Concerns and Complaints Policy

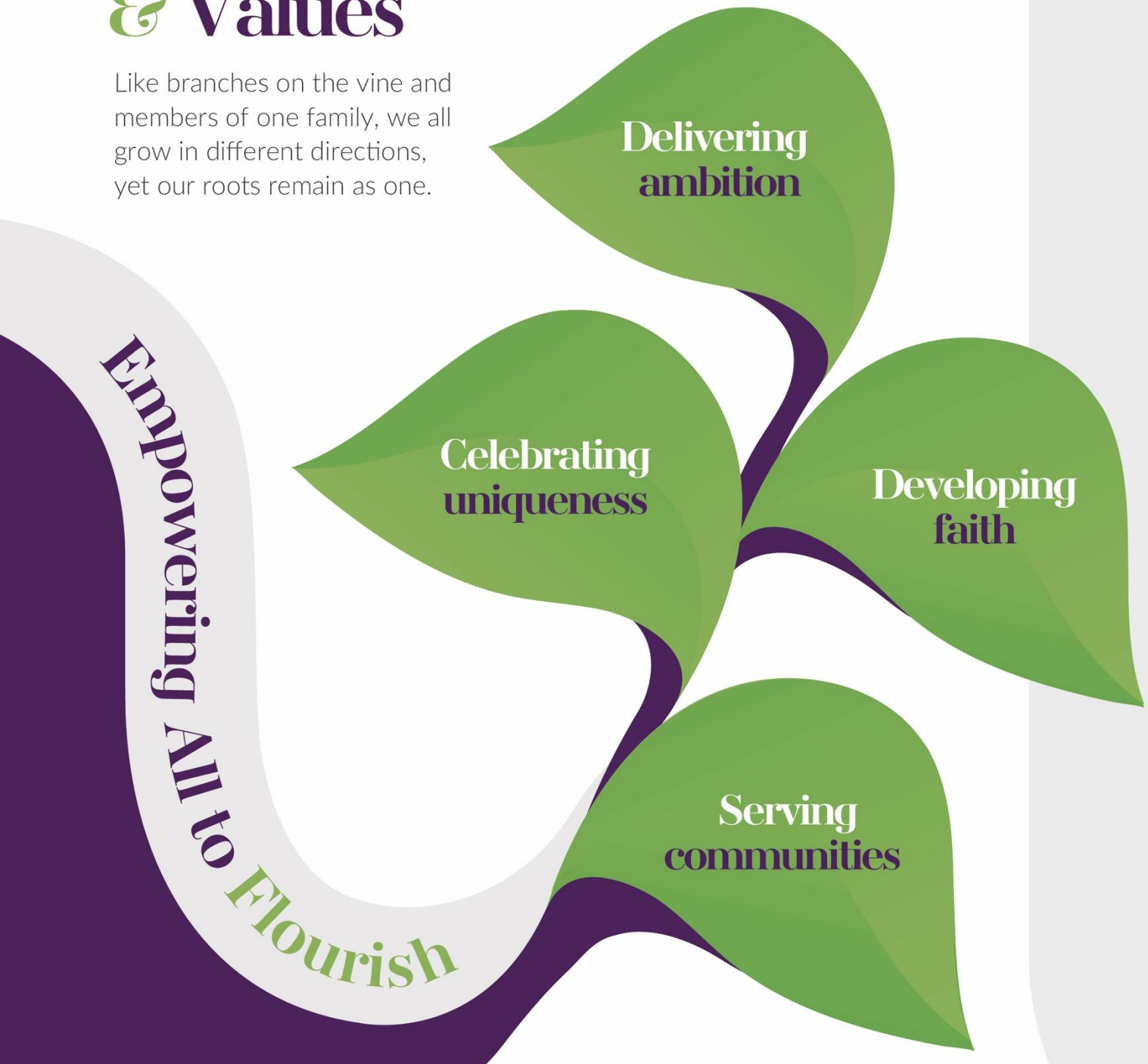
This is a mandatory policy for all Vine schools that has been noted and implemented with no amendments by this school.

Policy Reference:	A007 V7
Approved by Vine Schools Trust on:	Spring Term 2025
Adopted by this school on:	Summer Term 2025
Next review:	Spring Term 2026

> I am the vine; you are the branches.
> If you remain in me and I in you, you
> will bear much fruit
>
> JOHN 15:5

Vision & Values

Like branches on the vine and members of one family, we all grow in different directions, yet our roots remain as one.



Introduction

Schools within The Vine Schools Trust strive to provide a good education for all our children. The Executive Head Teachers, Headteachers, Heads of School, and staff work very hard to build positive relationships with all parents. However, the Trust is obliged to have procedures in place in case there are complaints by parents or guardians. The following policy sets out the procedures that the Trust follows in such cases. We stress that we welcome feedback from all stakeholders, and this can be positive communication as well as raising a concern.

Aims

The Vine Schools Trust aims to be fair, open, and honest when dealing with any complaint. We give careful consideration to all complaints and deal with them as swiftly as possible. We aim to resolve any complaint through dialogue and mutual understanding. Our complaints procedure is accessible and simple to use and understand. It aims to be non-adversarial. In all cases, we put the interests of the child above all else. We provide sufficient opportunity for any complaint to be fully discussed and then resolved within established time limits.

If any parents are unhappy with the education that their child is receiving or have any concerns relating to the school, we encourage them to talk to the child's class teacher immediately. We stress that there is a clear difference between a concern and a complaint. We take informal concerns seriously, and as a result, few develop into formal complaints.

The Difference Between a Concern and a Complaint

All complaints initially start as a concern, which can be defined as 'an expression of worry or doubt over an issue, considered to be important, for which reassurances are sought'. For example, a parent might wish to be assured that his or her child is receiving the appropriate difficulty of homework or might ask a member of staff to clarify a comment that the child has made about something at the school.

Concerns can materialize into a formal complaint only after informal processes with the school have been exhausted (See Appendix 1 Communication Flow Chart) and if the response from the school is perceived as unsatisfactory. A complaint is defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions (or lack of actions) taken'.

It is in everyone's interests that all concerns/complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage, without the need to invoke formal complaint procedures. This will take the format of an informal resolution.

Procedure for Informal Concerns

Most concerns can be resolved at an initial informal stage. In the first instance, it is essential each concern is directed at a level appropriate with the nature of the concern, and parents/carers are asked to speak to a relevant member of staff.

At this stage, the senior leader or staff member must seek clarification on the concern, identifying the outcome the parent/carer is requesting. Even though this is likely to be a spoken exchange, it

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is important that all parties are in agreement on outcomes. We therefore recommend agreeing in writing the outcomes of the meeting using the Contact Sheet (Appendix 1).

Parents should be assured that making a complaint will not adversely affect their child. This policy is available from the school office and will be published on the school and Trust website.

Dealing with Concerns/Complaints

The procedure aims to ensure all concerns/complaints are dealt with in a time-sensitive manner and, where possible, as informally as possible. The objective is for all complainants to receive a timely acknowledgment to their initial concern or complaint - within two school days - and to provide a response within seven school days.

- To clarify what the parent/carer feels would put things right.
- To gather appropriate information in relation to the concern/complaint, by thorough investigation in the form of taking statements and speaking to witnesses.
- To keep accurate records of all relevant conversations and meetings held in relation to the concern/complaint.
- To reach a satisfactory conclusion, which should be communicated through a written response and/or meeting with the complainant.
- To report on concerns/complaints to line managers or the Headteacher/Executive Head as appropriate and to ensure that formal complaints are reported to the central Vine team and School Governance Board.

At each stage of the concern/complaint, the person investigating will seek ways to resolve the complaint satisfactorily. It might be appropriate for the school to offer one or more of the following:

- An explanation
- An acknowledgment that the complaint is valid in whole or in part and/or acknowledgment that the situation could have been handled differently or better (this is not the same as an admission of negligence).
- An assurance and an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again
- An apology
- An undertaking to review procedures in light of the concern/complaint.

The Complaints Process

Stage 1: Informal

Expression of concern made to the school. If a parent is concerned about anything to do with the education that we are providing at any of our schools, they should, in the first instance, discuss the matter with their child's class teacher. In our experience, most matters of concern can be resolved positively in this way. All teachers work very hard to ensure that each child is happy at school and is making good progress; they naturally want to know if there is a problem so that they can take action before it seriously affects the child's progress. Most issues can be resolved on the spot with apologies where necessary.

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Members of the school's senior leadership may be involved at this stage. There may be multiple layers involved in resolving your concern within this initial informal stage using the communications procedure.

Stage 2: Formal Complaint to Deputy Headteacher/Head of School

Concerns raised formally with the designated complaints officer (the Deputy Headteacher or Head of School). Please note that properly collecting details always takes time. An appointment should be made at the school office. The Deputy Headteacher/Head of School considers any such complaint very seriously and investigates each case thoroughly. Most complaints are normally resolved by this stage. The outcome of the Head of School's investigation will be communicated to you within 15 school days.

Stage 3: Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher

Complaints rarely reach this formal level, but should you need to, you should make a formal complaint to the Executive Head Teacher. Complaints at this stage should be written and received within 10 school days of the /Deputy Headteacher/Head of School's decision. Your letter should be addressed to the Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher (marked "private and confidential") and should set out why you remain unhappy and what you wish to see happen (Appendix 2). The Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher (who will not have previously been involved in your complaint) will consider the case. They will let you know when your complaint is to be considered. If a meeting with you and others involved is considered necessary, you should be given adequate notice to prepare. The Executive Head Teachers will make their decision in private and write to you within 15 school days.

Stage 4: Chair of Governors

You may take your complaint to the Chair of Governors Schools Trust within 1 month of the Headteacher/Executive Head Teachers' response. If the complaint is not resolved, and all previous stages have been explored, a parent may make representation to the School Governance Board through the Chair of Governors. They can be contacted by a letter delivered to the school (addressed to them directly and marked "private and confidential". If the Chair of Governors considers from your letter that the complaint warrants further investigation, they may ask you to explain your case in person. However, it is also possible that, following investigation, they may make a decision without needing you to appear. A decision will be provided within 15 days where possible.

Stage 5: Panel Stage

Following the outcome at stage 4, if you are not satisfied with the outcome, a complaint can be raised to an independent panel within 28 school days using the Formal Complaint Form (Appendix 3). The Clerk of the SGB will convene a complaints panel which will comprise the following:

- The panel will consist of no fewer than three members, drawn from the Trust's Statutory Review Committee (all local committee members and central team employees). Staff members from the school to which the complaint pertains will not sit on the panel.

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- At least one panel member must be independent of the management and running of that particular school and cannot be a member of the school's local committee.
- No member of the panel can have been directly involved in previous considerations of the complaint. This includes the Chair of the local governance board if they have been involved at any stage.

Proceedings of the Panel

A complainant may bring someone along to the panel meeting to provide support. The role of 'supporter' can be a relative or friend and their role is to purely provide support to the complainant, not to speak on behalf of the complainant. In exceptional circumstances, a supporter may speak on behalf of the complainant. Any such request should be made via the clerk to the panel ahead of the meeting. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the committee meeting. 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 (Human Resources) staff disciplinary procedures, if appropriate, but outcomes will not be shared with them. Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

Panel hearings will be held face to face in an appropriate venue, e.g., a neutral, local venue. At least 5 school days before the meeting, the Clerk will:

- Confirm and notify the complainant of the date, time, and venue of the meeting, ensuring that, if the complainant is invited, the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible.
- Request copies of any further written material to be submitted to the committee at least 3 school days before the meeting. Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least 2 school days before the date of the meeting.

The committee will not normally accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded. The committee will also not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New complaints must be dealt with from Stage 1 of the procedure. The meeting 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. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken. Minutes will be taken by the clerk purely as a record to aid the panel in their decision-making. Copies of the minutes may be shared with the complainant and School, if requested.

A Formal Meeting

All parties will attend the meeting in the same room. The meeting includes the parent/carer, the Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher, and any other staff/witnesses who will be invited to make representations concerning the complaint. The appeal will be closed to the public.

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Parties may be questioned by the panel members so that they can form a clear and unbiased view of the complaint. Whilst it will be for the chair of the panel to decide exactly how the meeting will proceed, the procedure at the meeting will allow:

- The complainant to explain their complaint.
- The Headteacher/Executive Head teacher to explain the school's response.
- The panel to have an opportunity to question both the complainant and the other party.
- All involved to call witnesses (subject to the approval of the chair of the panel), and the panel to question all the witnesses.
- The complainant, the Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher, and staff/witnesses to be accompanied at the meeting if they so wish (other than by a legal representative).

At the end of the meeting, the chair of the panel will explain to the complainant and the Headteacher/other party that the panel will consider its decision based on the information and evidence presented to them, and a written response will be sent to both parties as quickly as possible and in an expeditious manner.

The meeting will be minuted and the complainant will be informed of the panel decision within 5 school days.

An Investigatory Approach

The complainant and representative(s) from the school may be invited to attend a formal meeting with the complaints panel in order to clarify the matter. As the panel meeting is intended to be investigatory, the persons giving evidence or making representations to the panel would normally attend separately. Whilst it will be for the chair of the panel to decide exactly how the meeting will proceed, the procedure will allow:

- The complainant, the Headteacher/Executive Head teacher, and staff/witnesses to be accompanied if they so wish (other than by a legal representative).
- Notes of the interview to be made, checked with the interviewee, and made available to other parties on request.

The chair of the panel will explain to the complainant and the Headteacher/Executive Head Teacher that the panel will consider its decision based on the information and evidence presented to them, and a written response will be sent to both parties as quickly as possible and in an expeditious manner.

Whichever procedure is followed, the panel will remember that some parents/carers are unfamiliar with dealing with groups of people in formal situations and may feel inhibited. Parents/carers may also feel emotional about discussing an issue that affects their child. The Chair of the panel will ensure that the proceedings are as informal as the situation allows.

The Governance Officer/Clerk will be the contact point for the formal complaint and will be required to:

- Set the date, time, and venue of the hearing.
- Collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing.

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- Record the proceedings.
- Notify parties of the panel's decision.

Remit of the Panel

The panel can:

- Decide whether or not the complaint has merit.
- Decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint.
- Recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.

Stage 6: Further Representation

If you still remain dissatisfied, you may make further representations. You may approach the Secretary of State for Education or the Ombudsman if you are unhappy with the process or outcome. This would normally only be appropriate if you believe that the school, the Governing body, and the LEA have acted illegally or arbitrarily. Please note the Ombudsman does not investigate internal school management.

Should any parents have a complaint about Heads of School or the Executive Head Teachers, they should first make an informal approach to the Chair of the Directors (as at stage 4 above) who is obliged to investigate it. The Chair will do all they can to resolve the issue through a dialogue with the school, but if parents are unhappy with the outcome, they can make a formal complaint, as outlined above.

In the case of a vexatious complaint where despite all stages of this policy being followed the complainant remains dissatisfied, they are not entitled to reopen the same issue. In such cases, the Chair of Directors is able to inform them in writing that the process has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

Please see Appendix 4 Vexatious and Unreasonable Complaints.

An anonymous complaint will not be investigated under this procedure unless there are exceptional circumstances. These would include serious concerns such as child protection issues or bullying allegations, where the school might consider it appropriate to contact outside agencies.

Investigating Complaints

It is suggested that at each stage the person investigating the complaint makes sure that they:

- Establish what has happened so far and who has been involved.
- Clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved.
- Meet with the complainant or contact them if further information is required.
- Clarify what the complainant feels would put things right.
- Conduct any interviews with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning.
- Complete all necessary notes.

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This Complaints Procedure covers most concerns/complaints about the provision of facilities or services at the school. However, the exceptions listed below are not covered because separate procedures exist. Where a school's actions are because of advice given by the Local Authority or another public body, complainants will be asked to refer their concern directly to that authority.

Exceptions to the Complaints Process

Exceptions

- **Allegations of child abuse/other child protection issues**: Immediately report your concern to the class teacher, Designated Safeguarding Lead, or Headteacher/Executive Head and check the school's Safeguarding policy. You can also report concerns about how child protection issues are being handled in your own or another organization to the NSPCC's whistleblowing advice line on 0800 028 0285 or at help@nspcc.org.uk.
- **Statutory Assessment of SEN**: Check the school's SEND offer and report your concern to the SENCO or Headteacher/Executive Head.
- **School Admissions including appeals**: Check the school's Admissions policy for contact details and further advice.
- **Pupil Exclusions an Suspensions**: Check the school's Behaviour Policy. Contact your school for further advice.
- **Qualifications awarded on the basis of centre-assessed grades or equivalent**: Each Awarding Body will establish its own process for the management of appeals and complaints and the examinations officer of your school will be able to advise you in this.
- **Whistleblowing (for financial or other regulatory malpractice)**: Check the Vine Schools Trust Whistleblowing Policy for contact details and further advice.
- **Staff grievances/disciplinary procedures**: These matters will invoke the school internal grievance procedures. If your concern relates to an external service provider, this should be raised with the Headteacher/Executive Head of the school in the first instance, but it might be that you or the school will have to follow the provider's own complaints policy thereafter.

If the issue concerns a serious safeguarding or child protection issue, an allegation of abuse, or a matter with serious disciplinary consequences, the Headteacher/Executive Head should be informed immediately.

Resolving Complaints

At each stage in the complaint, schools and complainants will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- An apology.
- An explanation.
- An admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better.
- An assurance that the event that was the basis of the complaint will not recur.
- An explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure it does not happen again. Details of any disciplinary procedures that have taken place as a result of the complaint are not released.
- An undertaking to review school policy or procedure in light of the complaint.

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- An explanation that there is insufficient evidence and thus the complaint cannot be upheld.
- An explanation that, following investigation, the concern is not substantiated by the evidence.

An admission that the school could have handled things better is not the same as an admission of negligence.

Contacting the Vine Schools Trust

The concerns and complaints procedure gives an opportunity for concerns to be raised and escalated in a fair and independent process. Complaints should not be raised formally with the CEO or central members of The Vine Schools Trust unless there is a serious concern about the school which has not been resolved through the complaints process. Where complaints are sent centrally to the CEO, these will be redirected through the concerns and complaints process as necessary.

The CEO has oversight of the number of formal complaints raised in each Trust school through the Headteacher report each term. If there are concerns about the number of complaints received, a review of the provision may take place in that setting.

Monitoring and Review

The Trust Safeguarding Lead, Head of Governance, and Assistant CEO monitor the complaints procedure to ensure that all complaints are handled properly. The Head of School/Headteacher logs all stage 2 complaints received by the school and records how they were resolved. These logs are presented to Local Governing Bodies as part of the Heateacher report. This policy is reviewed as necessary at meetings of Directors of The Vine Schools Academy Trust.

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Appendix 1

Parent Contact Sheet

Add school logo here

Parent/Carer Contact Record of Information

Name of Parrent/Carer: ……
Name/s of people present in meeting: ……
Date of contact: ……..
Time of contact: ……
Reason for contact: ……
Contact initiated by: ……

Nature of discussion:

Action agreed (if any and by when):

Signed school: ……

Date: ……

Parent/Carer signature: ……

Copies to: Head ☐ Class teacher ☐
Parent/Carer ☐ SENDco ☐
Other (please specify) ……

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Appendix 2

Schools Concern Form

This form should be sent to the school for investigation and response. You should receive a response from the school within 15 school days from date of receipt.

Name	
Date	
Address	
Pupil Name/Year (if applicable)	
Relationship to pupil (if applicable)	
Pupil's address (if different from above)	
Contact number(s) (if you have a preferred time within the school day, please state it)	
Email address	
Details of Concern	
Name(s) of staff member(s) at the school to whom you have spoken to about your concern?	
What action have you already taken to try and resolve the concern?	
What actions do you feel might resolve this concern? (e.g. an explanation, an apology, etc.)	

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Appendix 3

Formal Complaint

This form may only be used when all informal processes involving the school and formal processes involving school leaders and the Chair of the School Governance Board have been exhausted. Upon submission, the Governance Officer/Clerk will convene a panel to review the complaint within 20 school days of receipt.

Name
Date
Address
Pupil Name/Year (if applicable)
Relationship to pupil (if applicable)
Pupil's address (if different from above)
Contact number(s) (if you have a preferred time within the school day, please state it)
Email address
Details of Complaint
Why was the school's and Chair of Governor's response not satisfactory?
What action(s) can the Trust/Academy take to resolve this complaint?

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Appendix 4:

Guidance for Managing Serial, Vexatious, and 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. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with our school. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive, or threatening.

The Trust defines unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the school, such as if 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.
- Refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure.
- Insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice.
- Introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on.
- 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 school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed.
- Seeks an unrealistic outcome.
- Makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy, and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint.
- Uses threats to intimidate.
- Uses abusive, offensive, or discriminatory language or violence.
- Knowingly provides falsified information.
- Publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint while the 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.

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Whenever possible, the Headteacher/Executive Head or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking. If the behavior continues, the Headteacher/Executive Head will write to the complainant explaining that their behavior is unreasonable and ask them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from the school premises.

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