

Policy Regarding issues in Communication with Parents

Govan High School – January 2018

Rationale

Glasgow City Council's (GCC) approach to the relatively few parents/carers whose actions or behaviour we consider unacceptable aims to:

- deal fairly, honestly, consistently and appropriately with all parents/carers, including those whose actions we consider unacceptable. We believe that all parents/carers have the right to be heard, understood and respected. We also consider that our staff have these same rights.
- be accessible to all our parents/carers. However, we retain the right where we consider a parent/carer's actions to be unacceptable, to restrict or change access to our school.
- ensure that other parents/carers and school staff do not suffer any disadvantage from someone who acts in an unacceptable manner.

Definition of Unacceptable Actions

People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. There may have been upsetting or distressing circumstances leading up to a parent/carer coming to us. We do not view behaviour as unacceptable just because a parent/carer is forceful or determined. However, the actions of parents/carers who are angry, demanding or persistent may result in unreasonable demands on our resources or in unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. It is these actions that we consider unacceptable and aim to manage under this Policy. We have grouped these actions under three broad headings:

- **Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour**

Violence is not restricted to acts of aggression that may result in physical harm. It also includes behaviour or language (whether oral or written – including posts in social media) that may cause staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused.

Examples of behaviours grouped under this heading include threats, physical violence, personal verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, and rudeness towards our staff when they are engaged on school or council business. We also consider that inflammatory statements and unsubstantiated allegations can be abusive behaviour.

We expect our staff to be treated courteously and with respect. Violence or abuse towards staff is unacceptable. We understand the difference between aggression and anger. The anger felt by many customers involves the subject matter of their contact with us.

However, it is not acceptable when anger escalates into aggression directed towards school staff

- **Unreasonable Demands**

Parents/Carers may make what we consider unreasonable demands on us through the amount of information they seek, the nature and scale of service they expect or the number of approaches they make. What amounts to unreasonable demands will always depend on the circumstances surrounding the behaviour and the seriousness of the issues raised by the parents/carers.

Examples of actions grouped under this heading include demanding responses within an unreasonable time-scale; insisting on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff; continual phone calls or letters; and repeatedly changing the substance of the issue or complaint, or raising unrelated concerns.

We consider these demands as unacceptable and unreasonable if they start to impact substantially on the work of the faculty involved, such as taking up an excessive amount of staff time to the disadvantage of the delivery of the curriculum.

- **Unreasonable Persistence**

We recognise that some parents/carers will not or cannot accept that we are unable to provide a level of service other than that provided already. They may persist in disagreeing with the action or decision taken in relation to their issue or complaint, or contact us persistently about the same issue.

Examples of actions grouped under this heading include: persistent refusal to accept a decision made in relation to an issue or complaint; persistent refusal to accept explanations relating to what we can or cannot do; and continuing to pursue an issue or complaint without presenting any new information.

The way in which these parents/carers approach us may be entirely reasonable, but it is their persistent behaviour in continuing to do so that is not.

We consider the actions of persistent parents/carers to be unacceptable when they take up what we regard as being a disproportionate amount of time and resources.

Where appropriate, we will consider referring a persistent complainant to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) ourselves, if the complainant will not and does not do so themselves, and ask that the SPSO be the final arbiter in any dispute that has arisen.

Managing Unacceptable Actions

There are relatively few parents/carers whose actions we consider unacceptable. We aim to manage these actions based on their nature and extent. If our ability to do our work and provide a service to others is affected adversely, we may need to restrict that parent/carer's contact with us in order to manage the unacceptable action.

We aim to do this in a way, wherever possible, that allows a complaint to progress to completion through our Comments, Compliments and Complaints Procedure:

We may restrict contact in person, by telephone, letter or electronically or by any combination of these. We try to maintain at least one form of contact and this sometimes takes the form of identifying a named officer that the parent/carer may only contact. No other staff would have direct contact with the customer in this circumstance. In extreme situations, we tell the customer in writing that their name is on a 'no personal contact' list for the school. This means that they must restrict contact to our Customer Care Team only, whether this is in writing, personal contact or through a third party.

The threat or use of physical violence, verbal abuse or harassment towards staff is likely to result in the ending of all direct contact immediately with the parent/carer. Incidents may

be reported to the police. This will always be the case if physical violence is used or threatened.

The use of social media is covered by this policy – *see also the Govan High School Social Media Policy*.

We do not deal with correspondence (letter, fax or electronic) that is abusive to staff. When this happens we tell the parent/carer that we consider their language offensive, unnecessary and unhelpful. We ask them to stop using such language and state that we will not respond to their correspondence. We may require future contact to be through a third party if they persist.

Staff will end telephone calls if the caller is considered aggressive, abusive, offensive, unnecessarily repetitive or the time taken by the caller is disproportionate to the issues raised. The staff member taking the call has the right to make this decision, tell the caller that the behaviour is unacceptable and end the call if the behaviour does not stop.

Where a parent/carer repeatedly phones, visits, sends irrelevant documents or raises the same issues, we may decide to:

- Only take telephone calls from the parent/carer at set times on set days or put an arrangement in place for only one member of staff to deal with calls or correspondence from the complainant in future. The Corporate Customer Care Team, on behalf of the Chief Executive, will arrange this;
- Require the parent/carer to make an appointment to see a named member of staff before visiting the school; or, that the parent/carer contacts the school in writing only
- Return the documents to the parent/carer or, in extreme cases, advise them that further irrelevant documents will be destroyed; or, take other action that we consider appropriate.
- We will, however, always tell the parent/carer what action we are taking and why.

Where a parent/carer continues to correspond on a wide range of issues, and this action is considered excessive, then they will be told that only a certain number of issues will be considered in a given period and asked to limit or focus their requests accordingly.

Parent/Carer action may be considered unreasonably persistent if all internal review mechanisms have been exhausted and the parent/carer continues to dispute the council decision relating to their complaint or issue. The parent/carer will be told that no future phone calls will be accepted or interviews granted concerning this complaint or issue. Any future contact by the parent/carer on this issue must be in writing. Future correspondence is read and filed, but only acknowledged or responded to if the parent/carer provides significant new information relating to the complaint or issue.

Confidentiality

Where appropriate, we will always respect the confidentiality of a parent/carer. However, confidentiality is not an absolute obligation as the law has always recognised that where appropriate it is permissible to release information which would normally be confidential if this is necessary to fulfil an overriding public interest, such as protecting someone else from harm. There may be cases where the professional's view is that there is no substance behind such a threat. If someone threatens someone else, we should be able to take appropriate steps in response such as alerting that person, the police or associated agencies.

Decision to restrict Parent/Carer Contact

Staff that directly experience aggressive or abusive behaviour from a parent/carer have the authority to deal immediately with that behaviour in a manner they consider appropriate to the situation and in line with this Policy and the Violence at Work Procedure.

With the exception of such immediate decisions taken at the time of an incident, decisions to restrict contact with the council are only taken after careful consideration of the situation by a more senior member of staff, either the Executive Director or another member of the Education Directorate Team, and the parent/carer's case is then referred to the Corporate Customer Care Team. Wherever possible, we give a parent/carer the opportunity to modify their behaviour or action before a decision is taken.

Parents/carers will be issued with a warning letter containing a copy of this Policy. They will be told why their actions are deemed to be unacceptable, and asked to moderate this behaviour. If this is not done, then they will be told that a contact restriction can be put in place.

When a decision has been made to restrict future contact, the parent/carer will be written to with details of the restricted contact arrangements and, if relevant, the length of time that these restrictions will be in place.

If a serious threat of violence is made, then a warning letter is not necessary and the parent/carer can be issued with a restricted contact letter immediately.

Appealing a Decision to Restrict Contact

A parent/carer can appeal a warning letter, on the grounds of factual inaccuracy. They can do so, in writing only, to the Corporate Customer Care Team, within 10 working days of receipt of the letter. This letter must contain details of the appeal process.

A parent/carer can appeal a decision to restrict contact. This must be done within 10 working days of receipt of the letter. This letter must contain details of the appeals process. A senior member of staff who was not involved in the original decision considers the appeal. They advise the parent/carer in writing that either the restricted contact arrangements still apply or a different course of action has been agreed. This should be done within 10 working days.

Recording and Reviewing a Decision to Restrict Contact

Where it is decided to restrict parent/carer contact, an entry noting this is made in the relevant file and on appropriate computer records.

A decision to restrict contact may be reconsidered if the parent/carer demonstrates a more acceptable approach. The Corporate Customer Care Team reviews the status of all parents/carers with restricted contact arrangements on a regular basis.

All parents/carers who receive correspondence under the Policy have their restrictions reviewed at the bi-annual meeting held to review all active Unacceptable Actions Policy restrictions. The outcome from any review may be to continue with the restrictions, amend the terms of the restriction, or lift the restriction.

All correspondence relating to the Unacceptable Actions Policy will be in writing and by letter.

The council publishes its Unacceptable Actions Policy on its website.

Changes to the Unacceptable Actions Policy are brought to the council's Operational Delivery Scrutiny Committee for approval.