



Concerns and Complaints Procedures Policy

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Statement of intent

The ONE Trust aims to resolve concerns and complaints at the earliest possible stage and, where possible, informally, and is dedicated to continuing to provide the highest quality of education possible in all of its academies throughout the procedure.

This policy has been created to handle concerns and complaints relating to any aspects of the provision of facilities or services against:

- Any member of staff
- Any academy within the trust
- Any Local Governing Board (LGB) of the trust
- Individual trustees or the Board of Trustees
- The trust as a whole

The trust's concerns/complaints procedure is designed to be straightforward and when responding to concerns and complaints, we aim to:

- Be impartial and non-adversarial
- Facilitate a full and fair investigation by an independent person or panel, where necessary
- Address all the points at issue and provide an effective and prompt response
- Respect complainants' desire for confidentiality
- Treat complainants with respect and courtesy
- Make sure that any decisions we make are lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate, in line with the principles of administrative law
- Keep complainants informed of the progress of the concerns/complaints process
- Consider how the concerns/complaint can feed into school improvement evaluation processes

This policy outlines the procedure that the person raising the concern or making the complaint and the trust and its academies will follow. Once a concern has been raised or a complaint has been made, it can be resolved or withdrawn at any stage.

The headteacher and/or chair of governors of the relevant academy will delegate an appropriate person to be the first point of contact during the complaints procedure.

The trust and the schools will aim to give the complainant the opportunity to complete the complaints procedure in full.

To support this, we will make sure we publicise the existence of this policy and make it available on the trust website and the website of each individual school.

Throughout the process, we will be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved, and make any reasonable adjustments needed to accommodate individuals.

1. Legal framework

This policy has due regard to all relevant legislation and guidance including, but not limited to, the following:

- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Education Act 2002
- Equality Act 2010
- Part 7 of The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014
- Immigration Act 2016
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)
- Data Protection Act 2018
- HM Government (2016) 'Code of Practice on the English language requirement for public sector workers'
- ESFA (2021) 'Best practice guidance for academies complaints procedures'
- ESFA (2022) 'Academy trust handbook 2022'

This policy operates in conjunction with the following school policies:

- Admissions Policy
- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Behaviour Policy
- Suspension and Exclusion Policy
- Whistleblowing Policy
- Grievance Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Records Management Policy

2. Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, a “**concern**” is defined as ‘an expression of worry or doubt’ over an issue considered to be important and where reassurance is required.

A “**complaint**” is defined as ‘an expression of dissatisfaction’ towards the actions taken or a perceived lack of action. Complaints can be resolved formally or informally.

A complaint is not:

- a request for a service;
- a request for information or explanation of school policy or practice;
- a matter for which there is a right of appeal within the LA or to an independent body or a legal remedy.

It should be noted that even where an appeal procedure is in place a complaint could still arise regarding the way that procedure is operated.

Any concern or complaint will be taken seriously, whether raised formally or informally, and the appropriate procedures will be implemented.

The definition of “**unreasonable complaints**” is outlined in the ‘Managing unreasonable complaints’ section of this policy.

For the purpose of this policy, “**duplicate complaints**” are identical complaints received from a complainant’s spouse, partner or child. These complaints will not be addressed again and the individual making the second complaint will be informed that the complaint has been dealt with on a local level. If the individual is dissatisfied with the result, they can appeal to the DfE, as outlined in ‘The role of the DfE’ subsection of this policy. Any new details provided by a complainant’s spouse, partner or child, however, will be investigated and managed in line with the complaints procedure.

For the purpose of this policy, “**complaints campaigns**” are where the trust, or an academy within the trust, receives large volumes of complaints that are all based on the same subject.

For the purposes of this policy, having “**independence**” from the trust and its academies is defined as having no association with the trust, including through being a member, trustee or employee, and having no clear connection with any of the trust’s academies, including through being an employee or solicitor. Independent panel members will meet the trust’s and DfE’s definition of independence.

3. Raising a concern or making a complaint

Any person, including a member of the public, is able to raise a concern or make a complaint about the provision of facilities or services that the trust provides. Concerns or complaints may also be raised/made by a third party on behalf of a complainant, contingent on appropriate consent having been obtained to do so. All concerns and complaints made will be handled via the procedures outlined in this policy.

Any parent and/or carer of a pupil in a trust school is able to raise a concern or make a complaint about the provision of facilities or services that the trust provides. Any concerns or complaints raised/made by other parties may be handled via different procedures to those outlined in this policy. This includes concerns or complaints raised/made by a third party on behalf of a parent or carer of a pupil in a trust school.

The trust will not normally investigate anonymous complaints.

Individuals raising concerns or making complaints about issues relating to separate statutory procedures will be referred as follows:

- **Admissions** – referred to the appeals process outlined in the Admissions Policy.
- **Statutory assessments of special educational needs** – raised directly with the LA.
- **Child protection** – referred to safeguarding procedures outlined in the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy.
- **Exclusion** – referred to the procedures outlined in the Behaviour Policy and Suspension and Exclusion Policy.
- **Whistleblowing** – referred to the internal whistleblowing procedures outlined in the Whistleblowing Policy.
- **Staff grievances** – referred to the internal grievance procedures outlined in the Grievance Policy.
- **Staff conduct** – referred to the internal disciplinary procedures.

- **Third-party suppliers using school premises or facilities** – referred to separate complaints procedures. The school will ensure any third-party supplier using school premises or facilities to offer community facilities or services has its own complaints procedures in place and such complaints do not fall within the scope of this policy.

All other concerns and complaints will be directed towards the procedures laid out in this policy.

People raising concerns or making complaints may do so in person, in writing or by telephone. Concerns should be raised and complaints should be made using the appropriate channels of communication with the Trust or the schools and should not be raised/made on social media.

Concerns and complaints are expected to be made as soon as possible after an incident arises to amend the issue in an appropriate timescale. The trust upholds a **three-month** time limit in which a complaint can be lodged regarding an incident. Concerns or complaints made outside this time limit will be considered in exceptional circumstances. In the case of any timescales changing, all parties involved will be informed of the changes in a timely manner. Concerns or complaints received outside of term time will be treated as **being received on the first school day after the holiday period.**

A concern or complaint can progress to the next stage of the procedure even if it is not viewed as “justified”. All people raising concerns or making complaints are given the opportunity to fully complete the concerns/complaints procedure.

Concerns/complaints about trust staff or trustees

Concerns/complaints against staff of an academy in the trust will:

- Be dealt with by the headteacher of the academy.
- Follow the concerns/complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Concerns/complaints against a headteacher of an academy in the trust will:

- Be dealt with by the chair of the LGB of the academy.
- Follow the concerns/complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Concerns/complaints against local governors or trustees will:

- Be made in writing to the clerk, who will arrange for them to be heard.
- Be dealt with by the chair of the LGB or the chair of trustees, respectively.
- Potentially involve escalation to the Trust Board to conduct an investigation – this will be handled by the CEO.
- Involve a panel hearing where applicable.

Concerns/complaints against the chair of trustees, or an entire LGB will:

- Be made in writing to the clerk, who will determine the most appropriate course of action dependent on the nature of the complaint.

Concerns/complaints against the board of trustees will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO.
- Follow the concerns/complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Concerns/complaints against the CEO will:

- Be dealt with by the **chair of trustees**, with a panel hearing where applicable.

Concerns/complaints against the trust will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO.
- Begin with stage two of the 'Complaints procedure' outlined in this policy, i.e. via a formal, written complaint.

4. Roles and responsibilities

The complainant is responsible for:

- Cooperating with the trust, or an academy within the trust, in seeking a solution to the concern/complaint.
- Expressing their concerns and/or the complaint in full at the earliest opportunity.
- Promptly responding to any requests for information and meetings.
- Asking for assistance as needed.
- Treating anyone involved in the concern/complaint with respect.
- Respecting confidentiality.

The role of the investigator will differ depending on the nature of the concern/complaint and who it is directed at. This means that:

- For concerns and complaints against staff of academies in the trust, the investigator will be the headteacher.
- For concerns and complaints against headteachers of academies in the trust, the investigator will be the chair of the LGB.
- For concerns/complaints against local governors, the investigator will be the chair of the LGB.
- For concerns/complaints against trustees, the investigator will be the chair of trustees.
- For concerns/complaints against the chair of trustees or an entire LGB, the clerk will appoint an appropriate person to be the investigator.
- For concerns/complaints against the CEO/CFO, the investigator will be the chair of trustees.

The investigator of the concern/complaint is responsible for:

- Providing a sensitive and thorough interviewing process of the complainant to establish what has happened and who is involved.
- Considering all records, evidence and relevant information provided.

- Interviewing all parties that are involved in the concern/complaint, including staff and pupils.
- Analysing all information in a comprehensive and fair manner.
- Liaising with the complainant and clarifying an appropriate resolution to the problem.
- Identifying and recommending solutions and courses of actions to take.
- Being mindful of timescales and ensuring all parties involved are aware of these timescales.
- Responding to the complainant in a clear and understandable manner.

Where complaints are escalated to a panel hearing, all complaints panel members will be aware that:

- The review panel hearing is independent and impartial.
- No individual with prior involvement in the complaint, or the circumstances surrounding it, is permitted to sit on the panel.
- The aim of the panel is to achieve a reasonable resolution and, ultimately, attain reconciliation between the parties involved.
- Reconciliation between the trust and complainant is not always achievable, and that it may only be possible to establish facts and make recommendations to reassure the complainant that their case has been taken seriously.
- The panel can:
 - Dismiss or uphold the complaint, in whole or in part.
 - Decide on appropriate action to be taken.
 - Recommend changes that the trust can make to prevent reoccurrence of the problem.
- Complainants may feel nervous or inhibited in a formal setting and, therefore, the proceedings should be as welcoming as possible.

Panel members will also be aware that when a child is present at the hearing, extra care needs to be taken to ensure that the child does not feel intimidated, as well as ensuring the child's view is represented equally. It will be considered in advance if any support is needed to help them present their complaint. Where the child/ young person's parent is the complainant, the committee will give the parent the opportunity to say which parts of the meeting, if any the child needs to attend. The parent, however, will be advised that agreement might not always be possible if the parent wishes the child to attend a part of the meeting that the panel considers is not in the child's best interests.

The panel chair will:

- Ensure that minutes of the hearings are taken on every occasion.
- Explain the remit of the panel to the complainant.
- Ensure that all issues are addressed and that outcomes are reached based on facts and evidence.
- Help to put at ease and console individuals involved who are not used to speaking at such hearings, particularly any pupils involved.
- Conduct the hearing in a manner that ensures everyone is treated with respect and courtesy.

- Ensure that the room's layout and setting is non-adversarial, yet still sets the appropriate tone.
- Confirm that no member of the panel has previously been involved in the earlier stages of the procedure or has an external interest in the outcome of the proceedings.
- Give both the complainant and the trust the opportunity to state their case and seek clarity without undue interruption.
- Provide copies of any written material or evidence, via the clerk, to everyone in attendance of the meeting, ensuring that everyone has seen the necessary material provided that it does not breach confidentiality or any individual's rights to privacy under the DPA 2018 or UK GDPR.
- Be mindful that, if a new issue arises, everyone should be given the opportunity to consider and comment upon it, and that this may require a short adjournment of the meeting.
- Organise a short adjournment of the hearing if required.
- Continuously liaise with the clerk to ensure the procedure runs smoothly.
- Help to provide the support necessary where the complainant is a child.

The complaints coordinator will:

- Ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure.
- Liaise with staff members, head teacher, CEO, chair of trustees, or the clerk to ensure the smooth running of the complaints procedure.
- Be aware of issues regarding sharing third party information and additional support. This may be needed by complainants when making a complaint, including interpretation support or where the complainant is a child or young person.
- Maintain accurate and up-to-date records.

The clerk is the contact point for the complainant and the panel and will:

- Ensure that all people involved in the complaint procedure are aware of their legal rights and duties, including under legislation relating to school complaints, education law, the Equality Act 2010, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the DPA and the UK GDPR.
- Set the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties (if they are invited to attend) and that the venue and proceedings are accessible.
- Collate any written material relevant to the complaint and send it to the parties in advance of the meeting within an agreed timescale.
- Record the proceedings.
- Circulate the minutes of the meeting.
- Notify all parties of the committee's decision.

The role of the Department for Education (DfE)

If a complainant remains dissatisfied once the complaint procedure has been completed, they have the right to refer their complaint to the Secretary of State. If a complainant wishes to escalate a complaint, the trust will refer them to the relevant [contact form](#), and prompt them to follow the instructions on this form to submit a complaint to the Secretary of State.

The DfE will not overturn the trust or panel's decision about a complaint or re-investigate the original complaint. The DfE will only intervene following a complaint if it believes the trust has:

- Breached a clause in its funding agreement.
- Failed to comply with education law or acted unreasonably when exercising related education functions.

When making a final decision about a complaint, the trust reserves the right to seek advice from the DfE on whether they are acting reasonably and lawfully; however, they will not be able to advise on how to resolve the complaint.

5. Complaints procedure

This policy is implemented on a trust-wide level. The trust will ensure that the concerns/complaints procedure is:

- Easily accessible and publicised on its website.
- Simple to understand and put into practice.
- Impartial and fair to all parties involved.
- Respectful of confidentiality duties.
- Continuously under improvement, using input from the SLTs of all individual academies within the trust.
- Fairly investigated, by an independent person where necessary.
- Used to address all issues to provide appropriate and effective responses where necessary.

The concerns/complaints procedure follows a three-stage process:

- **Informal** – which will usually come in the form of a meeting between a representative of the trust or individual academy and the complainant.
- **Formal** – where the complaint is put in writing to the school/trust.
- **Panel hearing** – where the panel includes at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint.

At each stage, complainants will be informed of their options for escalation if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of their concern or complaint. The appropriate person will communicate the details of the next stage of the process when delivering the outcome of the current stage, where applicable.

To prevent later challenge or disagreement over what was said in any in-person meetings or telephone conversations at any stage of the procedure, brief notes will be kept, and a copy of any written response will be added to the record of the complaint. Notes and paper copies of any complaints and/or responses are kept securely **on each academy's IT system**, or **on the central trust IT system** where the complaint is against the trust as a whole or a member of the board of trustees.

Stage one – informal concern

An informal concern may be made in person, by telephone or in writing; however, it is preferred that initial, informal concerns are made via an in-person meeting.

Where a concern has been raised about a member of staff, the complainant can discuss the concern with the headteacher, or a person delegated to hear the concern on their behalf, to seek support. If the concern is about the headteacher, the chair of the LGB should be informed and will need to handle the concern.

Within **10** school days of notification of the concern, the complainant and the relevant member of staff should discuss the issue in a respectful and informal manner to seek a mutual resolution.

At this initial communication stage of the concern, the complainant will be asked for their input as to what they believe may resolve the issue about which the concern has been made to avoid further escalation where possible.

In line with DfE guidance, complainants should note that any acknowledgement by the trust that it could have handled the situation better is not an admission of unlawful or negligent action.

If an appropriate resolution cannot be sought at this informal level, or if the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome following the initial discussions, the person managing the response to the concern will inform the complainant about the next level of the procedure.

Stage two – formal complaint

Formal complaints must be made in writing. Please include the following information in your written complaint (if you need any support with providing this information in writing, please speak to the School Office):

- Your name
- Pupil name
- Phone number you would like us to use to contact you
- Date of the incident
- Date when this form was completed
- Full details of complaint (including the names of all persons involved and the dates of incidents referred to)
- What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint (for example, who did you speak to and what was the response)?
- What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?
- Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.

Stage two of the process will be completed within **15** school days. Where the situation is recognised as complex, and it is deemed to be unable to be resolved within this timescale, the person managing the complaint will contact the complainant to inform them of the revised target date via a written notification.

An appointment with the appropriate person for managing the complaint should be made, as soon as reasonably practical, to avoid any possible worsening of the situation.

If the complaint is against a headteacher, the complainant will initially need to write, in confidence, to **the chair of the academy's LGB**. The chair will seek to resolve the issue informally, e.g. by arranging a meeting with the complainant within **15** days, before moving directly to stage three of the procedure.

Where the appropriate person has made reasonable attempts to accommodate the complainant with dates for a complaint meeting and they refuse or are unable to attend, the meeting will be convened in their absence and a conclusion will be reached in the interests of drawing the complaint to a close.

In terms of a complaint being made against a member of staff, the headteacher will discuss the issue with the staff member in question. Where necessary, the headteacher will conduct interviews with any relevant parties, including witnesses and pupils, and take statements from those involved. All discussions shall be recorded by the headteacher, and findings and resolutions will be communicated to the complainant either verbally or in writing.

Once all facts are established, the person handling the complaint shall contact the complainant in writing with an explanation of the decision. The complainant will be advised of any escalation options (e.g. escalation to stage three) and will be provided with details of this process.

The complainant will also be provided with copies of minutes, subject to any necessary redactions under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK GDPR. Any further action the trust plans to take to resolve the issue will be explained to the complainant in writing.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome suggested, the procedure will progress to stage three. A request to escalate to stage three will be made to the clerk of the local governing body within **10** school days of the end of stage two, i.e. communication of an outcome.

Stage three – panel hearing

Where the complaint progresses to stage three, a panel will be constituted to hear the complaint, consisting of at least three individuals who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint, and at least one independent panel member. Where the complaint concerns an individual academy, the independent panel member will have no clear connection with that academy, such as having conducted work for the academy. Where possible, the independent panel member will also have no association with the trust. Where this is not possible, however, and the complaint concerns an individual academy, in line with the DfE's guidance, a local governor serving on the LGB of a different academy within the trust may occupy this role, as they will be sufficiently separate from the academy being complained about.

The clerk will record the date the escalation request was received, acknowledge receipt of the complaint, and inform the complainant of the scheduled time and date of the panel hearing in writing. The meeting will be convened within **15** days of the receipt of the escalation request where possible. Where this is not possible, the clerk will provide an anticipated date and ensure the complainant is kept up-to-date.

5 days' notice will be given to all parties attending the panel hearing, including the complainant.

Prior to the hearing, the clerk will have written to the complainant informing them of how the review will be conducted. The headteacher of the academy in question, the chair of governors

and the chair of trustees will also have a copy of this letter. The clerk will request copies of any further written material to be submitted to the committee at least **15** school days before the meeting. Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least **15** school days before the date of the meeting. The committee will not normally accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded. The committee will also not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New complaints must be dealt with from stage one of the procedure.

The meeting will be held in private. Electronic recordings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs requires it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending must be sought before meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

At the hearing, all participants will be given the opportunity to put their case across and discuss any issues. The meeting will allow for:

- The complainant to be present and accompanied at the hearing if they wish.
- The complainant to explain their complaint and the individual handling the complaint to explain the reasons for their decision.
- The complainant to question the individual handling the complaint, and vice versa, about the complaint.
- Any evidence, including witnesses who have been prior approved by the chair of the panel, to be questioned.
- Members of the panel to question both the complainant and the individual about whom the complaint was made.
- Final statements to be made by both parties involved.

Neither the complainant nor the trust will bring legal representation to this hearing, unless in exceptional circumstances, where this will be agreed beforehand. A member of staff who may be a witness to the complaint can bring a union representative or legal representative if desired; this will be agreed before the hearing.

The purpose of the hearing will be reconciliation and ensuring that things that may have gone wrong are corrected.

The complainant will receive a written response explaining the panel's findings and recommendations within **15** school days. This letter will also explain whether there are any further rights of appeal and to whom they need to be addressed.

The panel will make findings and recommendations, and a copy of those findings and recommendations will be made available for inspection on the academy premises by the board of trustees and the headteacher. The committee can uphold the complaint in whole or in part or dismiss the complaint in whole or in part. If the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, the committee will decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint and where appropriate, recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

Where relevant, the person complained about will receive a summary of the panel's findings and recommendations. They will also receive a copy of the minutes, subject to any necessary redactions under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK GDPR.

A written record will be kept of all complaints, and of whether they are resolved at the preliminary stage or proceed to a panel hearing, along with what actions have been taken, regardless of the decision.

All correspondence statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential, except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the 2008 Act requests access to them.

Complaints to the DfE

If a complainant has exhausted the trust's complaints procedure, they will be advised that they can submit a complaint to the DfE via their [webpage](#).

Resolving complaints

At each stage of the concerns/complaints procedure, the trust is committed to resolving the concern/complaint. Where appropriate, the trust will acknowledge that the concern/complaint is upheld in whole or in part, and may offer one of the following:

- An explanation
- An admission that the situation could have been handled better
- An assurance that the trust will try and ensure the incident will not occur again
- An outline of the steps that have been or will be taken to help ensure that it will not happen again and an indication of the timescales within which changes will be made
- An undertaking to review trust policies in light of the complaint
- An apology

Withdrawal of a complaint

Where a complainant wishes to withdraw their concern or complaint, the trust will ask them to confirm this in writing. Despite the concern or complaint having been withdrawn, the trust and academy will still take the complainant's voice seriously and attempt to avoid causing similar distress to others in the future. The trust and academy will not under any circumstances ask or pressure an individual to withdraw a concern or complaint.

Record keeping

A written record will be kept of all concerns or complaints that are made, regardless of the stage at which they are resolved, including any action taken by the trust as a result of those concerns/complaints, whether they are upheld or not.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual concerns or complaints will be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or an inspectorate requests access to them.

Academies are data controllers in their own right and must decide for themselves how long to keep records, unless statutory regulations apply, e.g. attendance records must be kept for 3 years. The trust will retain records of concerns and complaints and related documents in line with the Data Protection Policy and Records Management Policy. Personal data will only be kept for as long as necessary.

6. Interviewing witnesses

When interviewing pupils to gather information regarding a concern or complaint, the interview should be conducted in the presence of another member of staff or, in the case of serious complaints, e.g. where the possibility of criminal investigation exists, in the presence of their parents. All pupils interviewed will be made fully aware of what the interview concerns and their right to have someone with them.

The trust will ensure that the conduction of interviews does not prejudice an investigation by the LA designated officer (LADO) or the police.

The trust understands the importance of ensuring a friendly and relaxed area which is free from intimidation. Staff are allowed a colleague to support them at their interview. The colleague must not be anyone likely to be interviewed themselves, including their line manager. The interviewer will not express opinions in words or attitude, so as to not influence the interviewee. The interviewee will sign a copy of the transcription of the interview.

7. Recording a concern or complaint

A written record shall be kept of any concern or complaint made, whether made via phone, in person or in writing, detailing:

- The main issues raised, the findings and any recommendations.
- Whether the concern/complaint was resolved following an informal route, formal route or panel hearing.
- Actions taken by the trust as a result of the concern/complaint (regardless of whether the concern/complaint was upheld).

All records are made available for inspection on the academy premises by the trust.

The trust holds the right to use recording devices, where appropriate, to ensure all parties involved are able to review the discussions at a later date. Where there are communication difficulties or disabilities, the trust may provide recording devices to ensure the complainant is able to access and review the discussions at a later point.

Recording devices will not be used without the prior consent of all parties.

Where the trust allows complainants to record meetings, the following will be considered:

- How any decision to allow recordings may affect any third parties called to act as witnesses
- The impact and consequences on the individuals involved in the concern/complaint in the event that recordings are lost or leaked

The trust will not accept as evidence any recordings that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.

Details of any concern/complaint made shall not be shared with the entire board of trustees. The exception to this is when a complaint is made against the whole board, and they need to be aware of the allegations made against them to respond to any independent investigation.

Complainants have a right to access copies of these records under the UK GDPR and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The trust will hold all records of complaints from each academy, as well as those regarding the trust itself, centrally. Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints are kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection requests to access them.

8. Exceptional circumstances

The DfE expects complainants to have completed the trust's complaints procedure before directing a complaint to them. The exceptions to this include when:

- Pupils are at risk of harm.
- Pupils are missing education.
- A complainant is being prevented from having their complaint progressed through the trust's complaints procedure.
- The DfE has evidence that the trust is proposing to act or is acting unlawfully or unreasonably.

If a social services authority or local authority decides to investigate a situation, the board of trustees may postpone the complaints procedure.

If a complainant commences legal action against the school or Trust in relation to their complaint, the school or Trust will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

The school or Trust may pause, suspend or not consider a parent's formal complaint if the issue they are complaining about is concurrently being dealt with by a court (such as legal, disciplinary or tribunal actions), as they cannot interfere with or parallel process a court case. While the schools and Trust must follow statutory, published procedures for complaints (e.g. under the Education Act 2002 or Independent School Standards), they may invoke policies to manage "vexatious" or unreasonable complaints that directly conflict with the legal processes.

9. Managing unreasonable complaints

The trust is committed to dealing with all concerns and complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who raise concerns or make a complaint. The trust will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the trust itself or any of its academies; however, the trust does not expect staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

For the purposes of this policy, "**unreasonable complaints**" include:

- Vexatious complaints, which:
 - Are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, or repetitious.

- Insist upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason.
- Insist upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner.
- Are designed to cause disruption or annoyance.
- Demand for redress which lacks any serious purpose or value.
- Serial or persistent complaints, which:
 - Are duplicated, sent by the same complainant once the initial complaint has been closed.
 - Are new complaints that are submitted additionally, as part of an existing open complaint, by the same complainant.

A complaint may also be regarded as unreasonable when the complainant:

- Refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance.
- Refuses to cooperate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved.
- Refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaints procedure.
- Insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice.
- Introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on, or raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales.
- Makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues and seeks to have them replaced.
- Changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds.
- Repeatedly makes the same complaint despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed.
- Refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the trust's complaints procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed, including referral to the DfE.
- Seeks an unrealistic outcome.
- Makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with.

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the complainant:

- Acts maliciously or aggressively.
- Uses threats, intimidation or violence.
- Uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language.
- Knows the complaint to be false.
- Uses falsified information.
- Publishes unacceptable information in media such as social media websites and newspapers.

The above applies regardless of the method the complaint is made, e.g. face-to-face, by telephone, in writing or electronically.

Complainants should limit the number of communications with the trust while a complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent, either by letter, phone, email or text, as it could delay the outcome being reached.

Whenever possible, the member of staff, local governor or trustee leading the response to a complaint will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking.

Serial or persistent complaints will only be marked as 'serial' once the complainant has completed the complaints procedure. It is the complaint that will be marked as 'serial', meaning the complainant can complain about a separate issue if necessary.

If the behaviour continues, the individual handling the complaint will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and asking them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the trust or any of its academies causing a significant level of disruption, the trust may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will usually be reviewed after six months.

A decision to stop responding will only be considered in circumstances where the following statements are true:

- Every reasonable step has been taken to address the complainant's concerns
- The complainant has been given a clear statement of the trust's position and their options
- The complainant contacts the trust or any of its academies repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time

If the above criteria are met, in making a decision to stop responding, the trust will also consider if the complainant is often abusive or aggressive in their communication, makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff, or if the trust believes their intent is to disrupt or inconvenience the trust or its academies.

The trust will not stop responding to a complainant on the basis that they are difficult to deal with or they ask complex questions.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the concerns and actions taken will be put in writing immediately and the police informed. This may include banning an individual from the premises.

10. Complaints campaigns

Where the trust becomes the subject of a complaints campaign from complainants who are not connected with the trust, **a standard, single response will be published on the trust's website.**

If the trust receives a large number of complaints about the same subject from complainants who are connected to the trust, e.g. parents, each complainant will receive an individual response.

If complainants remain dissatisfied with the trust's response, they will be directed to the DfE.

11. Barring from the premises

School premises are private property and therefore any individual may be barred from entering the premises.

If an individual's behaviour is cause for concern, the headteacher of the relevant academy will ask the individual to leave the premises.

The headteacher will notify the parties involved in writing, explaining that their implied licence for access to the premises has been temporarily revoked and why, subject to any representations that the individual may wish to make. The individual involved will be given the opportunity to formally express their views regarding the decision to bar them.

This decision to bar will be reviewed by the chair of the LGB, or the chair of trustees where escalated, taking into account any discussions following the incident. If the decision is made to continue the bar, the individual will be contacted in writing, informing them of how long the bar will be in place, and when the decision will be reviewed.

Anyone wishing to make a complaint regarding a barring order can do so in writing, including via email, to the headteacher or chair of governors.

12. Transferring data

When a pupil changes school, the pupil's educational record will be transferred to the new school and no copies will be kept.

The trust will hold records of complaints separate to pupil records while a complaint is ongoing, so that access to these records can be maintained.

Information that the trust retains relating to a complaint will be stored securely and in line with its Records Management Policy.

13. Availability

A copy of this policy will be made available on request. It will also be published on the trust website, and the websites of individual academies within the trust, as recommended by the DfE.

14. Monitoring and review

The complaints procedure will be reviewed **annually**, taking into account any legislative changes and the latest guidance issued by the DfE.


Responsibility for reviewing the procedure belongs to a committee of the board of trustees. All projected review dates will be adhered to.

Information gathered through reviewing the complaints procedure will be used to continuously improve and develop the process. Any changes to this policy will be communicated to all relevant stakeholders.

The monitoring and reviewing of complaints will be used to help evaluate each academy's performance, and the performance of the trust as a whole.

Version Number	Purpose / Change	Author	Date
0.1	Created for MAT set up	Julie Stuart	October 2023
0.2	Minor amendments	E. Hampton	December 2023
1.0	Annual Review	Julie Stuart	November 2024
1.1	Amendments	Lee Comstock	December 2024
2.0	Annual Review	Julie Stuart	December 2025
Review update			December 2026

Signed by:

Chair of Trustee Board	Helen Richardson	
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