most likely to find complaints procedures in accessible and which has relevance to this research. Harker and colleagues (2003) explored looked after young people's experiences of school, the factors that they perceive hinder their education and their suggestions for improvement, raising relationships formed with teachers and social workers as a key issue. Dyson and colleagues (1998) explored the relationships between different agencies, including schools, supporting young people with special educational needs (SEN). They included data from interviews with 44 parents of children with SEN and observe that parents are more concerned with the individual experience of their child than the details of the procedures for agencies working together. Dearden and Becker (2003) reviewed the research looking at young carers' experiences in school, identifying a range of specific challenges faced by young people and some solutions that schools could use to meet these young peoples' individual needs. Further, Burke and Grosvenor (2003) asked children and young people with a wide range of life experiences about their ideal school and found that many of their visions relate to a broad desire for positive school cultures rather than specific changes related to policy or procedure.

### **Existing policy context**

Under section 29 of the Education Act 2002, every maintained school has to have an individualised complaints procedure and they have a duty to publicise it (DfE, 2014). A distinction is made between a concern and a complaint; according to both the Department for Education (2014) and Ofsted (2014) a concern becomes a complaint if the headteacher is not able to resolve the concern. This is the point at which the school's complaint procedure is activated.

The online guidance on developing a complaints procedure provided to schools by the Department of Education (2014) states that it:

*...does not limit complainants to parents or carers of pupils registered at a school. A complainant could be a member of the wider community or representing an ex-pupil. (DfE, 2014: 4)*

Nowhere in this guidance is there explicit recognition that the complainant could be a student. Therefore, the guidance presumes that a young person will not be making a complaint and thus there is no consideration of how the process would work for young people.

The complaint procedure will differ depending on the individual school (how they deal with internal complaints) and particularly the type of school (what happens if the complaint goes beyond the school):

In a *Maintained School* if a complaint is not resolved in school it should be directed to the board of governors and subsequently to the local authority. If the complainant subsequently believes that “there has been ‘maladministration’ by the local authority which has caused ‘injustice’” then they can take the complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (Coram Children’s Legal Centre (CCLC), 2014). However the Local Government Ombudsman can no longer consider complaints about individual schools and, if all other complaints procedures have been exhausted, such complaints can be directed to the Secretary of State.

In an *Academy*, if the school and the Governing Body fail to resolve a complaint, the complaint should be directed to the Education Funding Agency (EFA) who will examine whether the complaint breaches the funding agreement (CCLC, 2014). Alternatively, if the complaint is about a whole school issue rather than an individual student, a complaint about either a Maintained School or an Academy may, either during an inspection or between inspections, be directed to Ofsted (Ofsted, 2014; IPSEA, 2014).

There are specific complaint routes available for parents and carers of young people with *special educational needs (SEN)*. An appeal to a SEND tribunal can be made by either a parent or a young person who disagrees with a local authority’s decision not to assess for an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or not to provide an EHCP after an assessment. Before they progress to tribunal the parent or young person must provide evidence that they have sought advice from an independent mediator. A tribunal can also examine complaints where a parent or young person considers that the educational requirements of an EHCP have not been met by the school. It is also possible for parents and young people to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman if they feel that the school is not fulfilling their responsibilities as outlined in the EHCP<sup>5</sup>.

Where parents or young people believe that a school has acted unlawfully they can seek legal advice about the possibility of taking legal action (ACE, 2007). However, there is currently no legal aid available for such cases and Coram Children’s Legal Centre suggests that this should be a last course of action since it could negatively affect the relationship between the complainant and the school (CCLC, 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.specialneedsjungle.com/day-4-flow-chart-disagree-sen-provision-lack>

A more detailed overview of school complaints procedures is provided by Coram Children's Legal Centre (2014) and practical advice to parents about how to negotiate these procedures can be found in the guide written by the Advisory Centre for Education (2007). A flow chart developed by parents in collaboration with the Department for Education looking specifically at SEN complaints is available at <http://www.specialneedsjungle.com/day-4-flow-chart-disagree-sen-provision-lack/>. However the policy and legal contexts within which school complaints take place are liable to change and it is therefore important complainants refer to the specific complaints procedure provided by their individual school.

## Chapter 2: Do young people and parents want to raise complaints with schools? If so, what is the nature of these complaints?

The report now moves on to explore young people's and parents' perceptions and experiences of school complaints processes, using the four research questions (see above) as a guide to structure the data.

All of the young people and parents who took part in the research could identify something about their school or their child's school about which they wanted to complain. The following section starts by discussing how young people and parents define a 'school complaint' before going on to look at the most common issues about which they had wanted to complain.

### **What is a school complaint?**

The ways in which young people and parents define 'a school complaint' are multiple and complex. Young people and parents suggested a range of different possible responses to not being happy with something happening in school including: moaning, asking for help or support, making suggestions, giving feedback, campaigning and making a formal complaint. The boundaries between these different responses are often not clear and in some cases several responses occur simultaneously.

When discussing what makes a reasonable school complaint, young people and parents repeatedly said that a school complaint was justified when the education or wellbeing of a student was affected by something that was happening in school. They suggested that a complaint includes a request for action to be taken and for something to change. This view is exemplified by one young person:

*A complaint isn't just something you don't agree with; everyone is entitled to their opinion. A complaint is where something needs changed because it impacts on students' safety or learning. (group-work)*

A further essential aspect of a complaint is communicating it to someone. One 17-year-old young man said that the aim of a complaint is "to express your unhappiness about something" while another suggested that there are effective and less effective ways of expressing this unhappiness:

*When you don't like something you have to articulate yourself right to try to make sure that something gets done (group work).*

Distinctions were made about the object of the complaint. For example a complaint about something happening in school might be a complaint about the school, about a particular teacher within the school, about one of the school rules or about another student. These distinctions are not, however, always straightforward. While young people debated about whether being bullied by another student is a school



complaint (many thought that this is asking for help from the school while others thought that it could be a failure of school bullying policies), all thought that if you asked for help and it was not received, then a complaint about the school is justified.

Defining what is a reasonable complaint is not straightforward since it depends on both the context and the individual needs of different students. Examples given were that it would not be reasonable to complain that you do not like your school lunch if it were simply about personal preference, but it might be reasonable to complain if you found a hair or a piece of glass in it. One young woman argued that the quality of the school dinners could be of more importance to some students whose parents cannot afford to provide them with nutritious food at home. In another example, groups discussed whether it would be reasonable to complain if the teacher said that you could not go to the toilet during class-time. Most groups agreed that if this were a school rule then it would not generally be reasonable to complain about this, although some groups debated about whether this is a fair and/or effective school rule. However, in each group at least one young person suggested that if you had a health condition where you needed to use the toilet and you were not allowed to, then this would be grounds for complaint. Even in these two brief hypothetical examples, the complex ways in which school interacts with other aspects of young people's lives is clear.

Other young people and parents talked about how a complaint often occurs as a result of a build-up of minor issues that could have been dealt with more positively. In some cases young people and parents had repeatedly asked for help or given feedback but felt that they had either not got the help they needed or that the feedback had not been accepted and acted upon. In other cases parents and young people acknowledged that they did not communicate these minor issues, rather moaning about them with friends or assuming that they would 'blow over', but instead they built up and became a bigger issue. While not inevitably the case, the most common outcome in such circumstances was that the young person or parent concerned complained in an angry emotional outburst and sometimes ended up getting into trouble as a result.

### **Informal or formal complaints?**

As noted above, it is not clear when a response to something happening in school moves from asking for help or giving feedback into making a complaint and when it moves from informal to formal complaint. Most participants judged the formality of the complaint by who is complained to. Young people almost always suggested that in the first instance they would talk to the person closest to the issue that they are unhappy about. For example, if they were unhappy about something that had happened in a class, they would start by speaking to the specific teacher involved, but if this did not get resolved they might talk to a head of year, member of support staff or the headteacher. None of the young people involved in this research had complained about their school outside of the school, although several said that they would have liked to do so if they had known the necessary information.

The parents that participated in the research were more likely than the young people to escalate a complaint outside of the school staff to the school governors or to the local authority. Eight out of 15 parents had done so (five with children in Academies and three with children in Maintained Schools) and each of these eight parents perceived that their child had special educational needs. In these cases parents talked about the importance of keeping a paper trail and of the hierarchy of written complaints over verbal complaints. This is exemplified by this parent's statement:

*My son finally got excluded and when I met with the EWO [Educational Welfare Officer] she threatened me with court. But I'd had kept all the letters and emails that proved that I had been wanting a meeting with the HT to talk about how to keep him in school. All hell broke loose. (interview: parent)*

Other participants judged the (in)formality of the complaint by whether it was spontaneous (in the heat of the moment) or had been planned in advance. One young man explained in an interview that young people are less likely to make formal complaints because this is not how they operate in their daily lives, saying:

*A formal complaint is to go to someone who has power over the person you are complaining about and express the complaint in a calm manner....To explain what you are not happy about and what impact it is having on you....But young people are not used to making formal complaints. This isn't how our family lives work, we just say stuff when it comes up and have arguments.*

There were rarely clear lines expressed between informal and formal complaints for young people and parents. For different people a complaint may become more formal depending upon the person complained to, the form that the complaint takes or the premeditated nature of the complaint.

### **What is the nature of the complaints that young people and parents want to raise?**

The following section describes the content of complaints raised by young people and parents. The nature of these complaints was often complex and contained several interconnecting issues that had sometimes been occurring for a long time. As can be seen throughout this report, this clustering of problems and responses is significant and difficult to untangle. However a few most common types of complaints emerged, as outlined in this section.

#### *Student's learning needs not being met by the school*

This was the most common complaint raised by parents, particularly where their children had special educational needs (SEN) or other challenging circumstances in their home lives.

Repeated examples were given where students were punished for poor behaviour that parents considered to be a symptom of their particular SEN or where parents

believed that their child's education was suffering because their individual needs were not being taken fully into account.

*[My daughter] can't be in big classes; there is too much going on, too much stimulation, she can't wait to listen to instructions so she gets detentions, but then she can't do after school detentions because she needs to stick to the same routine (interview: parent).*

Several parents complained that their children had been excluded from school, and therefore missed out on their education, at specific times (just before trips or before an Ofsted inspection). They thought that the school found the children difficult to manage and the school either did not want to be seen as failing to cope or wanted to be seen as a school without challenging students. As one parent explained:

*Whenever there's a school trip he gets excluded the day before because they can't manage him (interview: parent).*

Young people who took part in the research were very clear that they are at school to learn and that anything that interferes with their learning is a reasonable complaint. For example, one young man aged 17 described having no computer access in school even though his course required online work. He perceived that there was an assumption that he would have access at home but his family could not afford to have Wi-Fi. Another young man aged 13 who had just moved to a new school described how "every lesson we have a different teacher and we end up either just copying off the board or doing something we've already done." He mused "what's the point of going to school if you are just going to redo your work?"

#### *School not being sensitive to students' home circumstances*

Young people and parents repeatedly shared examples of when difficult aspects of their lives outside school were not taken into account within school. On occasions the school was completely unaware of home circumstances and on other occasions young people and parents felt school staff had not taken the time to understand fully the context and the impact that it was having on the student's school life.

One grandmother described how her granddaughter had to miss school after the grandmother had an accident that left her unable to manage on her own. However, despite explaining the circumstances to the school, this time out of school was marked as unexplained absence and therefore affected her granddaughter's attendance record. The school did attempt to provide support for the young woman concerned by organising a counsellor. However, even though the counselling sessions were organised by the school they also counted this time against her attendance record which, in turn, affected the choice of college courses open to her. Another mother described how the break-down of her relationship with her son's father had impacted on her son's behaviour at school and also her relationship with the school, who she perceived had failed to listen to her warnings about the situation and took her ex-partner's 'side' in disputes.

Several young people described complaints that related to teachers who had some awareness of their home situations and shared it with other people in ways that the individual considered inappropriate. For example, one young woman was dealing with a complicated and stressful family situation; she described what had happened when she had gotten into trouble in school:

*One teacher tried to stick up for me and say that I had a lot going on at home but then another teacher made me explain my home situation in front of the other students which I was very unhappy about. I suffer from depression and was stumbling and crying, I was scared of explaining it to them, I didn't want everyone to know. (interview: young woman, 14)*

Another young woman who had recently moved into foster care described how, despite trying to be helpful, the school had caused her more stress by not respecting her privacy:

*The safeguarding co-ordinator in school kept singling me out and asking me how my new family were in front of other teachers and students. I didn't know who knew I was in care and I just didn't understand what was going on (interview: young woman, 18).*

In both of these cases teachers recognised the relevance for the school of circumstances external to the school but did not respect the students' privacy when addressing these issues.

#### *Bullying and how schools deal with bullying*

As noted, the group work sessions debated about whether bullying by another student would be a complaint about that student or about the school. Bullying was the most common issue about which young people wanted to complain. Some young people complained that teachers do not take their concerns seriously whilst other students complain that their teacher's actions had made the bullying worse. Further, questions were raised about the school's responsibility if the bullying happened out of school time or online.

Young people's stories about bullying were varied and complex. Sometimes the bullying appeared to be fairly straightforward targeting of one person by another person or groups of other people, sometimes because the target was in some way 'different'. However more commonly the stories wove a complex web of peer relationships where friendships had broken down and sometimes both sides of the dispute were accusing the other of being the bully.

#### *School rules that are perceived to be unfair*

Young people repeatedly discussed school rules that they thought were unfair. They wanted to complain about such rules because they either did not agree with them or because they did not understand how the connection between the rule and their education.

The most commonly raised examples related to school uniform. Although there were mixed views about the principle of wearing school uniform, complaints often arose from the rigidity of the uniform policy. For example, one young woman wanted to complain because she had her leather jacket confiscated on a day when it was raining heavily, even though it was her only waterproof jacket. For some young people these complaints were about practicality, while for others they were about the school needlessly suppressing their individuality. Students did not understand why they could not dye their hair certain colours or wear makeup in school.

One young man was told that he could not remove his jumper in class on a hot day; he said:

*It does my head in anyway that we have to all look the same, it's just about stripping us of our individuality. They say that we have rights and then we come to school and can't even take our jumper off and if I say anything about it I'm called a stroppy teenager. What is the point? How does this affect our learning? Surely that should be the priority?*

This young man went on to explain how having to wear a jumper in class on a hot day makes it more difficult for him to concentrate and therefore negatively impacts on his learning. Other students also felt that certain school rules are actively interfering with their education. One young woman described how she wanted to attend extra revision classes for an exam subject but was told that she had to follow her timetable which included classes for a different subject that was not examined.

Young people understood that schools need rules that help them to run well and to support their learning. Most did not think it reasonable to complain that you are not allowed to do something that is against the school rules. However, they wanted to understand why these rules are in place and to be able to challenge them.

#### *Problems with specific teachers*

Other situations were described by young people and parents where particular characteristics of a specific teacher and the way that they interacted with students (or a specific student) caused a problem.

In group work young people discussed the fine line between 'banter' in class and crossing over a line into 'taking the mickey' or 'singling one person out'. In these discussions most young people acknowledged that this line is not always entirely clear and that teachers have to tread carefully.

*It's important for a teacher to have a sense of humour but I'd complain if a teacher were taking the mickey all the time (group-work).*

Others pointed out that everyone has bad days and, in addition, that it is unreasonable to expect to get on with everyone, there are going to be some teachers that you just do not get on with.

Several young people described situations where they had wanted to complain about specific teachers whose behaviour they thought was unacceptable.

*We had a teacher who hated school and talked all the time about how he hated it and all the pressure. We had to listen to that, about how crap the school was and be like 'we can't really comment can we?' (group work)*

*There was this teacher who chewed gum...he would tell the pupils to spit out their gum if they were chewing-as school policy said students shouldn't chew gum, but he would sit there chewing. (group-work)*

Both of these quotations reveal a student's frustration in an unequal power relationship with a specific teacher. However, in each of the situations described above, although the young people found the teacher's behaviour annoying they did not raise a complaint because they did not think the complaint was serious enough for anyone to take it seriously.

However, young people repeatedly suggested that a teacher's behaviour crosses a line where either a student's learning or wellbeing is compromised as a result. One young person described complaining after having her social anxiety triggered by a teacher who repeatedly singled her out in class and asked her to read saying that he was trying to build her confidence. Others talked about situations where teachers thought they were bantering with a student but their teasing actually gave other students a sense of permission to target that person, with the potential for a bullying situation to develop.

By the time that parents became involved in complaints about specific teachers the situation tended to have escalated and parents repeatedly described a particular teacher as bullying their child. One student and his parents both told how one teacher's bullying behaviour towards him had legitimised the bullying behaviour of his classmates. Several parents of children noticed that it was particular teachers in the school who were always the ones that complained about their child and, in turn, complained about these teachers, believing that their child was being victimised by these teachers.

## Chapter 3: Making decisions about whether to complain.

This chapter describes the multiple considerations that come into play when making a decision about whether or not to make a school complaint. It draws particularly upon data from the group work sessions with young people and interviews with parents and young people where they discussed the decision making process about whether or not to make a complaint.

Of the 22 young people who took part in interviews, only four had never complained to the school. However, the 18 interviews involving young people who had complained to the school were rarely linear narratives of one problem where a complaint had been made and a conclusion reached. Many of these young people told stories of complex situations where they made multiple decisions about when and how to complain based upon a wide range of considerations including: whether they perceived a complaint would make any difference; whether they felt that they could resolve the situation themselves; and whether they possessed the information in order to make a complaint. The complaints raised by the 18 young people were all contained within the school and the headteacher was the most senior person to whom young people complained.

In group work sessions small groups of young people were asked (as described in appendix one) to create characters and write a story about what might happen if their character wanted to complain about something in school. Combined with group discussion after the exercise, these stories provide information about young people's perceptions about common complaints and what is likely to happen in these situations. Twenty-two of these hypothetical characters and stories were developed across the eight group work sessions. Of these 22 characters, 13 chose to complain and nine did not complain. Of the 13 characters who complained, in four stories the complaint was positively resolved, in seven stories nothing changed as a result of the complaint and in two stories the outcome was ambiguous or unlikely to be a lasting solution. Mirroring young people's reported own experiences, all of the complaint stories played out within the school.

All of the 15 parents interviewed had raised complaints with their child's school. In particular, parents whose children had special educational needs or disabilities described ongoing and multiple occasions on which they had raised complaints with the school. One parent reflected the views of this group of parents when she said:

*Being the parent of an SEN child is a full-time job. By virtue that you have a child with autism you have to complain.*

Eight of the 15 parents had taken complaints above the headteacher to the school's governing body, to the local authority or out of the school to other agencies. Similar to young people, parents described ongoing multiple decisions about when, whether and how to complain about different aspects of their situation based on a combination of their past experiences and also their perceptions of the likely outcomes.

The following sections explore the three most commonly expressed factors in whether young people and parents who want to complain about school decide to complain.

### **Is the complaint likely to be successful?**

The perception of whether or not a complaint will have a positive outcome is the biggest factor in young people's decision about whether or not to complain. Overall young people in particular were not optimistic that their complaints in school would be successful. Of the 22 hypothetical complaint stories developed in group work sessions only four of the 13 characters that complained achieved a positive outcome.

Nineteen of the complaint stories were written by young people attending mainstream schools and three by young people attending special schools. It is therefore, notable that two of these four complaint stories with positive outcomes were written by young people who attend special schools. In addition, the third complaint story written by young people attending special schools had a positive resolution as well: a teacher noticed that something was wrong and resolved the situation, without the young person needing to complain. The nine young people who generated these stories attend several different special schools and compared their schools to mainstream schools, which several of them had attended in the past.

They displayed more optimism about raising things that they were not happy about in school and suggested that this was because they had stronger relationships with their teachers than students in mainstream schools. Another optimistic 'complaint story' related to a complaint about girls not being allowed to wear trousers in school. In this story, the student council negotiated with the headteacher to change the school rules so that girls in their final year of school could wear trousers. This story was written by a group of young women whose optimism about making a complaint may have been related to their own positive experiences of being involved in the student council in their school.

Where the character in the 'complaint story' chose not to complain, the most common reason given was that they did not think that it would make any difference. These stories variously stated that the character was 'not listened to' or that their complaint was 'ignored' or that the teacher listened but 'nothing happened'. Similarly, in interviews, all four of the 22 young people who had never complained in school gave the main reason for this decision as not thinking that complaining would make any difference and therefore considering that it would be a waste of their time. For example:

*I didn't want to complain and waste my time, I knew it'd go in one ear and out the other (interview: young woman, 15).*



Several young people also suggested that this was a widespread attitude amongst school students:

*When we are not in lessons we are doing something fun – people don't want to give up their time to complain about things that happen in lessons. And people get discouraged, they say that it won't work so why bother anyway. (interview: young man, 17)*

One young man went further, suggesting that schools deliberately suggest that they are open to hearing complaints but in reality nothing will happen as a result.

*There's no point in making complaints...they sugar coat it and make you feel like you've got a choice, they say 'tell us how you feel', but nothing happens (interview; young man, 15).*

Some young people made distinctions between the types of complaints that would result in action and the types of complaints that would not. In one group work session young people discussed that there are justified complaints about learning in school but that could not result in action because they are outside the school's control, such as a shortage of teachers. In such cases, students just had to put up with the situation. Other young people talked about it being more effective to take certain issues, particularly related to issues with their peers, into their own hands because the school would either not take them seriously or would make them worse.

Parents were more likely to expect that a complaint would result in action. They often perceived that getting a satisfactory outcome could be time-consuming and difficult, but still felt like it was important to complain and were less likely to cite pessimism about the outcome as a reason not to complain. This could reflect that parents tend to get involved when complaints are considered more serious.

*Is there a fear that the complaint could have a negative impact?*

Parents were more likely than young people to perceive that making a complaint could end up having a detrimental effect. The majority of parents interviewed suggested that they considered this possibility before they decided to complain. One parent summed this up by saying:

*You have to be careful with schools because they take care of my child (interview: parent).*

In this interview the parent was implying that the school might not be happy if she complained and that making a complaint could somehow backfire on the wellbeing of her child.

While all of the parents interviewed had gone on to complain at least once, a few suggested that they sometimes chose not to make a complaint because of the perceived potential negative impacts of complaining. For example, one parent

perceived that, despite her unhappiness with many things happening in the school, she was making progress towards resolving the situation. Therefore, she did not want to upset the school, which had power in decisions that still needed to be made, by making another complaint:

*I don't want to rock the boat. He's on a trial managed move and we want it to be successful. In six weeks we have to sit down in front of the managed move board and they could still send him back to the PRU. (interview: parent)*

Other parents perceived that if they repeatedly complained about things happening at their child's school they would get a label as a trouble-maker. One parent was concerned that when she phoned her child's year office they recognised her voice because she had complained so many times and that every time she got in touch they assumed that she wanted to make a complaint. She said that she did not want to get a reputation as the parent who always complained and therefore sometimes resisted contacting the school even when she was trying to make positive contact in order to support her child. Another parent described how, after she had successfully complained about her son's special educational needs not being met, other parents had asked her to help them to complain but that she did not want to get involved because she did not want to be seen as "the leader of the trouble-makers". These parents were concerned that if the school identified them as trouble-makers then it might impact on their children's education.

Where young people did raise concerns about the possible detrimental impacts of complaints, they were not concerned about how their school viewed them but about the impact of any action resulting from the complaint. Of the 22 hypothetical complaints stories written in group work sessions, two described scenarios where complaining had a negative impact. Of the nine complaint stories where the character decided not to complain, four told stories where the character did not complain for fear of making the situation worse. All of these six stories, where the potential for a negative impact was expressed, were about complaints related to bullying and the ways in which schools manage bullying. Two fears emerged from these stories: firstly that the bullying would get worse as a result of the teacher's intervention and secondly that the teacher would not believe the child making the complaint. One young woman expressed both of these fears and the complexity of the situation, saying:

*I was getting bullied and my mum told the year office. I was really nervous because I didn't want to get dragged into a meeting where the two of us had to talk to each other. They talked to the girl concerned and she stopped bullying me to my face but started spreading stuff behind my back. Then my tutor got involved and he clearly took her side. I didn't feel listened to. I didn't want to complain about the teacher because I didn't want to get in his bad books and she was also complaining about me so it was complicated. (interview: young woman, 14)*

### **Does the complainant feel able to complain and know how to complain?**

Both young people and parents described times when they did not feel able to complain, because a lack of personal capacity, knowledge or accessible accurate information about how to complain, or a code of honour, prevented them from complaining. Young people almost invariably had no idea where they would go to complain about their school.

Many parents and young people described how they are emotional and confused, at the time they want to complain. A potential complaint arises because a child or parent is not happy about something happening in school and emotions are often high. Young people commonly used words such as 'angry', 'upset', 'scared', 'worried', 'lonely' and 'helpless' to describe how they felt when they (or their imagined character) wanted to complain.

This sense of confusion is mirrored by the parent of a young man diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She said that as a Jamaican woman recently arrived in England she did not know about ADHD and had no idea about the school system or that she should push to get a statement for her son. With hindsight she felt aggrieved that she should have received more support but at the time she did not understand what was happening and no-one provided her with information about how best to help her son.

Before a decision about whether or not to complain is made, the person needs to be aware that there is a decision to make. Several young people and parents, including the two examples above, indicated that they had not understood the options open to them. For example, one young woman described how she and a group of friends complained to the headteacher about the way in which a teacher had shared confidential information about one of their friends. The headteacher told them to take the issue to the student council. However, they did not think that would help since they thought that the student council only dealt with practical issues about the running of the school rather than personal issues about individual students and, anyway, they did not know who their student council representative was. They decided not to take the complaint any further.

Participants varied in their levels of knowledge about complaints processes and structures. A few young people who were involved in their school's student council knew more about this particular aspect of the school's complaints procedure and therefore were more likely to use it. Those parents who chose to complain outside of the school staff to the board of governors or local authority were either receiving support from a solicitor or specialist agency or had been school governors themselves and knew the system.

Other parents talked about not understanding the complaints procedure and so not knowing who they should complain to about any given issue within the school, nor how to complain outside school. One parent described how she had asked the headteacher how she could complain about the school and had been given a sheet of paper with a telephone number on but when she called the number was out of

use. Another parent described getting a telephone number to complain from the school website but not having called it yet because she did not know who it was for or what would happen when she called.

Finally some young people (from several different schools) talked about how they could not complain about another person in the school (student or teacher) because it would be seen as 'snitching', which is totally unacceptable. This is exemplified by one young person:

*This city has a culture of 'not snitching', we wouldn't even think of it, you just deal with something yourself (interview: young man, 17).*

From this perspective, complaining is seen as breaking the unwritten set of rules. Young people described these rules as having two different aspects; firstly you should always avoid getting another person into trouble and secondly if you did complain about someone you will be labelled as a snitch, which is considered to be a bad thing.

## Chapter 4: How are complaints dealt with by schools or other bodies?

In individual interviews, young people and parents were prompted to describe and reflect upon the 'story' of the school complaint that they had raised. They were encouraged to start with what was happening before they raised the complaint, through the process of complaining, to the final outcome of the complaint and whether the original situation changed as a result. This chapter explores these stories and the experiences of having raised a complaint in school.

These stories varied considerably. A few were discrete, linear, stories of a single issue that was taken through some form of complaint procedure and resulted in a clear outcome. The majority of stories, however, described a complex interweaving of issues that involved multiple interactions with the school and a further blurring of the already unclear boundaries between support, communication, complaints and feedback.

This section draws on the similarities and differences between these stories to explore, firstly, three possible outcomes that participants experienced as a result of a school complaint and, secondly, several common experiences that occurred during the process of making a school complaint.

### **Complaint outcomes**

When young people and parents raise a school complaint they do so because they want something to change or happen: e.g. an apology or recognition. The outcome of the complaint, therefore, relates to whether anything changed as a result of the complaint and whether the complainant is satisfied with this change.

#### *The complaint is resolved*

Young people who were happy with the way that their complaint had been dealt with and resolved all described one discrete complaint and a clear support structure that enabled the student to participate in dealing with the complaint. As one participant described:

*My timetable was changed, my friends all stayed together and I was put in a class with people who didn't work. I felt upset and didn't want to talk or eat – I didn't feel myself. In the end I went and complained to the year office and we talked about it. (interview: young man, 13)*

At first his year office suggested changing his seating plan but that did not really work because some of his teachers did not follow the new plan. He went back to the office and they decided together that after each class he would go to the year office and report how the class had been. It became apparent that a new seating plan was sufficient in some classes but in one or two classes he was still struggling so they agreed that he could move to a different class.

*It felt good, like they cared and were trying to help me. They listened to me and involved me in conversations about what would happen... It's 100% better now; the year office has been there since day one helping me. I thought that it would take ages but now I feel like I'm back to myself again.*

Two other young women described how they had taken their complaints to their school's student council, with one of the complainants being a representative on her student council and the other raising her complaint with her class representative. One complaint related to the lack of matches that girls' sports teams had in comparison with boys' sports teams and the other related to girls being able to wear trousers in school. Both of these complaints were resolved to the satisfaction of the young women: the girl's basketball team has permission to organise a tournament with other local schools and girls in their final year of school are now allowed to wear trousers. Both young women commented that they felt listened to and both expressed pride that they had raised the complaint and achieved something for the school.

Parents also discussed the importance of supportive people to the successful resolution of complaints. One parent described how she had only been able to obtain a statement for her child because she had been able to hire an experienced and supportive lawyer (as discussed below, page 45). Others, whose children had to move school as a result of the situation that caused the complaint, were able to compare two different schools and their attitudes to complaints. Three out of four such parents suggested that strong leadership is important in order to resolve difficulties and suggested that if there had been a stronger headteacher at their child's previous school there may not have been a need to complain in the first place.

*If there had been a stronger headteacher it could have been nipped in the bud. The headteacher needs to be approachable and friendly but everyone needs to know he's the boss. (interview: parent)*

#### *Making the situation worse*

Several participants described situations where schools had taken action that had made the original situation worse.

There were both young people and parents interviewed who felt that they had been let down by their school when they raised a complaint. One young woman, with a group of friends, had complained about a teacher sharing confidential information about one of her friends. She described going to the deputy headteacher and the headteacher, neither of whom did anything except telling the teacher concerned that the young people had complained. This teacher then spoke to the original student concerned and made the situation worse. Although the interviewee was not sure what had been said in that situation, she described feeling bad because they made the situation worse for their friend. However she said that in some ways she was pleased that they had complained because now she understood more how the school works:

*I learned how unhelpful the school is, that the teachers stick together and that if something is inconvenient to the school they will brush it under the carpet. (interview: young woman, 14)*

One parent described how she felt that her son's educational needs were not being met by the school and as a result he was getting into trouble because he was bored in class. She went to see the headteacher who said, "It'll be looked into, it'll be sorted," but it never was and she felt that both she and her son were being treated unfairly by the school. She described teachers having loud conversations with her in front of other parents or staff about private details of her home life and her son's special needs. She decided to make a written complaint to "the head of SEN" on the board of governors:

*I got a letter from the governors but they were very careful how they worded it, just saying that it would be dealt with. Then a few weeks later my son was excluded. I just got a phone-call one evening to say that the governors had had a meeting and he was excluded. They didn't even invite us to the meeting. It was very upsetting for both of us.*

In contrast to the example given above of the young man whose problem with his class seating plan was resolved in collaboration between school and complainant, here a meeting was held without the young person or parent present. The conclusion that this mother drew from the situation is that the school had wanted to exclude her son and that her complaint had given them an excuse to do so.

Other participants felt that schools had acted with good intentions but their actions had still not had the desired result. One young woman described how, as a result of an ongoing complaint about the way that the school had dealt with a bullying incident, arranged for her to have self-esteem classes. However, she felt that her self-esteem had been fine until she was told that she needed self-esteem classes:

*Self-esteem classes lowered my self-esteem. I didn't think I had low self-esteem before. (interview: young woman, 14)*

Another young man had suffered bullying from other students after he had been singled out in class by several different teachers. He had since moved from primary to secondary school but the bullies had moved with him and the bullying had continued. He described how his parents had talked to the school, the school had arranged a counsellor for him and had spoken to the bullies. He did not know what else the school could do:

*...but mostly I just sit there in class feeling miserable, I do my work and I'm glad to go home. I hate school so much. (interview: young man, 14)*

### *Nothing happens*

The majority of interviewees suggested either that nothing had happened as a result of their complaint or that they did not know what had happened as a result of their complaint.

For a few young people the situation had either resolved itself or things had changed but they did not know whether that was as a result of their complaint. One young woman described how in Year 7 she had complained to a teacher about how the prefects let their friends push into the queue every lunch-time and she had to wait in line for most of the break. The next year the queuing system at lunchtime changed but she was not sure if that were a coincidence.

A frequent experience described by parents was that of feeling like they were 'pushed from pillar to post' trying to get information about what was happening in response to their complaint. This lack of information was very frustrating for many parents and several suggested that the school was purposefully avoiding speaking to them or even withholding information.

Two young people believed that their complaint had been deliberately ignored by the school. One described how almost a whole class of students repeatedly complained to the headteacher because of the attitude of one of their teachers who had favourite students to whom he gave much more time and attention. He described what happened next:

*We just got the impression she wanted to get us out of the room as quickly as possible. She just said 'yeah yeah...I'll see if I can sort it out'. Nothing happened. We went back five or six times but still nothing changed. My foster carer went in and complained and also several other parents but still nothing happened. Nobody knew what else to do and in the end we just finished that school and I went on to a different sixth form. (interview: young man, 18)*

Another young man described how he had been blamed for another student swearing at a teacher in class and had been excluded.

*I got taken out of the lesson and, even though I kept saying I didn't do it, she said that I did it and there was no investigation needed. She said 'I know it was you because you are that sort of a person'. She judged me; she got muddled up and a teacher always has to be right. The school just kept saying that I had anger issues and they wouldn't listen to me because of my anger issues so I got excluded for one week for verbal abuse. I wrote a complaint letter to the Head of Year and my parents wrote as well cos they 100% supported me as they knew it was not in my nature to do that. I suspect the letters got screwed up and put in the bin – we didn't get any response. (interview: young man, 17)*



Although these two complaints had both happened more than a year before the interview, both of these two young men were still angry about how the school had dealt with them and both perceived that the incidents had negative impacts on their grades and their lives:

*My grades suffered because I didn't get the help I needed and I just started getting negative, I didn't listen and didn't care anymore. I felt like: my voice isn't being heard, so what is the point? (interview, young man, 18)*

*My anger went off the scale and I started going really downhill. I ended up having to leave the Spanish class and taking diazepam for anxiety...I missed out on a GCSE and this year I needed one more GCSE to get into the college course that I wanted to do. (interview: young man, 17)*

Several other young people talked about upset and anger resulting from feeling that their complaint had been ignored. For some this resulted in a build-up of emotion and an explosion mirroring the hypothetical 'complaint stories' described on page 27.

*The Headteacher spoke to the bully and said that if there was one more incident they would be excluded but that never happened. My complaining made no difference.... I was really really upset, crying myself to sleep every night and mum was ill at the time so I was looking after her too. In the end I took things into my own hands, the bully pulled a chair from under me so I stabbed him in the face with a pen. I got put into a classroom for two weeks on my own and I felt like it was my fault and the bullying carried on for a little while but then it ended. I guess he knew I was going to react if he did anything. (interview: young woman, 15)*

Just as this young woman ended up resorting to finding her own solution to the situation, two parents also ended up taking matters into their own hands when they felt that their complaint had been ignored. In both cases these were complaints about bullying and in both cases the parent, frustrated by a lack of action from the school, approached the parent of the child named as the bully. In one story this ended with the two parents having a physical fight on the school grounds. The other story had a more positive conclusion, although the parent thought that it should not have been necessary:

*We started off by talking to the school but they kept saying 'let's have a new start' and then nothing changed. So it ended up with his father going round to the house of the kid who was bullying him and talking to the parents. They were reasonable and had a good conversation, but that shouldn't have had to happen. It should have been sorted out through school. (interview: parent)*

### **Shared experiences in the process of raising a complaint**

The complaints process is a stressful process: Many interviewees described complaints that were ongoing at the time of the research, in some cases for several years. Even where the final outcome of the complaint was positive, many young people and parents discussed how the process of raising a complaint can be complex and involve several different stages. Participants expressed a range of challenging emotions and worries that accompany this process and discussed how complaining in school impacts on other areas of their lives.

Sometimes the process was stressful because of the amount of time that the participant waited before they complained. One young woman described how she had eventually received counselling after complaining about a stressful situation but felt that they school should have listened to her and seen that she needed this support much earlier.

*In year 7 I was seeing a boy who tried to touch me and I called him a pervert and a paedophile. I didn't know what it meant but he complained about me and the year office accused me of calling him gay. They believed him more than they believed me and it felt horrible, like they weren't listening to me. I was still angry with him because he never apologised for what he did. I was the victim but the school treated me like I was the bad guy. I needed support and I didn't get it... I didn't know who to complain to because they are the people that you are supposed to complain to. In the end I complained to the head of year and she put me into counselling. (interview: young woman, 13)*

A similar theme of not feeling listened to was reflected by a parent whose child also ultimately received counselling, but only after the parent had made a series of complaints about the school's lack of sensitivity to her son's challenging circumstances at home:

*In the end (my son) got a counsellor but the whole [complaint] process was completely crazy. They could have just taken some time to listen to me and find out what was going on and given him a counsellor at the beginning and saved a lot of hassle at a really difficult time for all of us. (interview: parent)*

The process also impacts upon the child's life. For example, a grandmother described how her granddaughter missed time in school and suffered ill-health as a result of the length of time required to sort out a complaint:

*In the end it did get sorted out and she was allowed back into college but it really affected all areas of her life. She got really ill with worry. (interview: grandmother)*

Several parents of children with special educational needs, who felt that their child's school did not meet their child's educational needs, described long, complex processes of trying to get their child moved to a different school. One parent

described how, although at the end of this two-year process her son had moved to a special school that caters specifically for his needs, she had been left with chronic diabetes caused by stress.

*I was in tears all the time. Every day my face was swollen.... I had brain overload with no help for two years. (interview: parent)*

After a long and complex period of conflict with the school about her son's education, another parent commented that, for every complaint she wanted to make, she had to ask herself the question: "Is it worth my stress to complain?" (interview: parent).

### **Schools' attitude towards complaints**

There was a widespread belief from participants that complaints about school are viewed as personal criticism and that school staff want to make it difficult for young people and parents to complain. One young man drew a distinction between being encouraged to complain about other students but not about teachers:

*We are told to tell a teacher if we've got a problem with a student but the school doesn't encourage you to say if you have a problem with a teacher... in schools, making complaints about teachers is like calling the police about the police (interview: young man, 17).*

Both young people and parents described a lack of access to information about school complaints procedures. While this could be interpreted simply as a need for more information, participants tended to perceive this lack of information as indicative that schools want to avoid complaints. For example:

*I didn't know I could complain in school. In social services I got a leaflet called something like "Have Your Say!" saying how to complain, but there is nothing like that at school. (interview: young woman, 18)*

*I had to go on to the Council's website to find out that I could write to the Chair of the governors because it wasn't on the school website. The Council website said that I could also take it to an independent tribunal but I've got no idea how to do it so I don't think it's worth the stress. (interview: parent)*

In other interviews young people and parents described feeling deliberately misled and given unhelpful or inaccurate information. For example, one parent described how she had tried to complain but felt that information had been deliberately withheld so that she did not know how to take the complaint further:

*I sent complaint letters to the Head of Children's Services, the Head of the Borough, the Attendance and Welfare Manager and the chair of the governors. I only got a response back from Children's Services saying that they don't get involved in school admissions, but they didn't tell me who I should contact. It's ridiculous – they must know. (interview: parent)*

Participants perceived that schools are scared of complaints because they do not have the capacity to deal with them when their focus is on achieving academic targets. A fear of Ofsted was mentioned repeatedly as shifting concern away from student wellbeing. Both young people and parents perceived that as long as young people are getting the grades, schools consider that they are fine and if they are not getting the grades then schools want to get rid of the young people. For example, one parent said:

*It feels like they just want him out of the way because he is not getting an A\* and because we are telling them that they need to do better for him (interview: parent)*

Parents repeatedly used the phrase 'closing ranks' to describe how staff within a school support each other after a complaint has been made. Young people perceived that, where a complaint is one person's word against another, teachers always believe other teachers:

*I tried to complain but there isn't really any point. Every time we complain the teachers find a way to go against us, they say we are lying. The school believes teachers because they think they are all older and wiser...and anyway they are all friends. (interview: young woman, 14)*

Other parents extended the perception of 'closing ranks' to include other professionals outside of their child's school. One parent described how she had requested a place for her child at a different school because she wanted him to 'have a fresh start'. She was refused after the headteacher from his existing school contacted the potential new headteacher. Another parent was angry to discover that the personal information that she had discussed with her social worker had in turn been shared with the school:

*I was working with the social worker but they were all working against me. They were trying to break me down as much as possible and get rid of [my son]. I told the social worker that I was going to get a solicitor, she told the school and suddenly all their attitude changed. (interview: parent)*

This experience of the school's attitude changing when a solicitor became involved was not unique. Another parent described how she was given the wrong information by the school; after she was given advice from a solicitor, the school accepted that they had been in the wrong and her son was placed on a managed move which was successful:

*I called [my son's] caseworker in school who said that there was no other option and he would get sent to [name of PRU]. I got in touch with a solicitor who said that they had to offer him a managed move first before they could send him to a PRU. The school is an academy and they like to make their own*

*rules up and change policies at the drop of a hat to suit themselves. But when I found out the truth they had to follow the law. (interview: parent)*

### **Schools listen to some people's complaints more than others**

The repeated perception among young people was that head students and student council members have good relationships with the teachers and so they would get listened to if they made a complaint. Students labelled as "trouble-makers" get attention but the wrong sort of attention. Schools do not make the effort to understand what is going on for them. Students in the middle are ignored as long as they are doing their work. Young people interviewed who were on their school's student council seemed to suggest that this perception is true. They were most likely to be positive about their school's attitude to complaints but admitted that student councils are not accessible for all students and that if a student were considered a trouble-maker the school would be less likely to listen to that student.

*I could do it because I'm already involved in a lot of things. I'm a prefect and I'm on the student council and I'm on [the local youth forum]. It's kinda like I just know how things work. (interview: young woman, 15)*

Young people had found that schools are more likely to listen to parents than to any young people. In particular schools are likely to listen to parents who know their rights and know how the complaints' process works.

*Dad was a governor at the school and when he got involved the school started taking it much more seriously. They had a meeting with my dad and the boy's dad and he was excluded for a week. When he came back he didn't talk to me much which was fine. My dad being a Governor was what made a difference. He knew how to take it further if the school didn't listen. They sorted it that day! I'm glad that dad complained but would have preferred them to listen to me and sort it out without him getting involved. (interview: young woman, 16)*

Not all parents, however, felt like they were listened to by schools when they made a complaint:

*I was in one meeting where I tried continuously to get a word in and I was told to 'shush' and that 'if you would just listen'. In the end I had to bang my fists in the table and say 'no, you just listen to me'. I felt like I was being talked to like I was a child, like I was being told off. (interview: parent)*

There was a shared view amongst the majority of the parents interviewed that parents need to have knowledge and support in order to make an effective complaint. One parent talked about how she had paid for this knowledge and had spent over £12,000 on independent experts and witnesses and a solicitor in order to get her child a statement. She described how other parents from the school asked her how she had managed to get the statement:

*I'm embarrassed; I don't want to tell them that they need to have money. There is something fundamentally wrong with the system for complaining about schools. I just thank God that our business is going well. (interview: parent)*

Other parents talked about how they were able to access the knowledge necessary to be taken seriously through non-profit sector support and advocacy services. However information about such services was limited. Out of the 15 parents interviewed only five said that they had received support from an organisation. All of these five parents described the support that they received as extremely useful but all of these had found out about this organisation either by chance or by word of mouth:

*Now I found out about [advocacy organisation] just through googling about support and they've been amazing – they are like my rock. I've learned all about the legal situation now and the school have to take me seriously cos I know what I'm talking about, but I don't want to be in this position, I just want to be a mum. (interview: parent)*

As with young people, some parents expressed the belief that once they had gained a reputation for being a trouble maker then they are less likely to be listened to by the school. Other parents felt that the school is less likely to listen to them because they are a single parent, because of their ethnicity or because they do not have enough money.

*They think that you are less important if you are a single parent. They think I'm not a good mother and I won't care. (interview: parent)*

*Schools listen to white people who have money. They don't listen if you are poor or if you are Black. It's true, because they are all white. They'll say it's not true but it is true. (interview: parent)*

## Chapter 5: How would young people and parents like complaints to be dealt with?

This chapter presents young people's and parents' ideas and priorities for strengthening and improving school complaints processes.

The Office of The Children's Commissioner has produced a list of "Common Principles for a Child Friendly Complaints Process"<sup>6</sup>. These were modified specifically for this piece of research, as described in appendix one. This modified document was used in group work with young people to explore the ways in which they would like schools to deal with complaints. Young people were asked two questions about each of the principles:

- Do you think this should happen?
- In your experience, does this happen in your school?

After each statement the group had a discussion about their answers, particularly where there was discrepancy between answers to the two questions.

After the exercise, where time allowed, there was a more general discussion about the participants' ideas about how schools could make complaints procedures more effective and accessible. This question was also asked to all young people and parents who took part in interviews. This section uses the data from these discussions and conversations to examine the ways in which young people and parents would like to see schools deal with complaints.

### **Principles for a child friendly complaints process**

Young people overwhelmingly agreed that schools should follow the modified version of principles for a child friendly complaint process, although they were far less likely to agree that these principles reflect their experiences in schools. The eight principles for a child friendly complaints process discussed with the groups are:

1. Schools should value and respect young people and spend time building good relationships with them.
2. When a young person complains, schools should see it as a positive opportunity to learn and improve the service that they provide.
3. Young people should be involved in making decisions about what will happen if they complain about their school.

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4. All young people should be able to get information about how to complain about their school. This information should be available in lots of different formats, including online, that are easy to understand for all young people.
5. All young people should have a choice of different ways to make a complaint.
6. When a young person complains, they should get a written response and then have an opportunity to give feedback to that response. Where possible the written response should be discussed with the young person.
7. Staff should get training in listening to young people and dealing with their complaints.
8. All young people should be able to speak to an independent person who can give them advice and support about how to complain in school.

On the few occasions where young people disagreed with one or more of these principles, discussion revealed that they did not fundamentally disagree. They were concerned that the principle might focus attention on one thing at the expense of something more important. Examples of this included:

- In one group session, young people discussed that having a choice of different ways to make a complaint would be ideal but that it is more important to have one way that everyone understood and that is effective.
- In another group, young people discussed how getting written feedback is not as important to them as verbal feedback, which they felt was more personal and demonstrated that the person cares about them as an individual and has taken time to talk to them. The principle of feedback is still considered vital and they agreed that, in an ideal world, students who complain would get both verbal and written feedback. Young people's views here differed from the majority of parents' views, many of whom considered written feedback as vital in order to maintain a paper trail of the complaint so this could be used as evidence.
- When asked about whether students should be involved in decision-making process about schools complaints, a distinction was made between being involved in developing the complaints' process and being involved in decisions about individual complaints. While young people who had complained appreciated being involved in the process of finding a solution to their specific complaint, others suggested that students should not be involved in final decisions saying that they would be too harsh on people who are being complained about. Discussing students' involvement in developing procedures, many young people expressed frustration that even if this did happen, it would be student councils who would be involved and that they



do not genuinely reflect the views of all the students in a school.

- One young woman worried that staff having training on how to listen to young people and deal with their complaints might distract teachers from focusing on teaching and learning. She felt that it was more important that the school should provide specific members of staff whose job is to support students. However other young people in the group argued that all teachers need to have these skills since the teachers are the adults in school that spend the most time with students.

While there was broad agreement that schools *should* follow these principles, there was also broad agreement that school currently *do not* follow most of these principles. The sections below examine the steps that young people and parents would most like to see schools take in order to move towards these principles.

### **Start by building a school culture that values feedback and open communication**

When asked about how schools could deal with complaints differently, participants' comments related most commonly to school culture more generally rather than complaints' processes specifically. As discussed, young people did not make clear distinctions between asking for help, making suggestions, giving feedback and complaining. However a large majority of young people perceived that schools think of complaints as negative. One young person suggested a change in language saying:

*We just need to change the word. To complain is negative, full stop. So if you change the word...query or suggestions maybe...then schools might not be so scared. (group-work)*

Others agreed that changing the emphasis from complaints to feedback or suggestions would be useful and also perceived that the responsibility should be upon the schools to ask for this information so that issues are picked up before people need to make a complaint. This view is exemplified by:

*Schools should be proactive about finding out students' problems and trying to fix them. They should find ways to ask, "have you got any problems?" and to consult about things going on in the school. They have done it before but it could be better. (Interview: young man, 15)*

*[There should be] proactive and confidential ways of making suggestions about things in school; less than a written formal complaint but an opportunity to let off steam and raise more minor issues. By the time it gets to a complaint it is usually made up of lots of nit-picky things. Last year at the end of term I wrote a letter of nine pages of little things that I was unhappy about in the school. I didn't send it because it was petty, but if the school wasn't so defensive about little things they could be finding them out and sorting them out as they go along (interview: parent)*

Other parents and young people acknowledged that there are things that schools currently do to collect feedback like this, but it is not seen as authentic or effective:

*We have a school council but nothing really changes. Teachers need to be willing to talk to students and listen to what they have to say. (interview: young woman, 15)*

*Researcher: "Do your schools have suggestion boxes or anywhere you can give your ideas?"*

*Young person: "Only about food or toilets, nothing we actually care about." (group-work)*

*Parents and schools should be working in partnership; we need to talk about what is and what isn't acceptable as a whole school community. Rather than just sending questionnaires out to cover their back with Ofsted there should be community meetings looking at solutions to the problems – and the Senior Management Team need to attend those meetings. (interview: parent)*

While the parents and young people above suggested methods to gather feedback, others focused on the importance of open communication in the school culture. One young man suggested not only moving away from the word complaint but also from the idea of a complaints process, saying:

*If I wanna make a complaint I wanna make a complaint there and then, but they tell you that you have to this and that and I can't be bothered. It shouldn't need to be so serious, to write a letter or involve parents or speak to the Headteacher, we should just be able to say that we are not happy about something and have a conversation. (interview, young man, 17)*

Several parents focused on the importance of conversations and suggested that if the school initiated such conversations they might not have to complain so frequently. For example, talking about her son who has special educational needs and whose behaviour is challenging, one parent said:

*They could call if he has had a bad day or bad few days so that we can talk through strategies. It would be good if they just recognised that I'm his mum and sometimes I've got ideas about what works. (interview: parent)*

Another parent echoed this desire to communicate with the school before things become a problem saying:

*I'm just trying to nip things in the bud before I have to take it further but I feel like the school thinks 'oh God, it's her again' (interview, parent).*

While many participants acknowledged the pressures upon their time that teachers face, both young people and parents expressed the view that, if relatively minor problems were not recognised and dealt with then, they could escalate into bigger

problems or complaints that were more difficult to deal with. This was especially true for parents of children with special educational needs:

*He sees how far he can push the teachers and they need to deal with it earlier, but the teachers say they don't have time. Then he erupts and gets into trouble. (interview, parent)*

A very high proportion of young people who took part in group work said that when a young person complains, their school does not see it as a positive opportunity to learn and improve the service that they provide. However, a small number of participants suggested that their school has a more positive attitude to complaints:

*It's not like they do a happy dance if someone complains, but they do try to keep the students happy and they do take complaints seriously. (group work)*

*They tell us that everyone is there to listen to us, and everyone is there to help us be the best person that we can be. (group work)*

### **Take action and tell us what has happened**

Young people and parents want to know what the correct complaints process is and they also want to know that it has been followed. The process of making a complaint was stressful for many participants and they described things that could have been done during that process to make it less stressful.

It was important particularly for young people that they are treated seriously when they make a complaint. One group of young people generated a list of the ways that a school should treat a student who makes a complaint:

*Listen to us, tell us all the information, don't shelter us, be very open and honest, treat us like an adult, don't patronise us, do what you say you are going to do. (group-work)*

Another young woman had similar reflections, when she suggested that schools should:

*Investigate the complaint properly and look for evidence, listen to everyone equally rather than just believe one person, tell you when they've done something. (interview: young woman, 14)*

Honesty and fairness are seen as particularly important. Young people understood that there may be reasons why a complaint cannot be resolved but they want to have a conversation where someone takes the time to explain the reasons and discuss any other possible solutions.

Parents also wanted to be treated as equal partners by the school and to be kept informed about what happens as a result of their complaint. For example:

*It would help if I didn't have to chase them for every tiny bit of information about what is happening. If they were just straight with me then I wouldn't get angry and phone, making demands. (interview: parent)*

### **Provide clear information for students and parents about how to complain**

Young people and parents all agreed upon the importance of information about how to deal with a situation about which they are unhappy in school. One young person commented that:

*We need to know that it's okay to complain if something's going on and we need to know how to do it (group work).*

There was widespread agreement that neither young people nor parents understand their school's complaints process, which causes frustration and stress at a time that is likely to already be stressful.

*We didn't know who to talk to and we spent a lot of time racking our brains and working out how to handle the situation – that was stressful. Posters in schools could be helpful. (interview: young woman, 13)*

Indeed young people were sometimes surprised to hear that there is a formal process and many suspected that this process does not always work as it should:

*Teachers and schools should be consistent, but often the system seems random. Sometimes something gets done and sometimes it doesn't. (group-work)*

*Whether things change depends on who you go to and whether they've got the time and the power to do something about it. (interview: young man, 17)*

Several participants suggested that schools would not find it difficult to produce better information:

*Students are at the bottom of a hierarchical structure and we don't get to see the top levels so we don't know who to go to. It would be easy to produce a simple document outlining the complaints structure. Schools should make it clear:*

- *What each person has responsibility for*
- *Who you should go to for what*
- *How the chain works. If I go to one person and they don't do anything, who do I go to next? (interview: young man, 17)*

*[It would help to have] a clear structure written down of who to go to for different complaints....this could be included on a more informative and user-friendly website. (interview: parent)*

Others noted that such information should not only include who to go to but more nuanced information about what will happen that might help a young person decide whether or not they want to complain.

*Students don't trust that complaints will be dealt with confidentially. They also worry that if a student complains about a teacher, the teacher will find out and if that is part of the due process, the students need to know what due process is. (group-work)*

### **Prioritise building individual relationships with all students**

As has already been noted, the group of nine young people who attended special schools were much more positive about their relationships with their teachers than the majority of young people who attended mainstream schools. Several of these young people were able to compare a previous experience at a mainstream school and their current experience at a special school, saying that their current teachers spent more time getting to know them and knowing about their individual needs.

One young woman suggested that, because there are lots of young people with different special needs and disabilities in her class, her teacher has to understand them all better and learn how to communicate with each of them individually. Another young woman mused that maybe students had better relationships with their teachers because of smaller classes and teachers had better training.

Overall these young people were also more positive about their schools' attitude towards complaints and they made a link between the two. They suggested that, if they had a problem, they would speak to a teacher straight away or a teacher would notice that something was wrong.

Young people in mainstream schools who felt positive about their school's attitude towards complaints tended to have a positive relationship with at least one teacher in the school. Many students who had successfully complained in school cited a strong relationship with one particular teacher who took time to listen to them and understand their situation. Yet, when discussing the principles for a child-friendly complaints process, the principle that young people were least likely to agree that their school followed was, 'schools should value and respect young people and spend time building good relationships with them'.

Young people repeatedly expressed the opinion that their teachers do not take time to get to know them or understand their home circumstances. Yet problems at school often occurred when there are also problems at home. These sets of problems were connected in different ways: several young people described how a build-up of problems at school caused them to become angry at home, while other young people and several parents described how challenging home circumstances caused, or added to, problems at school.

There was a widespread perception that the focus is on getting students through exams rather than on student wellbeing. Therefore the amount and type of attention that students get in class is not perceived to be equal:

*Young person 1: I feel like at my school if you are in the smarter classes they just thought they were going to do fine, just leave them to it, but if you were the troublemaker they would sit and take the time to get to know you so the smarter people who were having issues got pushed out.*

*Young person 2: I kind of agree but I think it's the middle group that get left out...the prefects, Head-girls, etc. get attention, people who disrupt the classes will get attention, but the people who come to school on an everyday basis, do what they need to do, they are missed out of the system.*

*Young person 3: yeah...but I used to be a trouble-maker and I got attention but not the right sort of attention. No-one ever asked what was going on at home or that...I just got dragged out of class and given detention (group-work)*

Young people and parents repeatedly talked about how strong positive relationships, particularly where the teacher understands the young person's individual needs and home situation, can reduce the amount of complaints that are necessary. However, this understanding has to be genuine; several young people suggested that schools also need to stop making assumptions about them based on a limited knowledge of their home situation. For example:

*They need to really listen. [When I made a complaint] it felt like they were just reading from a sheet and making assumptions about a young person in care. (interview: young woman, 14)*

Parents placed less emphasis upon the importance of building relationships in schools but several still cited this as an important way to reduce the number of school complaints and make it easier for young people to complain. Parents of children with special education needs did, however, emphasise the importance of teachers understanding their child's individual needs and behaviours. As one parent said:

*The school should be willing to stand alongside him and understand how he understands things (interview: parent)*

### **Have independent support available for all young people in schools**

While young people emphasised the importance of relationships with teachers in school, parents emphasised the importance of support from people and organisations independent of the school. Parents talked about how such support should encompass listening to students and parents, helping them to complain and ensuring that any solutions to complaints are adhered to:

*There needs to be someone that kids can complain to who, 'that is their job'. Teachers have too much on their minds and HTs don't want to know. Their behaviour gets bad because they've got no one to talk to. (interview: grandparent)*

*They should have a third party, not on anybody's side, someone who gives you a phonecall and explains who they are, a voice, a face (interview: parent)*

*There needs to be an independent body looking at how statements are implemented. (interview: parent)*

Most parents had not experienced such independent support. Those who had received support from professionals or organisations outside of the school were more likely to be satisfied with the outcome of their complaint and to suggest that everyone should have access to such support.

Few young people access independent support. While all young people agreed that this principle of a child friendly complaint *should* happen, practice varied and, outside a very small number of schools, few were aware of such advocates within their school setting. A small number of young people spoke about talking to a worker from an outside agency to ask advice about things happening in school, but they did not think that these workers could get involved in school complaints. School counsellors were mentioned by a minority of young people. One student young person had found the opportunity to talk to a school counsellor particularly helpful, saying:

*It is really good that I can go somewhere to get angry and name names in a confidential space. Then they can help me to work out what to do. (interview: young man, 13)*

Others were aware that school counsellors exist but said that they are not available for everyone and that you have to be seen as a 'problem child' before you can see one. This was repeated with frustration and a strong sense that such provision should be easily accessible to all students.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

The conclusions from this research fall under four main categories:

- The challenges of defining a school complaint
- The importance of developing a school culture that is positive about complaints
- The importance of strong relationships and communication in school
- The need for accessible information and independent support related to complaints.

### **The challenge of defining a school complaint**

This research suggests that, unlike current policy, young people and parents do not make clear distinctions between concerns and complaints. Of the young people who said they had raised a complaint about their school, none had taken this complaint further than their headteacher. Slightly more than half of the parents interviewed had, ultimately, raised their complaint with the school's Governing Body. However, when asked about making complaints about schools, both young people and parents talked mostly about processes that had taken place within the school community.

When attempting to define a school complaint, participants most often considered two factors:

- the negative impact that a situation was having on their (or their child's) learning or wellbeing
- their choice to tell someone who they hoped would be able to change the situation.

All participants raised the complaint with someone at the school. The majority of complaints did not move beyond the headteacher. Although the Department for Education (2014) emphasises that concerns should be taken seriously, the language used suggests that what participants consider complaints are not actually complaints and runs the risk of minimising the importance and impact of these issues. As has been shown throughout this report, the original situation about which the complaint was raised, and the process of complaining, can impact upon young people's learning and wellbeing.

Further, this research explores young people's and parents' experiences of raising complaints about schools in England. Yet, as noted on page 14, the guidance does not recognise that the complainant could be a young person and, therefore, there is no consideration of how the complaints process would work for young people. This also means that links are not made between processes that young people consider part of complaining, such as student councils and bullying policies. In summary, the policies draw distinctions between types of complaints and between types of complainants in ways that participants do not.

The young people and parents who participated in this research talked about a wide range of experiences of wanting to complain and/or of raising complaints about



schools. These experiences were often complex and ongoing over a long period of time. Regardless of the type of complaint, whether it were a young person or a parent complaining or the outcome of the complaint, there was always negative emotional experiences associated with making a school complaint.

It is, therefore, important that school complaints procedures include concerns or complaints raised within schools. These procedures should pay attention not only to the outcome of complaints but also to the potential stress experienced by the complainant during the process of raising a complaint, especially where this process takes place over an extended period of time.

### **Developing positive school cultures where all students and parents feel listened to and valued**

Research participants repeatedly expressed the view that successful complaints procedures need to be embedded in a positive school culture. Such a positive school culture would make it less likely that young people and parents would need to complain and that, if they did need to complain, they would be more optimistic that the complaint would be successfully resolved.

The majority of young people and parents perceived that their school does not have a positive attitude towards complaints. Instead schools were viewed as 'scared' of complaints, as trying to dissuade young people and parents from raising complaints and as 'closing ranks' when a complaint is raised. This perception is supported by the challenges faced by the current research. Despite promises of anonymity for participants and the school, out of over 40 schools directly approached to take part in the research only one school agreed to allow the researcher to speak to young people and parents.

Many young people and parents felt that the most important thing that schools could do to improve their complaints' processes is listening to their students and the wider school community. Rather than waiting for complaints to come to them, schools could be doing more to pro-actively seek out concerns, suggestions and feedback. Both young people and parents acknowledged that there are opportunities for such feedback but these opportunities rarely focus on the issues that they consider most important. This perception is supported by previous research looking at the role of student councils in schools (see, for example, Gwanzura-Ottermolter et al., 2010)

Schools vary and individuals' experiences of different schools vary. Some young people felt that their school values student feedback, but these students tended to be those who are prefects or student council representatives. Most young people perceived that schools treat students differently depending on their academic ability and behaviour; there was a common view that quieter students' needs are more likely to be missed and that trouble-makers who complain are less likely to be taken seriously.

Similarly participants perceived that schools are more likely to pay attention to parents who have more knowledge and/or resources to access knowledge about their rights. Parents who made repeated complaints about their child's school frequently expressed concern that the school sees them as a trouble-maker. This research focuses only on the young people's and parent's perspectives and therefore the schools' perspectives in these cases are unknown. However, this concern seems to be borne out in the policy and guidelines, which describe how schools should avoid 'vexatious' and 'spurious' complaints from parents (DfE; 2014) who are "unreasonable and are not seeking to have a situation remedied but instead are determined to extract retribution for some real or imagined wrong" (NAHT, 2009: 4).

In summary, this research suggests that school complaints are perceived negatively by schools that are, thus, defensive about young people and parents raising concerns or complaints. Developing a positive school culture, where the views of all members of the school community are sought and valued is vital in order to change this perception. Such a positive attitude to complaints was important to creating an effective complaints' process.

### **Strong relationships and good communication within the school**

Strong relationships and good communication are central to a positive school culture. Young people who perceived that they had a strong relationship, with at least one teacher in the school, tended to express more optimistic views about school complaints. When they did raise a complaint, these young people were more likely to consider the complaint successfully resolved.

Many of the complaints raised by participants involved situations where the school, or individuals within the school, were felt to display a lack of understanding of students. Young people and parents, therefore, wanted schools to invest time in building relationships with students so that school staff understood their individual learning needs and personal situations. However, while participants expressed a desire for schools to pay closer attention to individual circumstances, they also thought this must be done with sensitivity to privacy.

Parents felt that small problems at school should be communicated earlier so that school and home could then work together to find solutions and prevent minor problems from turning into major problems. Both young people and parents observed that complaints are often a build-up of multiple minor issues that, with better communication from both sides, could be prevented from becoming more serious.

Such build-ups of minor frustrations can result in outbursts of negative emotion that do not help to resolve the situation. Several participants suggested that complaining constructively is a skill that schools could usefully teach young people. This idea is reflected in resources for parents, written by Ofsted (2014) and The Advisory Centre for Education (2007).

More positive communication in schools could also include communicating openly about the possibility of raising a complaint and of the process that would follow such a complaint. A lack of openness to communicate about school complaints is one possible reason why schools were unwilling to participate in the current research.

In short, early communication and positive relationships between school staff, and young people and parents, contribute to the likelihood of concerns being quickly resolved. Schools could support young people and parents to improve their communication skills in order to maintain positive relationships and to develop the ability to express their concerns positively and effectively.

### **Accessible information and independent support to deal with complaints**

Young people and parents prioritised the need to develop a school culture where complaints are dealt with early and positively. However, participants also lacked information about what to do when they need to make a complaint.

Despite a legal requirement for schools to publicise their complaints procedure (DfE, 2014), no young people who participated in the research, and only two parents, knew that their school had a formal complaints procedure. All of the measures suggested by the DfE (2014) to publicise the school complaints procedure were suggested by at least one participant; yet none were aware that their school had taken any of these measures. One parent described sending multiple letters of complaint to a range of different people because she did not know who would be able to help. Several young people did not realise they could complain to anyone with more authority than the headteacher. Other participants had asked how to complain about their school and had received information that was unhelpful and at times seems to have contradicted the DfE guidelines (2014).

Schools that listen to and communicated with all of their students and parents must not be scared to provide clear and accessible information to these students and parents about the school's complaints procedure. Schools could signpost young people and parents to online resources that provide information about school complaints process such as those by Advisory Centre for Education (2007) and Coral Children's Legal Centre (2014). However, schools must be mindful that the legal and policy context can change and take care that the information that they provide is accurate.

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

### **Aim of the research**

This research explores young people's and parents' experiences of raising, or wanting to raise, school complaints in England. The research sits within The Office of the Children's Commissioner's (OCC) wider remit to investigate complaints procedures open to children and young people. It forms part of a broader programme looking specifically at school complaints procedures, which will make recommendations to improve the current system.

### **Research questions**

The research addresses four main and interconnected research questions:

1. Do young people and parents/carers want to raise complaints with schools? If so, what is the nature of these complaints?
2. If young people and parents/carers wanted to complain, did they end up making a complaint?
3. How are complaints dealt with by the school and or other bodies?
4. How would young people and parents/carers like complaints to be dealt with?

### **Young research consultants**

The lead researcher met three times with a group of six young research consultants who were identified by Investing in Children and who all had experience of raising complaints or wanting to raise complaints in school. The first meeting focused on research information and design. In the second meeting the researcher piloted the group work activities and interview schedule for young people. The third meeting took place after the research had been completed and was an opportunity to feed back the research findings to the group and discuss ways of sharing these findings with other young people. In addition there was a brief Skype call between researcher and consultants midway through the research process to discuss the challenges faced by the researcher and changes to the research design. The young research consultants were each paid a fee of £45 for attending each of these meetings.

Discussion with the young consultants about their experiences of, and ideas about, schools complaints processes gave the researcher a clearer sense of issues that might come up during the research. Specifically, the young consultants provided significant input into:

- The name of the research project: "Making School Complaints Work for You"
- The information provided about the project for young people
- The modified version of OCC's "Common Principles for a Child Friendly Complaints Process" that was used in group work with young people

They also gave other advice about the research, design and process including:

1. The researcher should speak about the research at a school assembly in order to encourage young people to take part.
2. Group work based in schools should take place during the school day.
3. Young people should have an option to give a written input to the research, if they do not want to participate in group work or an interview.
4. Examples of "what is a complaint" and "what isn't a complaint" that were used in the group work sessions.
4. The researcher should give young people the choice about whether to draw their person or use one of the "people shapes" (see below) and provide a choice of felt-tips and coloured pencils for them to use.
5. Young people should have the option to keep their subsequent "character" if they wanted to. In this case the researcher should ask if she can take a photo for the report.
6. Instead of getting young people to move to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the principles for child-friendly complaints, the researcher should give them cards to hold up and indicate whether they agree or disagree.

This advice was followed, unless it proved impossible due to the challenges of working within schools (discussed below).

### **Methods**

Three main methods were used to collect data:

1. Group work with young people
2. Interviews with young people
3. Interviews with parents

The group work focused on young people's perceptions about their school's complaints processes. Each session included three main activities: looking at how young people define a complaint, common 'complaint stories' and the OCC's "Common Principles for a Child Friendly Complaints Process". The programme for the group work session is included in appendix two. Schools and organisations that organised group work sessions received a thank-you gift of £50 for their participation.

In group work sessions young people were asked whether they would like to participate in a short interview focusing on their personal experience of either raising a complaint or wanting to raise a complaint in school. The interviewer supported the young person to tell the story of his or her complaint using a visual tool and a topic guide to prompt questions (see appendix two). These interviews ranged in time from 20 minutes to 1 hour. Young people received a £10 gift voucher after the interview as an appreciation of their time.

Parents were identified through schools, out-of-school young peoples' organisations and the Parent Partnership Network. All but one interview with parents took place over the telephone and all the parents who chose to participate had raised complaints with their child's school. These interviews followed a similar structure to the interviews with young people, with the interviewer using prompt question to

encourage the parent to tell the story of the school complaint that they had raised. These interviews ranged in time from 30 minutes to 2 hours.

### **Challenges of the research process**

The original research design included speaking to young people in six secondary schools (two in each local authority area) and one out-of-school young people's provision in each local authority area. The out-of-school provisions were chosen in order to target groups of young people that previous research identified as finding school complaints processes difficult to access. Parents interested in participating in the research were to be identified through schools. The research team was aware that the topic may be viewed by schools as sensitive and therefore it was agreed that the schools and local authority areas would be reported anonymously.

Four schools in each local authority were initially contacted, by email and follow up phone-calls, with the expectation that 50% would agree to take part. None of these schools agreed to take part and neither did a further four schools contacts in each area. A further 18 schools in the three areas were contacted through a national schools' network but only one school agreed to take part in the research. Other attempts to contact schools were made through professional contacts in the areas, with no success.

The majority of schools failed to reply to emails from the OCC and, despite repeated phone-calls, the researcher was unable to speak to anyone in the senior management teams. Where direct contact was made with schools, the most common reason given for not participating in the research was a lack of capacity and the time pressures faced by schools. A small number of schools seemed initially interested in participating but, after further emails, telephone calls and (in one case) a school visit, they decided not to participate. One school suggested that discussing historic complaints could resume conversations about issues that had been resolved, potentially causing distress both to individual students and to the school community.

School staff are undoubtedly under pressure from a wide range of sources and previous research experience suggests that it can be difficult to engage schools in research projects. However the response rate for this research is unusually low and the engagement requested from schools was relatively limited. We suggest, therefore, that this methodological challenge is also a research finding, supporting the views of young people and parents presented in this report that schools do not encourage open communication about complaints processes.

As a result of this lack of engagement from schools, participants were identified primarily through a wide range of out-of-school provision. Although frustrating, this had some advantages since young participants were genuinely self-selecting, whereas in schools, the concern can be that the school selects young people that they want to take part.

### **Participants**

In total 84 young people (including young research consultants) and 15 parents were involved in the research. The young people were aged between 12 and 22; all but



five of the young people who took part were aged under 19 and currently attending secondary school.

- Six young research consultants
- 76 young people took part in eight group work sessions
- 22 young people (14 attending Academies and eight attending Maintained Schools) took part in individual interviews (only one of whom had not also taken part in group work)
- One young person submitted a written contribution to the research
- 14 parents and one grandparent took part in interviews (nine of whose children attended Academies and five of whose children attended Maintained Schools). Twelve of these interviews were conducted by telephone and three were face-to-face.

Young research consultants were particularly concerned that the research should be open to all young people and that participants should have a range of different life experiences and academic ability. Given the tight time schedule of the research and the changing research design, some pragmatic decisions had to be made but every effort was made to ensure that this was the case.

The eight group-work sessions included:

- Two in a school setting (13 young people)
- Two in local youth forums (34 young people)
- One with young carers (five young people)
- One with looked after young people (nine young people)
- One with young people with special educational needs (nine young people)
- One in an open youth group (six young people)

Participants were requested, but not required, to fill in the OCC equalities monitoring form. Sixty-three of the seventy-six participants agreed to fill in the form and the results are shown in the table below:

Gender	Age	Sexuality	Ethnicity	Religion	Disability	Experience of Care
Female: 39 Male: 24	12: 2 13: 5 14: 8 15: 11 16: 15 17: 10 18: 7 19-22: 5	Heterosexual : 51 Question not answered: 11 Pansexual/panromantic: 1	White British: 35 Black Caribbean: 7 Black African: 5 Mixed White Black Caribbean: 3 Gypsy/Traveller: 1 Asian Other: 1 Mixed White Black African: 1 Mixed White Asian: 1	No religion: 28 Christian: 2 Prefer not to say: 6 Buddhist: 2 Hindu: 1 Other: 1	No: 48 Yes: 13 Prefer not to say: 2	No: 47 Care leaver: 8 Question not answered: 4 Experience of care: 2 In care: 1 Prefer not to say: 1

**Table 1: self-identified characteristics of participants**

As suggested by the young research consultants, young people were offered the opportunity to submit a written input to the research if they did not want to take part in group work or interviews. Take-up of this was low, possibly because less of the research took place through schools than expected. However, one young person chose to participate in this way.

As it was difficult to engage schools in the research, access to parents was more difficult. Out-of-school organisations had less contact with parents. Parents were approached to participate through the one school that participated, the young carers group, one of the youth forums and through a parent partnership. The majority of parents who chose to participate identified that their child had special educational needs (ten out of 15) although, as described in the report, there were often several issues and complaints intertwined.

### **Ethics**

The research was assessed and passed by the ethics committee at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science. Alongside a range of issues, key ethical concerns for this research were:

### **Information**

Written information about the research was sent to young people and parents who might be interested to participate. This information was developed with the young research consultants.

When first talking to the participants, either face-to-face or on the telephone, the researcher went through this information and gave them a chance to ask any

questions that they may have had about the research.

### **Consent**

After discussing the research with the researcher, all young people were asked to sign consent forms and, where under 16, parental consent was required for them to participate. Verbal consent was required where parents took part in telephone interviews. All participants were informed that they could choose not to answer any questions, not to take part in any activities or to terminate their involvement at any time.

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

All participants were assured that their name, their school and their local authority area would not be identified in the research report and that only the researcher would have access to information that identified them. Although not possible, it is worth noting that several of the parents specifically stated that they wanted schools to be named in the report in order to highlight specific bad practice.

### **Safeguarding**

Participants were all informed that the only circumstance in which confidentiality would have to be broken was if something caused the researcher to be concerned for the safety of a young person (either the participant or a third party). In this situation the researcher told participants that she would talk to them and discuss her concerns before taking action.

The researcher was aware that the research topic is sensitive and that discussing situations in school that had been difficult or problematic could trigger negative emotions. At the beginning of each group work session the researcher explained that the focus of the group work was not on personal experiences and that young people should not feel that they needed to share their own stories in order to participate. Time was reserved at the end of each group to 'cool down' and chat about things other than school complaints. In interviews the researcher remained attentive to the wellbeing of the participants and 'checked in' about whether they wanted to continue if they appeared upset. All interviews and group work with young people were conducted in a setting where there was an identified person with whom they had an existing relationship and could talk to after the interview if necessary. In interviews with both parents and young people, the researcher ensured that the interview finished with a chance to check how the interviewee was feeling and a few minutes to talk about something light and positive. OCC contact details were given to all those who participated, where they could follow up any concerns.

### **Data analysis**

Group work was conducted by two researchers, one facilitating the session and one taking notes. The 'characters' developed in group work sessions were photographed and transcribed. The researcher took notes during interviews with young people and parents, focusing particularly on recording the words of participants where possible. Using the four original research questions as an organising structure, a thematic analysis of the resulting data was conducted that was used to write this report.

## Appendix 2: group-work programme

1. Icebreaker (say your name and say something that you like about your school)
2. Introduction to the research and ethics (including consent and equalities forms)
3. What is a complaint?
  - Read a list of things that a student might not be happy about (some serious, some silly). Are they a complaint or not?
  - Discussion: what is a complaint? Introduce the idea of a complaints process.
  - Give the definition of a complaint agreed with OCC
4. Split into small groups (3 or 4 people in a group)
  - Draw a school student. What are they called? How old are they?
  - This student wants to complain about something. What do they want to complain about?
  - Will they make a complaint? If not, why not?
  - If they do complain, how do they complain? Who do they complain to? Do they complain in person or write a letter? Does anyone help them?
  - What happens after they complain? Does anything change?
5. Debrief in whole group. Do you think these examples are typical of the times when young people want to complain in school?
6. OCC Principles for Child Friendly Complaints.
  - Give each young person a green “agree” sign and a red “disagree” sign.
  - Take each principle individually.
  - Do you agree with it (yes/no – indicate with signs, use as a starter for discussion)
  - Does this match your experience at school? (yes/no – indicate with signs, use as a starter for discussion)
  - Is there anything that schools could do to make complaints procedures more accessible?  
(to make it easier for young people to complain and to make it worthwhile complaining)
7. Your individual experience. Show of hands but making clear that there will be an opportunity to speak individually to the researcher after the group if preferred.
  - How many people in the room have wanted to complain?
  - How many have actually complained?
  - Anyone who would like to take part in an interview?
8. Any questions? Chat about what happens next...