

# St Mary's Catholic Primary Schools Trust



*'Aspire not to have more, but to be more'*

*(Oscar Romero)*

## Complaints Policy 2023

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## Policy Aim and Statement

This Complaints Policy helps underpin the mission statements of St Mary's Catholic Infant School (the "Infant School") and St Mary's Catholic Junior School (the "Junior School", referred to together as the "Schools"), which comprise St Mary's Catholic Primary Schools Trust (the "Trust"). Its aim is to ensure that a concern, difficulty or complaint is managed sympathetically, efficiently and at the appropriate level and resolved as soon as possible. Doing so is good practice, fair to those concerned and helps to promote parents' and students' confidence in the Schools' ability to safeguard and promote welfare. The Schools will try to resolve every concern, difficulty or complaint in a positive way with the aim of putting right a matter which may have gone wrong and, where necessary, reviewing the Schools' systems and procedures in the light of the matters raised.

The Schools need to know as soon as possible if there is any cause for dissatisfaction. The Trust recognises that a concern or difficulty which is not resolved quickly and fairly can soon become a cause of resentment, which can be damaging to the relationship between the Schools and the parent and student, and can also have a detrimental effect upon the Trust's ethos and culture. Parents and students should never feel – or be made to feel – that raising a concern, difficulty or complaint will adversely affect the pupil's future at the Schools, or place the student at a disadvantage in any way.

## Application

The Schools are governed by the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (as amended) ("the Regulations"). This Complaints Policy has been formulated to comply with Schedule 1, Part 7 of the Regulations (as well as equality legislation and the rules of natural justice). In the case of any variance between the procedure outlined in this Complaints Policy and the Regulations, the procedure outlined in the Regulations will apply.

This policy is also based on guidance published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and good practice guidance from the Department for Education. In addition, it addresses our duties set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework in respect of complaints relating to our fulfilment of Early Years Foundation Stage requirements.

Anyone can make a complaint about any provision of facilities or services that a school provides, unless separate statutory procedures apply; this includes parents or carers of pupils at the Schools, parents or carers of pupils no longer at the Schools, and members of the public, and all complaints must be dealt with respectfully and expeditiously. However, in respect of complaints made by those who are not parents of children at the Schools, there is no obligation to follow the complaints policy.

Separate statutory procedures will apply to issues including child protection, admissions, exclusions, statutory assessments of special educational needs and the content of any resulting Education, Health and Care Plan ("EHCP") (although concerns about the provision of SEN support at the Schools can be raised through this policy), school reorganisation proposals, whistleblowing, staff grievances and conduct dealt with under the Schools' internal disciplinary process, services by other providers who may use school premises or facilities (who should have their own complaints policy), matters dealt with by regulatory bodies such as the JCQ and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, as well as National Curriculum content. Where a complaint is made against a member of staff, depending upon the nature and seriousness of the complaint, the matter may be dealt with under separate HR procedures which are strictly confidential, rather than under this

Complaints Policy. Complaints about the content of a pupil's EHCP should be raised directly with the pupil's home Local Authority.

This Complaints Policy distinguishes between a concern or difficulty, which can usually be resolved informally, and a formal complaint which will require further investigation.

### **The Rules of Natural Justice**

Simply put, the rules of natural justice relate to fairness. The Trust will ensure that all concerns, difficulties or complaints are dealt with in accordance with the following principles:

- All parties will be provided with all information and documentation pertinent to the matters raised;
- All parties will be given the opportunity to prepare and present their case and respond to the other parties involved;
- All persons investigating and making decisions in relation to the matters raised will be impartial and will do so without bias (or apparent bias) to any party involved;
- All decisions made will be made on a balanced and considered assessment of the information before him or her only;
- All decisions made will be based upon logical conclusions, and not based on mere speculation or suspicion;
- All decisions made will be supported by detailed reasons which will be disclosed to all parties involved.

### **Equality Act 2010**

The Trust will deal with concerns, difficulties and complaints in accordance with its duty under the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard for the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010;
- Advance equality of opportunity between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not, by having regard for the need to:
  - Remove or minimise disadvantages connected to a relevant protected characteristic;
  - Take steps to meet the different needs of those sharing a relevant protected characteristic; and
  - Encourage those who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in school life and activities in which participation is disproportionately low.
- Foster good relations between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not, by having regard for the need to:
  - Tackle prejudice; and
  - Promote understanding.

"Relevant protected characteristics" includes sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity and (in the case of persons who are not pupils) age and marriage / civil partnership.

In addition, the Trust will comply with its duty to make the following reasonable adjustments for persons

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with a disability:

- Where a provision, criterion or practice places a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage compared to person who is not disabled, reasonable steps must be taken to avoid that disadvantage;
- Where a disabled person would, but for the provision of an auxiliary aid, be placed at a substantial disadvantage compared with a person who is not disabled, reasonable steps must be taken to provide the auxiliary aid.

An auxiliary aid can be a piece of equipment or a service.

Meetings will be held in private. Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs require it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending must be sought before recording of meetings or conversations take place.

If a Complainant or other person involved in the complaints procedure requires an interpreter, a signer or any other assistance at meetings or at a Complaint Panel Hearing, they should let the Trust know immediately.

Further details can be found in the Trust's Equality Policy.

### Terms Used

For the purpose of this Complaints Policy, a "parent" includes the natural or adoptive parent of a student, irrespective of whether they are or ever have been married, whether they are separated or divorced, whether the student lives with them, whether the father has parental responsibility for the student or whether they have contact with the student.

A "parent" will also include a person who has parental responsibility for a student, an adult with whom the student lives, and an adult who is involved in the day-to-day care of the pupil (for example, collecting or dropping off the pupil from school).

A person making a complaint will be referred to as a "Complainant" throughout this Complaints Policy.

A reference to "School" refers to the Infant School or the Junior School as appropriate.

### Procedure

In respect of complaints regarding the Trust's fulfilment of Early Years requirements, we will investigate all written complaints relating to the Trust's fulfilment of the Early Years Foundation Stage requirement, and will notify the complainant of the outcome within 28 School Days of receiving the complaint.

A record of the complaint will be held in accordance with the 'retention of records' section below, and will be made available to Ofsted upon request.

Parents and carers may contact Ofsted if they believe that the Trust is not meeting its Early Years Foundation Stage requirements, by calling 0300 123 1231, or by emailing [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

We will notify parents and carers if we become aware that the Infant School is to be inspected by Ofsted, and we will also supply a copy of the inspection report to parents and carers of children attending the setting

on a regular basis. A copy will also be available from the Trust website and from Ofsted's website.

For all other complaints, subject to the content of this policy, the Trust's complaints procedure will consist of the following three stages:

- Stage 1 – Concerns and difficulties, dealt with informally;
- Stage 2 – Complaints formally investigated by the Headteacher (or designate);
- Stage 3 – Complaint Panel Hearing.

### Time Limits

The Trust aims to resolve concerns, difficulties and complaints in a timely manner. Time limits for each stage of the procedure are set out under each individual stage. For the purposes of this Complaints Policy, a "school day" is defined as a weekday during term time, when the Schools are open to children. The definition of "school day" excludes weekends, school holidays and bank holidays. For the avoidance of doubt, term dates are published on the Trust's website, and information about term dates is made available to parents and pupils periodically.

We will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

Although every effort will be made by the Schools to comply with the time limits specified under each stage of the procedure, it may not always be possible to do so, for example due to the complexity or number of matters raised, or due to the unavailability of the Complainant to attend a meeting, if offered. In all cases, **where a time limit cannot be complied with, the School will write to the Complainant within the specified time limit, setting out the reasons why the time limit cannot be complied with, and confirming the new time limit which will apply.**

If the School has made reasonable attempts to accommodate complainants with dates for complaint meetings and they refuse or are unable to attend the School may:

- Convene meetings in their absence; and
- Reach a conclusion in the interests of drawing the complaint to a close.

### Complaints against the CEO, a Director of the Trust, a Governor of the Local Governing Body ("LGB"), or the members

There may be occasions when it is necessary or reasonable to deviate from the published complaints procedure. However, in these circumstances we will notify you and provide an explanation as to why.

For example:

If the complaint is about the CEO or a Governor/Director (including either the Chair or Vice-Chair), a suitably skilled Governor/Director, as appropriate, will be appointed to complete all the actions at Stage 2 instead.

Complaints about the CEO or a Governor/Director must be made to the Clerk to the Trust Board, via the Infant School office.

Complaints about the Trust's members will be rare but any such complaints should also be made to the Clerk to the Trust Board and a Director will be appointed to complete all the actions at Stage 2.

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair of the LGB/Trust Board; or
- The entire LGB/Trust Board; or
- The majority of the LGB/Trust Board,

then, depending on the circumstances, Stage 2 may be considered by an independent investigator appointed by the LGB or the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, and Stage 3 may be heard by a panel consisting of 2 trustees and one independent panel member if the complaint is about a governing body or an independent panel if the complaint is about the Trust Board.

At the conclusion of their investigation, the independent investigator (and at Stage 3, the committee of independent, co-opted governors/directors) will provide a formal written report. The outcome of the Stage 2 or Stage 3 complaint (as appropriate) will be communicated to the Complainant by the School.

### Late Complaints

Where a complaint is submitted more than six months after the incident or event (or where the complaint relates to a series of incidents or events, more than six months from the date of the latest incident or event), the Schools reserve the right to refuse to investigate the complaint under this Complaints Policy **if it appears reasonable and fair to do so, having regard to the circumstances surrounding the complaint.**

Where the School decides that a complaint which was submitted late will not be investigated, the School will write to the Complainant notifying them of the decision within **five school days** of the complaint being received.

If the Complainant is unhappy with the decision not to investigate a complaint which was submitted late, the Complainant may write to the Chair of Local Governors asking for the decision to be reviewed. The Chair of Local Governors will be provided with all documentation relating to the complaint, together with the letter from the School to the Complainant, and will review the decision not to investigate the complaint. The Chair of Local Governors will **not** investigate the complaint itself during this review.

The Chair of Local Governors will write to the Complainant with the outcome of the review within **ten school days** of the date that the letter from the Complainant seeking the review was received, and provide the School with a copy of the letter.

If the Chair of Local Governors quashes the decision not to investigate the complaint, it will be referred to the School to be dealt with under this Complaints Policy in the usual way.

If the Chair of Local Governors upholds the decision not to investigate the complaint, the Complainant may refer the concern or complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency using the procedure stated towards the end of this Complaints Policy.

In exceptional circumstances, the Chair of Local Governors can delegate the responsibility for the review to the Vice-Chair of Local Governors.

### Persistent or Serial Complaints

There may be occasions when, despite a complaint being considered under all stages in this Complaints Policy, the Complainant persists in making the same complaint to the Trust. There may also be occasions when a Complainant raises unreasonable persistent complaints or raises complaints about matters which do not affect them. There may also be occasions when a complaint is made about a matter which is clearly so trivial that it would be a poor use of the Trust's resources to deal with it under the formal stages of the procedure.

In all of these cases, the Trust reserves the right to regard the complaint as persistent or serial and to refuse to investigate it under the procedure in this Complaints Policy, **if it appears reasonable and fair to do so, having regard to the circumstances surrounding the complaint.**

Where the Trust decides that a complaint is persistent or serial and will not be investigated, the Trust will write to the Complainant within **five school days** of the complaint being raised to notify them of the decision.

If the Complainant is unhappy with the decision not to investigate a persistent or serial complaint, they may write to the Chair of Local Governors to ask for the decision to be reviewed. The Chair of Local Governors will be provided with all documentation relating to the current complaint and any previous complaints which were relevant to the decision, together with the letter from the School to the Complainant, and will review the decision not to investigate the complaint. The Chair of Local Governors will **not** investigate the complaint itself during this review.

The Chair of Local Governors will write to the Complainant with the outcome of the review within **ten school days** of the date that the letter from the Complainant seeking the review was received.

If the Chair of Local Governors overturns the decision not to investigate the concern or complaint, it will be referred to the School to be dealt with under the procedure in this Complaints Policy in the usual way.

If the Chair of Local Governors upholds the decision not to investigate the concern or complaint, the Complainant may refer the concern or complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency using the procedure stated towards the end of this Complaints Policy.

In exceptional circumstances, the Chair of Local Governors can delegate the responsibility for the review to the Vice-Chair of Local Governors.

Further to the above, the School may consider ending communication with a complainant if:

- It has taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns;
- The complainant has been given a clear statement of the School's position and the options available;
- The complainant contacts the School repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time.

The case to stop responding is stronger if:

- The complainant's letters, emails, or telephone calls are often or always abusive or aggressive;
- The complainant makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff;
- The School has reason to believe that the complainant is contacting the School with the intention of causing disruption or inconvenience.

Alternatively, the School may suggest that the complainant asks a third party to act on their behalf when communicating with the School, such as the local Citizen's Advice Bureau.

If the School has decided that it is appropriate to stop responding, it must inform the individual accordingly. Parents and carers will however be provided with the information they are legally entitled to, and the School will at all times act reasonably and consider any new complaint.

If an individual's behaviour is causing a significant level of disruption, regardless of whether or not they have raised a complaint, academies can implement a tailored communication strategy.

If an individual persists to the point that may constitute harassment, further action may be considered.

### **Anonymous Complaints**

The Schools will not investigate anonymous complaints under the procedure in this Complaints Policy. Anonymous complaints will be referred to the CEO who will decide what, if any, action should be taken.

### **Duplicate Complaints**

There may be occasions when, despite a complaint being considered under all stages in this Complaints Policy, we receive a duplicate complaint from:

- a spouse
- a partner
- a grandparent
- a child

If the complaint is about the same subject, we will confirm either that;

- the School has already considered this complaint and the local process is complete; or
- the School is currently considering this complaint.

The author of the duplicate complaint will be advised that once the original complaint has completed all stages under this Complaints Policy, they can contact the Education and Skills Funding Agency if they are dissatisfied with the Trust's handling of the original complaint.

Any new aspects to the complaint not previously considered will be investigated and dealt with in accordance with this complaints procedure.

### **UK GDPR /Data Protection Act 2018 and Freedom of Information Act 2000**

Complaints sometimes include requests for information or documentation. Such requests will either be a "subject access request" under the UK GDPR / Data Protection Act 2018 (where the information requested relates to an identifiable individual) or a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (where the information is general and not related to an identifiable individual).

Subject access requests under the GDPR / Data Protection Act 2018 must be responded to within one calendar month (although the Trust can extend the timescale for compliance by up to two further calendar months if a request is complex), and requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 must be responded to within twenty school days, however the School will aim to provide this information as soon as practicable (where the request is valid and the Complainant is lawfully entitled to the information or documentation) in accordance with the rules of natural justice.

Further details can be found in the Trust's Data Protection Policy and Freedom of Information Policy.

### **Resolution Principles**

It is in everyone's interest that concerns, difficulties and complaints are resolved to the satisfaction of all parties at the earliest possible stage. The way in which the concern, difficulty or complaint is dealt with after Complaints Policy June 2023



the matter is first raised by the Complainant can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, members of staff will be periodically made aware of the procedure in this Complaints Policy, so that they will know what to do when a concern or difficulty is raised with them.

At each stage of the complaints procedure, the investigator will consider how the complaint may be resolved. In considering how a complaint may be resolved, the investigator will give due regard to the seriousness of the complaint. It **may** be appropriate in order to bring the complaint to a resolution for the investigator to offer:

- An explanation;
- An apology;
- Reassurance that steps have been taken to prevent a recurrence of events which led to the complaint;
- Reassurance that the School will undertake a review of its policies and procedures in light of the complaint.

None of the above will constitute an admission of negligence or an acceptance of liability on behalf of the School.

#### Outcome Principles

Examples of outcomes include:

- There was insufficient evidence to reach a conclusion, so the complaint cannot be upheld;
- The investigation did not substantiate the matters raised, so the complaint cannot be upheld;
- The complaint was substantiated in part or full. A description should be given of the remedial action being taken by the School as a consequence of the complaint. **Details of any disciplinary action or sanctions to be taken against a member of staff are strictly confidential and cannot be disclosed.**
- The matter has been fully investigated and, as a consequence, further confidential procedures are being pursued. **Details of any disciplinary action or sanctions to be taken against a member of staff are strictly confidential and cannot be disclosed.**

#### Retention of Records

A full written record will be maintained centrally at the Schools of all complaints made under Stage 2 to 3: to include whether they are resolved following a formal procedure, or proceed to a panel hearing as well as:

- a record of the progress of the complaint and the final outcome;
- a record of whether the case progressed to a panel hearing; and
- a record of the action taken by the school or the trust, regardless of outcome.

Records of complaints will be destroyed when the student to which they relate reaches the age of twenty four years or, in the case of a student with a statement of special educational needs, until the student reaches the age of thirty years.

### Confidentiality

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential except where access is requested by the Secretary of State, a school inspector, or under another legal authority.

There may also be occasions where complaints are made or continue to be escalated after a child has left the school. On changing schools, the pupil's educational record is transferred to the new school. Schools can consider holding records of complaints separate to their pupil records (while a complaint is ongoing) so that access to them can be maintained.

Meetings will be held in private. Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs require it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending must be sought before meetings or conversations take place.

### Publication

This Complaints Policy has been agreed by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark and ratified by the Local Governing Body, and will be reviewed annually by the Trust Board. It will be published on the Trust's website and provided to parents and students on request by the school office at the Infant School and the Junior School. A copy of this Complaints Policy will be provided to a Complainant when a concern, difficulty or complaint is first raised.

### Complaints- Stage 1: Concerns and Difficulties

#### 1. Concerns:

The Schools expect that most concerns and difficulties (defined as 'an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought'), where a parent or student seeks intervention, reconsideration or some other action to be taken, can be resolved informally. Examples might include dissatisfaction about an aspect of teaching or pastoral care, allocation of privileges or responsibilities, a timetable clash, an issue with a School's systems or equipment, or a billing error.

#### 2. Notification:

The concern or difficulty should be raised as follows:

- **Education issues** – if the matter relates to the classroom, the curriculum or special educational needs, the Complainant should speak to the Class Teacher, Assistant Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher, as appropriate.
- **Pastoral care** – for concerns relating to matters outside the classroom, the Complainant should speak to the Class Teacher, Year Leader, or Head of School (in relation to the Junior School), as appropriate.
- **Disciplinary matters** – a problem over any disciplinary action taken or a sanction imposed should be raised with the member of staff who imposed it in the first instance. If not resolved, the Complainant should speak to the relevant Class Teacher, Year Leader, or Head of School, as appropriate.

- **Financial and administrative matters** – a query relating to fees, extras or other administrative matters should be raised by the Complainant with the Office Manager (at the Junior School) or the School Business Manager (at the Infant School).
- **An issue with a specific member of staff** – often, the best way to resolve an issue with a specific member of staff is to raise it with that member of staff directly, so that they are given the opportunity to address and resolve the concern or difficulty before it becomes a formal complaint. If the Complainant feels uncomfortable doing this, however, the issue should be raised with the appropriate Year Leader, or Head of School.

Should a concern or difficulty be raised with a member of staff who feels that they are not the best person to be dealing with it, they will refer it to the Head of School or other member of the leadership team as appropriate.

If a concern or difficulty is raised with a member of staff who feels that it raises serious issues which should be dealt with as a formal complaint immediately, the member of staff will tell the Complainant that they should put their complaint in writing to the CEO under Stage 2 of this Complaints Policy. The same applies to those occasions when complainants want to raise their concerns formally. If the Complainant would prefer to complete a form instead of writing a letter, the Complainant can complete the Complaint Form contained in Appendix 1 of this Complaints Policy to submit their complaint formally.

### 3. Unresolved Concerns and Difficulties

The School will aim to resolve a concern or difficulty within **fifteen school days** of the date that it was raised. Where a concern or difficulty has not been resolved by informal means within this time limit from the date that it was raised, the complainant can submit the matters raised as a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this Complaints Policy.

### 4. Record of Concerns and Difficulties

The member of staff dealing with a concern or difficulty will make a written record of the issues raised, the action taken and, if applicable, the resolution reached, which will be retained in a central record. Further information in relation to the retention of records can be found earlier on in this Complaints Policy.

## Complaints- Stage 2: Formal Complaint

### 5. Notification

A concern or difficulty raised under Stage 1 of this Complaints Policy which remains unresolved after **fifteen school days**, or a serious matter which requires formal investigation from the outset, should be set out in writing by the Complainant and sent to the Head of School /CEO. Should a formal written complaint be received by another member of the School's staff, it will immediately be passed on to the above.

The Complainant should clearly set out the matters in dispute, the relevant dates, the full names of the persons involved and what the Complainant believes the School should do to resolve the complaint. Any documentation relied upon by the Complainant should be attached to the formal complaint.

### 6. Acknowledgement

The formal complaint will be acknowledged in writing within **five school days** of receipt. The acknowledgement letter will confirm the date that the formal complaint was received, the action to be taken and the specified time limit.

### 7. Investigation

The Head of School /CEO will be provided with the records of the Stage 1 informal procedure (if applicable) within **five school days** of receipt of the formal complaint, and will then proceed to investigate the complaint. This will involve obtaining and considering all documentation held by the School which is relevant to the complaint. If further information is required from the Complainant, this may be requested from them over the telephone or in writing.

The Head of School /CEO will speak to the persons who were involved in the matters raised by the Complainant. Students will only be spoken to with an independent member of staff present to support them. Where there is an issue about the conduct of a member of staff, that member of staff will be offered the option of having another member of staff present. Other members of staff will be spoken to alone. A written record of the conversation will be made, and the student or member of staff spoken to will be asked to read, sign and date the written record to confirm that it is accurate. In the case of students, the accompanying independent member of staff will also be asked to sign and date the record of the conversation.

If the Head of School / CEO deems it to be appropriate in relation to the matters raised, the Complainant will be offered a meeting to discuss the issues raised. This may take place at the beginning of the investigation to clarify any matters which are unclear, or after the investigation has taken place with the aim of reaching an amicable resolution.

## **8. Outcome**

The Head of School /CEO will write to the Complainant confirming the outcome of the investigation within **twenty school days** from the date that the complaint was received. The letter will set out the individual matters raised by the Complainant, the findings made by the Head of School /CEO during the course of the investigation, and the conclusion reached.

The letter will inform the Complainant that, if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 2 investigation, they should write to the Clerk to the Local Governors within **five school days** of receipt of the letter requesting a Complaint Panel Hearing under Stage 3 of this Complaints Policy.

Where the complaint was received during a school holiday or within twenty days from the end of a term or half term, the Head of School/ CEO will endeavour to expedite the investigation wherever possible.

The Head of School/CEO will make a written record of the issues raised, the action taken and, if applicable, the resolution reached, which will be retained in a central record. Further information in relation to the retention of records can be found earlier on in this Complaints Policy.

## **9. Delegation**

In appropriate cases, the Head of School /CEO may delegate the complaint to a member of the Senior Leadership Team at the School to deal with in accordance with the procedure outlined above.

### **Complaints- Stage 3: Complaint Panel Hearing**

## **15. Notification**

If the Complainant is unsatisfied with the outcome of the review under Stage 2 of this Complaints Policy, the Complainant may write to the Clerk to the Local Governors requesting a Complaint Panel Hearing. The Complainant should write to the Clerk to the Local Governors within **five school days** of receiving the letter confirming the outcome following Stage 2.

The Complainant should not repeat the matters raised in their original letter or attach documentation already  
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provided, but should clearly set out how and why the Complainant does not accept the findings made under Stages 1 and 2.

## **16. The Complaint Panel**

The Complaint Panel will consist of three persons appointed by or on behalf of the Trust by the Clerk to the Local Governors. None of the three Complaint Panel members will have been involved in the matters which gave rise to the complaint, have been involved in dealing with the complaint previously or have any detailed prior knowledge of the complaint. Two of the Complaint Panel members may (but do not have to) be Governors. The third Complaint Panel member will be independent of the management and running of the School, i.e. they will not be a member of staff or a Governor, and will not be linked to the School in another way, for example as a parent of a student at the School. The independent Complaint Panel members will decide amongst themselves who will be the Chair of the Complaint Panel.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency suggest that the independent panel member should not be a member, trustee or employee of the school and should not be a person who has a clear connection with the school (for example, a solicitor who routinely handles legal matters for the school).

## **17. Attendance**

The Complainant may attend the Complaint Panel Hearing, and may be accompanied by another person. For the avoidance of doubt, the Complainant's supporter will be present for moral support only and will not play any part in the proceedings, unless invited to do so by the Chair of the Complaint Panel, entirely at his or her discretion and for a good reason. The Complaint Panel Hearing is **not** a legal hearing and it is not appropriate for either the Complainant or the School to be legally represented. The aim of the panel hearing should be reconciliation; to put things right that may have gone wrong.

However, there may be occasions when legal representation is appropriate.

For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by union and/or legal representation.

*Note: Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaints procedure. Complainants will be advised that any staff conduct complaints will be considered under staff disciplinary procedures, if appropriate, but outcomes will not be shared with them.*

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

The School will be represented at the Complaint Panel Hearing by the person who dealt with the complaint under Stage 2, which will usually be the CEO. This person will be referred to as the "School's Representative" for the purposes of Stage 3.

The Complaint Panel Hearing will be minuted by the Clerk to the Complaint Panel, who will usually be the Clerk to the Local Governors. The minutes of the hearing will be made available to the Complainant on request.

## **18. Convening the Complaint Panel Hearing**

After selecting the Complaint Panel members, the Clerk to the Local Governors will write to the Complainant within **five school days** acknowledging receipt of their request and informing them of the names of the Complaint Panel members. If the Complainant objects to any of the named persons being appointed to the Complaint Panel, they should notify the Clerk to the Local Governors within **three school days** of receipt of the letter. Fair consideration will be given to any bona fide objection to a particular member of the Complaint Panel.

The Clerk to the Local Governors will liaise with the Complaint Panel, the Complainant and the School's Representative to agree a mutually convenient date for the Complaint Panel Hearing, which will usually take place within **twenty school days** of receipt of the Complainant's request, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The Clerk to the Local Governors will write to the Complainant confirming the date of the Complaint Panel Hearing within **five school days** of the date that the acknowledgement letter was sent (or the date that the new Complaint Panel member was selected, if an objection was received and upheld). If the Complaint Panel Hearing will not take place within **twenty school days** of receipt of the Complainant's request, the letter will set out the exceptional circumstances involved.

## **19. Documentation**

The Clerk to the Local Governors will forward a copy of all paperwork relating to the complaint (consisting of the record of the Stage 1 informal procedure (if applicable), the original letter of complaint or Complaint Form, any documentation provided by the Complainant with their complaint, all investigation records with the letter of outcome under Stage 2 with the Complainant's letter requesting a Complaint Panel Hearing and accompanying documents) to the Complainant, the School's Representative and the three Complaint Panel members.

The names of individuals other than the Complainant, the Complainant's family, members of the School's staff and Governors, will be redacted and replaced with a letter relevant to that particular individual (for example "Jane Brown" will be replaced with "A" throughout, "John Jones" will be replaced with B throughout) unless they have provided their written consent for their name to be disclosed or it is reasonable in all the circumstances for their information to be included.

If the Complainant wishes the Complaint Panel to consider any additional information, they should forward this documentation to the Clerk to the Local Governors to arrive **at least five school days** before the Complaint Panel Hearing, to enable the Clerk to the Local Governors to forward it to the School's Representative and the Complaint Panel members. Documentation may be submitted after this deadline with the permission of the Chair of the Complaint Panel acting in his or her sole discretion.

## **20. Witnesses**

The Chair of the Complaint Panel will decide, at his or her absolute discretion, which witnesses will be permitted to attend the Complaint Panel Hearing to give a verbal statement rather than relying on a written statement or record of meeting which have been signed by the witness.

If the Complainant wishes to rely on the account of a witness, they should ask the witness to write down, sign and date their account and forward it to the Clerk to the Local Governors **at least five school days** before the Complaint Panel Hearing, to enable the Clerk to the Local Governors to forward it to the School's Representative and the Complaint Panel members.

Members of staff of the School involved in the matters which gave rise to the complaint will usually have provided a signed written account or have signed a note of a meeting during the previous stages, which will be forwarded to all parties with the other complaint documentation in the usual way. Members of staff will not usually be required to attend the Complaint Panel Hearing to give a verbal statement unless their conduct is relevant or their account is contentious and the rules of natural justice dictate that the Complainant should be allowed to ask that member of staff questions.

## **21. Procedure at the Complaint Panel Hearing**

The Complaint Panel Hearing will be conducted as follows:

- The Clerk to the Complaint Panel will greet the Complainant, the Complainant's supporter and the School's Representative and welcome them into the room where the Complaint Panel has convened (any witnesses will remain outside of the room until they are called in to give their account);
- Questions may be restricted depending on the relevance/purpose of them, and whether they have been addressed in the documentation;
- The Complainant will be invited by the Complaint Panel to give an account of their complaint;
- The School's Representative will be invited to ask the Complainant questions, if any;
- The Complaint Panel will ask the Complainant questions, if any;
- At the discretion of the Chair of the Complaint Panel, the Complainant's first witness will be invited into the room to give an account of what they saw or know;
- The School's Representative will be invited to ask the Complainant's witness questions, if any;
- The Complaint Panel will ask the Complainant's witness questions, if any;
- The Complainant's witness will be asked to leave the room;
- If the Complainant has any further relevant witnesses, at the discretion of the Chair of the Complaint Panel, they will be invited into the room individually to provide their accounts and be questioned as outlined above;
- The School's Representative will be invited by the Complaint Panel to respond to the complaint and make representations on behalf of the School;
- The Complainant will be invited to ask the School's Representative questions, if any;
- The Complaint Panel will ask the School's Representative questions, if any;
- At the discretion of the Chair of the Complaint Panel, the School's relevant first witness will be invited into the room to give an account or what they saw or know;
- The Complainant will be invited to ask the School's witness questions, if any;
- The Complaint Panel will ask the School's witness questions, if any;
- The School's witness will be asked to leave the room;
- If the School has any further relevant witnesses, at the discretion of the Chair of the Complaint Panel, they will be invited into the room individually to provide their accounts and be questioned, as outlined above;
- The Complainant will be invited by the Complaint Panel to summarise their complaint;
- The School's Representative will be invited by the Complaint Panel to summarise their response to the complaint and the School's stance;
- The Complaint Panel Hearing will conclude and the Complainant and the School's Representative will be asked to leave.

- The Chair of the Panel may, at their discretion, adjourn the Hearing if they consider it appropriate to do so. This may include an adjournment for the parties to take legal advice on a specific issue arising.
- A Hearing before the Panel is a private proceeding. No notes or other records or oral statements about any matter discussed in or arising from the proceeding shall be made available directly or indirectly to the press or other media.

## **22. The Complaint Panel's Decision**

The Complaint Panel will convene in private, either immediately after the Complaint Panel Hearing or on a subsequent date, and will consider all of the documentation and everything that they have heard at the Complainant Panel Hearing and make:

- **Findings of Fact**

The Complaint Panel will decide which facts are established to be true, on a balance of probabilities (i.e. more likely than not). If a fact is not deemed relevant, the Complaint Panel will not consider it further. The Complaint Panel will make a written record of the facts that have been established, those which have not been established and those which are not relevant, with their reasons for making these findings.

- **Recommendations (where appropriate)**

The Complaint Panel will consider the facts which they have established and will make recommendations based upon them where appropriate. These recommendations may be aimed at achieving reconciliation between the parties (for example, a written apology), improving procedures or preventing a recurrence in the future. The Complaint Panel will keep a written record of their recommendations, with reasons.

It is not within the powers of the Panel to make any financial award, nor to impose sanctions on staff, pupils or parents, although the complaints panel may make recommendations.

## **23. Notification of the Complaint Panel's Decision**

The Clerk to the Local Governors will write within **ten school days** of the Complaint Panel Hearing to the:

- Complainant;
- the School's Representative;
- Any person complained about;

The letter will identify each of the issues complained about, summarise how the Complaint Panel Hearing proceeded, and confirm each of the Complaint Panel's findings of fact and recommendations, if any, with reasons. The letter will also confirm that, if the Complainant believes that this Complaints Policy does not comply with the Regulations, or that the School has not followed the procedure outlined in this Complaints Policy, the Complainant may refer their complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency for further consideration. Copies of Complaint Panel hearing minutes will also be provided to the Complainant on request.



The Clerk to the Local Governors will also ensure that a copy of the Complaint Panel's findings and recommendations are made available on the School's premises for inspection by the Trust, the Local Governing Body and the Principal.

#### **24. Factors for the Complaint Panel to Consider**

- It is important that the Complaint Panel Hearing is independent and impartial, and that it is seen to be so. No person may sit on the Complaint Panel if they have had a prior involvement in the matters which gave rise to the complaint, in dealing with the complaint in the previous stages, or have a prior detailed knowledge of the complaint;
- The aim of the Complaint Panel Hearing, which must be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the School and the Complainant. However, it has to be recognised that the Complainant may not be satisfied with the outcome if the Complaint Panel does not find wholly in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the Complainant that his or her complaint has been taken seriously;
- An effective Complaint Panel will acknowledge that many Complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child. The Chair of the Complaint Panel will ensure that the Complaint Panel Hearing is as welcoming as possible, while ensuring that it is procedurally fair to all parties. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not substantially adversarial; and
- The Complaint Panel should ensure that they are familiar with the complaints procedure in advance of the Complaint Panel Hearing.

The Chair of the Complaint Panel will play a key part at the Complaint Panel Hearing, ensuring that:

- The remit of the Complaint Panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of making representations without undue interruption;
- All of the issues raised in the complaint are addressed;
- Key findings of fact are made, on a balance of probabilities;
- Each party treats the other with respect and courtesy;
- The Complaint Panel is open minded and acts independently of the School;
- No member of the Complaint Panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings;
- Each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions;
- All written material is seen by all parties. If a new issue arises during the course of the Complaint Panel Hearing, it would be useful to give all parties the opportunity to consider and comment on it.

#### **Referral to the Education and Skills Funding Agency**

Once a complaint has been through all the stages of this Complaints Policy, that is the end of the internal procedures. If the Complainant believes that this Complaints Policy does not comply with the Regulations, Complaints Policy June 2023

or that the School has not followed the procedure in this Complaints Policy, the Complainant can refer the complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency for consideration.

The Complainant can find further information about referring a complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency by pasting this page into an Internet browser:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/schoolperformance/b00212240/making-complaint-school/complaints-free-schools-academies>

The Complainant should be aware that the Education and Skills Funding Agency will not usually investigate the complaint itself, or interfere with the findings of the Complaint Panel, unless the decision made was manifestly unreasonable.

## Appendix 1 – Formal Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the School who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your Name:	Student's Name:
Your Relationship to Student:	Student's DOB and Form:
Address and Postcode:	Daytime Telephone Number:
	Evening Telephone Number:
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.	
<b>Signature:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
<i>For Official Use:</i>	
<i>Date Acknowledgement Sent:</i>	
<i>Name of Person Complaint Referred To:</i>	
<i>Signature:</i>	<i>Date:</i>