



Durham &
Newcastle
Diocesan
Learning
Trust

**Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust (DNDLT)
Company Number 10847279**

Complaints Procedures Policy

"Every child matters and no child is ever left behind..."

**"Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them;
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."**

Luke 18:15-17

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Vision Statement

At the heart of our vision is our commitment to ensure all of our schools are places where children and young people develop and thrive academically, socially, culturally and spiritually. The drive for excellence and effectiveness in our schools is paramount, but not merely because the Government says so. The enabling of every child to flourish in their potential as a child of God is a sign and expression of the Kingdom and is at the heart of the Trust's distinctive mission. This vision statement will be taken into account in all of our policies and their implementation.

Statement of intent

The Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Learning Trust is committed to operating with the highest ethical standards and acting with integrity in all activities.

This policy aims to resolve 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 complaints relating to any aspects of the provision of facilities or services against:

- Any member of staff.
- Any academy within the trust.
- Any local academy council of the trust.
- Individual trustees or the board of trustees.
- The trust as a whole.

It is designed to ensure that the trust's complaints procedure is straightforward, impartial, non-adversarial, allows a full and fair investigation, respects confidentiality and delivers an effective response and appropriate redress.

This policy outlines the procedure that the complainant and academies within the trust will follow. Once a complaint has been made, it can be resolved or withdrawn at any stage.

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

1. Legal Framework

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

- Education Act 2002
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Immigration Act 2016
- Equality Act 2010
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)
- Data Protection Act 2018
- Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014
- ESFA (2021) 'Best practice guidance for academies complaints procedures'
- HM Government (2016) 'Code of Practice on the English language requirement for public sector workers'
- Academy Trust Handbook 2024

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 “**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 “**concern**” is defined as ‘an expression of worry or doubt’ where reassurance is required. For the purpose of this policy, concerns will be classed and addressed as complaints.

Any complaint or concern 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 ESFA, as outlined in [The role of the ESFA](#) section 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 ESFA's definition of independence.

3. Making a Complaint

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

The trust will not normally investigate anonymous complaints.

Individuals 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.
- **Child protection** – referred to safeguarding procedures outlined in the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy.
- **Exclusion** – referred to the procedures outlined in the Behavioural Policy 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 complaints will be directed towards the procedures laid out in this policy.

Complainants may make complaints in person, in writing or by telephone. Complaints should be made using the appropriate channels of communication, including the use of the [Complaints Procedure Form](#).

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. 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. Complaints received outside of term time will be treated as being received on the first school day after the holiday period.

A complaint can progress to the next stage of the procedure even if it is not viewed as “justified”. All complainants are given the opportunity to fully complete the complaints procedure.

Complaints about trust staff or trustees

Complaints against staff of an academy in the trust will:

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

In the event the headteacher has knowledge of or has been referenced in the complaint the Trust will have the discretion to ask another headteacher or senior leader from a different school, or if required an external independent investigator, to deal with the complaint.

Complaints against a headteacher of an academy in the trust will:

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

In the event the Chair of the Academy Council has knowledge of or has been referenced in the complaint the Trust will have the discretion to ask another academy councillor or an academy councillor from a different school, or if required an external independent investigator, to deal with the complaint.

Complaints against Academy Councillors 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 academy council 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.

Complaints against the chair of trustees, or an entire academy council will:

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

Complaints against the board of trustees will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO, or if deemed appropriate an external investigator
- Follow the complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against the CEO will:

- Be dealt with by the chair of trustees, or if deemed appropriate an external investigator, with a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against the trust will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO or if deemed appropriate an external investigator.
- Begin with stage two of the [complaints procedure](#) outlined in this policy, i.e. via a formal, written complaint.

Complaints escalated to the trust

Where a complainant wishes to escalate their complaint to the trust, the complaint will be handled by the CEO.

The clerk to the board of trustees will write to the complainant to acknowledge their complaint within **15** days of receiving it. If appropriate, the CEO will investigate the complaint and provide an initial response.

Where the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the initial response, they will be prompted to write to the clerk to the board of trustees to ask for the complaint to be held before a panel within **10** school days. The clerk will record the date this complaint is received and will respond within **10** school days. The panel hearing will be organised in accordance with stage three of the [complaints procedure](#).

If a complaint is escalated beyond the panel, its resolution may involve sourcing an independent investigator to deal with the complaint. In exceptional circumstances, where it is necessary to deviate from the complaints procedure, this deviation will be appropriately documented.

Information about a complaint will not be disclosed to a third party without written consent from the complainant.

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 complaint.
- Expressing the complaint and their concerns in full at the earliest opportunity.
- Promptly responding to any requests for information and meetings.
- Asking for assistance as needed.
- Treating any person(s) involved in the complaint with respect.

The role of the investigator will differ depending on the nature of the complaint and who it is directed at (and who this is will be subject to the exceptions/discretions referred to in part 3 above).

- For complaints against staff of academies in the trust, the investigator will be the headteacher
- For complaints against headteachers of academies in the trust, the investigator will be the chair of the local governing board
- For complaints against academy councillors, the investigator will be the chair of the Academy Council.
- For complaints against trustees, the investigator will be the chair of trustees.

- For complaints against the chair of trustees or an entire Academy Council, the CEO will appoint an appropriate person (who may be external to the Trust) to be the investigator.
- For complaints against the CEO, the investigator will be the chair of trustees.

The investigator of the 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 and making notes of the interviews with all parties that are involved in the 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.
- 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.

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. This may include giving prior permission for the complainant to bring along a friend (as support) or an interpreter if requested.
- 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 to everyone in attendance of the meeting, ensuring that everyone has seen the necessary material.
- 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 role of the Department for Education

If a complainant remains dissatisfied once the complaint procedure has been completed, they have the right to refer their complaint to the DfE. If a complainant wishes to escalate a complaint, the trust will refer them to the relevant form at <https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe> and prompt them to follow the instructions on this form to submit a complaint to DfE.

The DfE will not overturn the trust or panel's decision about a complaint or re-investigate the original complaint. The DfE role is to make sure we handle your complaint properly.

The DfE will only be able to consider your complaint if you can provide evidence that the school:

- does not have a complaints procedure
- did not provide a copy of its complaints procedure when requested
- does not have a procedure that complies with statutory regulations
- has not followed its published complaints procedure
- has not allowed its complaints procedure to be completed

The DfE are not able to:

- overturn the Trust/School's decision
- re-investigate the original complaint
- review the accuracy of minutes taken or documents provided
- order the academy to pay you compensation
- direct the academy to discipline or exclude pupils
- force the academy to discipline or dismiss staff
- instruct the academy to apologise to you

Further guidance on how the DfE handle complaints about academies is at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/complain-about-an-academy/complain-about-an-academy>

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 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 procedure will consist of **three** stages:

- **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 trust.
- **Panel hearing** – where the panel includes at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint and one person who is independent of the management and running of the trust.

At each stage, complainants will be informed of their options for escalation if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of their 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 ICT system, or on the central trust ICT system where the complaint is against the trust as a whole or a member of the board of trustees.

Stage one – informal complaint

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

Where a complaint has been made about a member of staff, the complainant can discuss the concern with the headteacher, or a person delegated to hear the complaint on their behalf, to seek support. If the concern is about the headteacher, the chair of the academy council should be informed and will need to handle the complaint. The complainant can then be referred to the chair of trustees.

Where a complaint is made initially to a trustee, the complainant will be referred to the appropriate person. No member of staff or trustee will act alone on a complaint outside of the procedure; if they do, they cannot be involved if the complaint is subject to a hearing at a later stage of the procedure.

Within **10** school days of notification of the complaint, 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 complaint, the complainant will be asked for their input as to what they believe may resolve the issue about which the complaint has been made to avoid further escalation where possible.

In line with ESFA 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 complaint will inform the complainant about the next level of the procedure.

Stage two – formal complaint

Formal complaints must be made in writing via the [Complaints Procedure Form](#).

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 the headteacher, the complainant will initially need to write, in confidence, to **the chair of the academy council**. If the complaint references the chair or they have knowledge of it they will delegate this to an appropriate alternative person (for example another academy councillor, or an academy councillor from a different school) to investigate on their behalf. 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 to the board of trustees within **10** school days of the end of stage two, i.e. communication of an outcome. This request should include the reasons for being dissatisfied with the outcome as well as an outline of what outcome the complainant hopes to achieve.

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 ESFA's guidance, a academy councillor serving on the Academy Council 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 the Academy Council and the chair of trustees will also have a copy of this letter.

At the hearing, all participants will be given the opportunity to put their case across and discuss any issues. If the hearing is unable to be conducted in person due to exceptional circumstances it may be held virtually by video call. The meeting will allow for:

- The complainant to be present and accompanied at the hearing if they wish. The identity of the companion must be agreed by the Chair in advance and they will be able to act in

a supportive role but not speak on the complainant's behalf (unless agreed in exceptional circumstances before the hearing).

- 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 decision will be the final stage in the complainant's procedure subject to any submission to the ESFA below.

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.

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.

Complaints to the ESFA

If a complainant has exhausted the trust's complaints procedure, they will be advised that they can submit a complaint to the ESFA via

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency/about/complaints-procedure, or by writing to:

Complaints Team
Education and Skills Funding Agency
Cheylesmore House
Coventry
Quinton Road
Coventry
CV1 2WT

Please note that the ESFA will only consider complaints that fall into the following areas; where an academy (extract from ESFA website [How ESFA handles complaints about academies - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/education-and-skills-funding-agency/about/complaints-procedure)):-

- *“does not have a complaints procedure*
- *did not provide a copy of its complaints procedure when requested*
- *does not have a procedure that complies with statutory regulations*
- *has not followed its published complaints procedure*
- *has not allowed its complaints procedure to be completed*

The ESFA are not able to:

- *overturn the governing body’s decision*
- *re-investigate your original complaint*
- *review the accuracy of minutes taken or documents provided*
- *order the academy to pay you compensation*
- *direct the academy to discipline / exclude pupils*
- *force the academy to discipline / dismiss staff*
- *instruct the academy to apologise to you”*

Resolving complaints

At each stage of the complaints procedure, the trust is committed to resolving the complaint. Where appropriate, the trust will acknowledge that the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, and may in those circumstances 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 complaint, the trust will ask them to confirm this in writing. Despite the 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 complaint.

Record keeping

A written record will be kept of all 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 complaints whether they are upheld or not.

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

Trust schools will retain records of complaints and related documents in line with the Data Protection Policy and Data Retention Schedule. Personal data will only be kept for as long as necessary.

6. Interviewing Witnesses

When interviewing pupils to gather information regarding a 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 LA designated officer's (LADO) or police investigation.

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 complaint

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

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

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 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. 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 ESFA 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 ESFA has evidence that the trust is proposing to act or is acting unlawfully or unreasonably.

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

9. Managing unreasonable complaints

The trust is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. 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 ESFA.
- 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 or one of its schools 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 (or school's) website.

If the trust/school 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 or school's response, they will be directed to the ESFA.

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 Academy Council, 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 the Academy Council.

12. Standard of fluency complaints

As members of a public authority, all staff are subject to the fluency duty imposed by the Immigration Act 2016, which requires staff members to have an appropriate level of fluency in English in order to teach pupils.

The trust is free to determine the level of spoken communication necessary in order for staff members to develop effective performance, but it will be matched to the demands of the role in question.

The trust will be satisfied that an individual has the necessary level of fluency appropriate for the role they will be undertaking, whether this is an existing or potential new member of staff.

If a member of the school community feels that a staff member has insufficient proficiency in spoken English for the performance of their role, they are required to follow the [complaints procedure](#) outlined in this policy.

For the purpose of this policy, a **“legitimate complaint”** is one which is about the standard of spoken English of a member of staff; complaints regarding an individual’s accent, dialect, manner or tone of communication are not considered legitimate complaints. All legitimate complaints regarding the fluency duty will be handled in line with the processes detailed in this policy.

In addition to the processes outlined in this policy, the trust will assess the merits of a legitimate complaint against the necessary standard of spoken English fluency required for the role in question.

To assess the merits, the academy at which the staff member works will undertake an objective assessment against clear criteria set out in the role specification or, against the level of fluency descriptors relevant to the role in question.

If the complaint is upheld, the trust will consider what action is necessary to meet the fluency duty; this may include:

- Specific training
- Specific re-training
- Assessment
- Re-deployment
- Dismissal

Appropriate support will be provided to staff to ensure that they are protected from vexatious complaints and are not subjected to unnecessary fluency testing.

Records of complaints regarding fluency will be kept in accordance with the processes outlined in the [Recording a complaint](#) section of this policy.

13. 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.

14. 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 ESFA.

15. Monitoring and review

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

Responsibility for reviewing the procedure belongs to the board of trustees.

Information gathered through reviewing the complaints procedure will be used to continuously improve and develop the process.

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.

Headteachers of each school will inform Academy Councillors of the number of complaints received in their termly report, this report will include numbers but no identifying details.

Complaints procedure form

If you have tried unsuccessfully to resolve your complaint and wish to take the matter further, please complete this form and send it to the headteacher. (If your complaint is against the headteacher, you will need to send the form to the chair of the Academy Council)

Name:	Address:
Daytime telephone number:	
Evening telephone number:	
Email:	Postcode:
What is your complaint concerning, and what action would you like the headteacher (or where appropriate Chair of Academy Council) to take?	
When did you discuss your concern or complaint with the appropriate member of staff?	
What was the result of the discussion?	
Signed:	Date:

Example letter to complainant for a stage three complaint

Address line one

Address line two

Town

County

Postcode

Date

RE: Stage three complaint

Dear **addressee's name**,

Thank you for your letter dated **date** setting out the reasons why you are not satisfied with the **headteacher's** response to your complaint about **details of the complaint**.

I am writing to let you know that I will be arranging for a complaints panel hearing to consider your complaint, in accordance with our trust's complaints procedure.

As explained in the procedure, the **chair** of the panel will advise, in writing, how the panel intends to consider your complaint.

Yours sincerely,

Name

Chair of the Academy Council

Example letter for complaints against the headteacher

Address line one

Address line two

Town

County

Postcode

Date

RE: Complaint against the headteacher

Dear **addressee's name**,

I have received your complaint against the **headteacher** of **name of academy**.

I write to let you know that I have forwarded a copy of your complaint to the **headteacher**, with a request that they respond to the issues raised in the complaint within **10** school days.

A copy of the **headteacher's** response will be sent to you as soon as possible.

If you are not satisfied with the **headteacher's** response, I will arrange for a complaints panel hearing to consider your complaint in accordance with stage three of the attached complaints procedure.

As explained in the procedure, the **chair** of the panel will advise you, in writing, how the complaint will proceed.

Yours sincerely,

Name

Chair of the Academy Council