



Learning in
Harmony
Trust

Complaints Policy and Procedure

April 2025

This policy applies to all schools within the Learning in Harmony Trust

(This policy is based on the Department of Education's Model Complaints Procedure 12 Mar 2021)

Approved by:	Learning in Harmony Trust Board	Date: April 2025
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Background

It is in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to follow formal procedures. We aim to take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

However, there will be occasions when complainants want to raise their concerns formally. In those cases, your complaints procedure will be followed.

Guidance from the Department for Education (DfE)

We always follow the most recent, best practice guidance on managing and resolving complaints as outlined by the DfE. That information, which supports this process can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-complaints-procedures/best-practice-advice-for-school-complaints-procedures-2019#managing-serial-and-persistent-complaints>

Who can make a complaint?

This complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of children that are registered at the school. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to The Learning in Harmony Trust about any provision of facilities or services that we provide. Unless complaints are dealt with under separate statutory procedures (such as appeals relating to exclusions or admissions), we will use this complaints procedure.

Resolving complaints

At each stage in this 4 stage complaints procedure, The Learning in Harmony Trust wants to resolve the complaint. In order to address your concerns or complaints the 4 stages of the complaints procedure should be followed in order from stage 1 to stage 4.

For ease of use, a template complaint form is included at the end of this procedure. If you require help in completing the form, please contact the school office. You can also ask a third-party organisation for example like the Citizens Advice to help you.

In accordance with equality law, we will consider making reasonable adjustments if required, to enable complainants to access and complete this complaints procedure. For instance, providing information in alternative formats, assisting complainants in raising a formal complaint or holding meetings in accessible locations.

This policy sets out our procedures and outlines the likely outcomes. If appropriate, we will acknowledge that the complaint is upheld in whole or in part. In addition, we may offer one or more of the following:

- an explanation
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- an assurance that we will try to ensure the event complained of will not recur
- an explanation 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 any changes will be made
- an undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint
- an apology.

Time scales

You must raise the complaint within three months of the incident or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. We will consider complaints made outside of this time frame if exceptional circumstances apply.

Complaints received outside of term time

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

Withdrawal of a complaint

If a complainant wants to withdraw their complaint, we will ask them to confirm this in writing.

All information discussed or documents relating to complaints are confidential and subject to UK GDPR and must not be shared with anyone outside of the complaints process as outlined below.

Stage 1 – School level Informal complaints

We hope that most concerns can be expressed and resolved quickly and effectively on an informal basis.

In the first instance concerns should be raised with the most appropriate person, this could be either the class teacher, year/Key Stage Leader, or line manager. If needed, the concern/complaint can then be escalated to the Deputy Head or Headteacher to support a positive outcome swiftly. Thus reaching a satisfactory result without the need for the formal process.

When raising a concern at this informal stage 1 it is important to ensure that both the individual raising a concern and the employee receiving the feedback are **clear on the outcome that the individual is seeking** and to ensure that this is fully explored and satisfactorily concluded if possible. This could be by way of an explanation, adjusted action or agreement to hold a follow up meeting.

Complainants should not approach individual governors to raise concerns or complaints. Governors have no power to act on an individual basis and it may also prevent them from considering complaints later in the process at Stage 3 if needed.

If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint.

Stage 2 – School level formal complaint

Formal complaints must be made to the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher (unless they are about the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher), via the school office. This may be done in person or in writing (preferably on the Complaint Form).

The Headteacher/Executive Headteacher, will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within **5 school days**.

Within this response, the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher will seek to clarify the nature of the complaint, ask what remains unresolved and what outcome the complainant would like to see (if this is not evident from the correspondence or Complaint Form). The Headteacher/Executive Headteacher can consider whether a face-to-face meeting is the most appropriate way of doing this.

A period of time for investigation into the matter will follow.

Note: The Headteacher/Executive Headteacher may delegate the investigation to another member of the school's senior leadership team but not the decision to be taken.

During the investigation, the head teacher (or investigator) will:

- if necessary, interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish (depending on the circumstances and if appropriate)
- keep a written record of any meetings/interviews in relation to their investigation.

At the conclusion of their investigation, the head teacher will provide a formal written response within 20 school days of the date of receipt of the complaint.

If the head teacher is unable to meet this deadline, they will provide the complainant with an update and revised response date.

The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint, the outcome as a result and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions taken to resolve the complaint.

The Headteacher/Executive Headteacher will advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of Stage 2.

If the complaint is about the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher, or a member of the governing body (including the Chair or Vice-Chair), a suitably skilled governor will be appointed to complete all the actions at Stage 2.

Complaints about the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher or member of the governing body must be made to the Clerk, via the school office.

If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or
- the entire governing body or
- the majority of the governing body

Stage 2 will be escalated to the CEO of the Trust.

If the complaint is about:

- the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or
- a trustee of the Trust or
- The Trust

Stage 2 will be escalated to the Chair of Trustees, via the trust office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Stage 3 – School level panel hearing

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 2 and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to Stage 3 – a panel hearing consisting of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint with one panel member who is independent of the management and running of the school (for example another governor from another school within the Trust). This is the final stage of the complaints procedure.

A request to escalate to Stage 3 must be made to the Clerk, via the school office, within **10 school days** of receipt of the Stage 2 response.

The Clerk will record the date the complaint is received and acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within **5 school days**.

Requests received outside of this time frame will only be considered if exceptional circumstances apply.

The Clerk will write to the complainant to inform them of the date of the Complaint Panel meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within **20 school days** of receipt of the Stage 2 request. If this is not possible, the Clerk will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed.

If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Clerk will decide when to hold the meeting. It will then proceed in the complainant's absence on the basis of written submissions from both parties.

If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or
- the entire governing body or
- the majority of the governing body

Stage 3 will be heard by a panel of three trustees and an independent panel member (for example an external senior leader, governor or Trustee from another Multi Academy Trust).

A complainant may bring someone along to the panel meeting to provide support. This can be a relative or friend. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the committee hearing. 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.

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 **5 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.

The committee will consider the complaint and all the evidence presented. The committee can:

- uphold the complaint in whole or in part
- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part.

If the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, the committee will:

- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
- where appropriate, recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

The Chair of the Committee will provide the complainant and The Learning in Harmony Trust with a full explanation of their decision and the reason(s) for it, in writing, within **5 school days**.

The letter to the complainant will include details of how to contact the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled by The Learning in Harmony Trust.

The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions The Learning in Harmony Trust will take to resolve the complaint.

The panel will ensure that those findings and recommendations are sent by electronic mail or otherwise given to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about. Furthermore, they will be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher.

Record keeping

A written record will be kept of all complaints, and of whether they are resolved at the Stage 2 or proceed to a panel hearing, along with what actions have been taken, regardless of the decision.

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

Stage 2: Formal Complaints escalated to / about the Trust, CEO or Trustee

If a complaint is escalated, at stage 2 of this policy. to the Learning in Harmony Trust “the trust” or if a complainant wishes to complain directly about the trust, then the complaint should be sent to the CEO or Chair of Trustees as appropriate to be investigated.

The CEO or Chair of Trustees will write to the complainant acknowledging the complaint within **5 school days** of the date that the written request was received. The acknowledgement will confirm that the complaint will now be investigated under Stage 2 of this Complaints Policy and will confirm the date for providing a response to the complainant.

Following the investigation, the CEO or Chair of Trustees will write to the complainant confirming the outcome within **20 school days** of the date that the letter was received. If this time limit cannot be met, the CEO will write to the Complainant within **10 school days** of the date that the letter was received, explaining the reason for the delay and providing a revised date.

If the complaint concerns the CEO or a Trustee, the complaint should be investigated by the Chair of the Trust Board. If a formal complaint form is received about the Chair, the complaint will be referred to the Vice Chair for investigation.

NB. Where the Chair of the Trust Board has investigated the complaint, they will write the letter of outcome to the Complainant and provide a copy to the CEO.

Stage 3: Panel Hearings for Complaints escalated to / about the Trust, CEO or Trustees

If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the previous stage, the complainant should write to the Clerk to the Trust Board asking for the complaint to be heard before a Complaint Panel, within **5 school days**. This process will follow the Stage 3 process set out above.

If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or
- the entire trust board or
- the majority of the trust board
- the CEO

Stage 3 will be heard by a completely independent committee panel.

The Complaint Panel will consist of three members. None of the three members of the Complaint Panel will have been involved in the incidents or events which led to the complaint, or have been involved in dealing with the complaint in the previous stages, or have any detailed prior knowledge of the complaint.

One of the Complaint Panel members will be independent of the management and running of the Academy Trust. This means that the independent Complaint Panel member will not be a Trustee or an employee of the Trust.

The Panel Hearing process will follow the same procedure as set out in the section above relating to Panel Hearings.

Stage 4: Next Steps

If the complainant believes the school / trust did not handle their complaint in accordance with the published complaints procedure or they acted unlawfully or unreasonably in the exercise of their duties under education law, they can contact the ESFA after they have completed Stage 3.

The ESFA will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by the school or Trust. They will consider whether the school or trust has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint and whether they have followed Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

The complainant can refer their complaint to the ESFA online at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus, by telephone on: 0370 000 2288 or by writing to:

Academy Complaints and Customer Insight Unit
Education and Skills Funding Agency
Cheylesmore House
5 Quinton Road
Coventry
CV1 2WT

Anonymous, Persistent or Vexatious Complaints

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the head teacher or Chair of Governors, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

There will be some occasions when complainants are reluctant to accept the outcome of the process.

Should the complainant continue to make contact on the same issue, the Board of Trustees has the power to inform them that the process is complete and the matter is therefore closed.

In the context of Freedom of Information requests 'vexatious' is defined as the 'manifestly unjustified, inappropriate or improper use of a formal procedure.'

The Learning in Harmony Trust prefers the term 'serial' or 'persistent' complaints. The Trust may apply the following criteria in determining whether the situation may be defined as 'serial', 'persistent', 'manifestly unjustified', 'inappropriate' or 'improper':

- All reasonable steps have been taken to address matters following the Trust's complaints procedure;
- A clear statement has been provided of the school's position;
- The school is being repeatedly contacted with the same points being raised;
- The complainant makes obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, defamatory or repetitive complaints
- The school has reasonable grounds for believing that the intention is to cause inconvenience;
- the complainant pursues valid complaint(s), but in an unreasonable manner, e.g. refuses to articulate the complaint, refuses to cooperate with this complaints policy, or insists that the complaint is dealt with in ways that are incompatible with this policy and the timeframes it sets out
- the complainant seeks unrealistic outcomes, or a solution that lacks any serious purpose or value
- the complainant submits excessive, frequent and unreasonable complaints which could reasonably be judged to be intended to overwhelm the school or trust's ability to respond.

If the above situations materialise, the Board of Trustees has the power to inform the complainant that the process is complete and the matter is therefore closed.

The Learning in Harmony Trust may seek legal advice if they think that persistent contact by a complainant constitutes harassment.

Roles and Responsibilities

Complainant

The complainant will receive a more effective response to the complaint if they:

- explain the complaint in full as early as possible
- co-operate with the school in seeking a solution to the complaint
- respond promptly to requests for information or meetings or in agreeing the details of the complaint
- ask for assistance as needed
- treat all those involved in the complaint with respect
- refrain from publicising the details of their complaint on social media and respect confidentiality.

Investigator

The investigator's role is to establish the facts relevant to the complaint by:

- providing a comprehensive, open, transparent and fair consideration of the complaint through:
 - sensitive and thorough interviewing of the complainant to establish what has happened and who has been involved
 - interviewing staff and children/young people and other people relevant to the complaint
 - consideration of records and other relevant information
 - analysing information
- liaising with the complainant and the complaints co-ordinator as appropriate to clarify what the complainant feels would put things right.

The investigator should:

- conduct interviews with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
- keep notes of interviews or arrange for an independent note taker to record minutes of the meeting
- ensure that any papers produced during the investigation are kept securely pending any appeal
- be conscious of the timescales to respond

- prepare a comprehensive report for the head teacher or complaints committee that sets out the facts, identifies solutions and recommends courses of action to resolve problems.
- The Headteacher / Executive Headteacher or complaints committee will then determine whether to uphold or dismiss the complaint and communicate that decision to the complainant, providing the appropriate escalation details.

Complaints Co-ordinator

(This could be the Headteacher / Executive Headteacher or CEO / designated complaints governor or trustee or other staff member providing administrative support)

The complaints co-ordinator should:

- ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure
- liaise with staff members, Headteacher / Executive Headteacher, CEO, Chair of Governors, Chair of Trust or the Clerk and to ensure the smooth running of the complaints procedure
- be aware of issues regarding:
 - o sharing third party information
 - o additional support. This may be needed by complainants when making a complaint including interpretation support or where the complainant is a child or young person
- keep records.

Clerk to the Governing Body / Trust Board

The Clerk is the contact point for the complainant and the committee and should:

- ensure that all people involved in the complaint procedure are aware of their legal rights and duties, including any under legislation relating to school complaints, education law, the Equality Act 2010, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)
- set the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties (if they are invited to attend) and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- collate any written material relevant to the complaint (for example: stage 1 paperwork, school and complainant submissions) and send it to the parties in advance of the meeting within an agreed timescale
- record the proceedings
- circulate the minutes of the meeting
- notify all parties of the committee's decision.

Committee Chair

The committee's chair, who is nominated in advance of the complaint meeting, should ensure that:

- both parties are asked (via the Clerk) to provide any additional information relating to the complaint by a specified date in advance of the meeting
- the meeting is conducted in an informal manner, is not adversarial, and that, if all parties are invited to attend, everyone is treated with respect and courtesy
- complainants who may not be used to speaking at such a meeting are put at ease. This is particularly important if the complainant is a child/young person
- the remit of the committee is explained to the complainant
- written material is seen by everyone in attendance, provided it does not breach confidentiality or any individual's rights to privacy under the DPA 2018 or UK GDPR.

If a new issue arises it would be useful to give everyone the opportunity to consider and comment upon it; this may require a short adjournment of the meeting

- both the complainant and the school are given the opportunity to make their case and seek clarity, either through written submissions ahead of the meeting or verbally in the meeting itself
- the issues are addressed
- key findings of fact are made
- the committee is open-minded and acts independently
- no member of the committee has an external interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure
- the meeting is minuted
- they liaise with the Clerk (and complaints coordinator, if the school has one).

Committee Member

Committee members should be aware that:

- the meeting must be independent and impartial, and should be seen to be so
No governor / trustee may sit on the committee if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it.
- the aim of the meeting should be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant
We recognise that the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the meeting does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations.
- many complainants will feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting
- Parents/carers often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child.
- extra care needs to be taken when the complainant is a child/young person and present during all or part of the meeting
Careful consideration of the atmosphere and proceedings should ensure that the child/young person does not feel intimidated.
The committee should respect the views of the child/young person and give them equal consideration to those of adults.
If the child/young person is the complainant, the committee should ask in advance if any support is needed to help them present their complaint. Where the

child/young person's parent is the complainant, the committee should give the parent the opportunity to say which parts of the meeting, if any, the child/young person needs to attend.

However, the parent should be advised that agreement might not always be possible if the parent wishes the child/young person to attend a part of the meeting that the committee considers is not in the child/young person's best interests.

- the welfare of the child/young person is paramount.

Conclusion

The Learning in Harmony Trust is committed to working together with its valued community to work in collaboration to resolve any concerns or complaints quickly and positively. This statutory policy and procedure supports this intent.

Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the Clerk / Headteacher / Executive Headteacher / Head of School for School Level Complaints.

Or

The Chair of Trust Board / Trust Board Clerk for Trust Level Complaints who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your full name:
Pupil's name (if relevant):
Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant):
Address:
Postcode:
Day time telephone number:
Evening telephone number:
Email address:

Please give details of your complaint, including whether you have spoken to anybody at the school about it.

What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?;-

Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.

Signature:

Date:

Official use

Date acknowledgement sent:

By who:

Complaint referred to:

Action taken:

Date: