



Primary Cluster Complaints Procedure





Statement of Intent

The schools within the primary cluster aim to resolve complaints at the earliest possible stage and, where possible, informally, and are dedicated to continuing to provide the highest quality of education possible in all of its schools throughout the procedure.

This Complaints Procedure applies to the schools within the primary cluster, part of the Athena Learning Trust, in accordance with and pursuant to the Education (Independent Schools Standards) Regulations 2014 and appropriate DfE guidance.

This Complaints Procedure covers all complaints about any provision of services or community facilities by schools within the primary cluster other than the matters that are subject to a separate statutory procedure.

In implementing this procedure, the governing body, schools' leaders and school staff, must take account of any advice or instruction given to them by governors, Director of Education, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Board of Trustees. If there is any question or doubt about the interpretation or implementation of this Procedure, the CEO should be consulted.

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

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 Once a complaint has been made, it can be resolved or withdrawn at any stage.

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



Statement of intent

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1.1. Terminology

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

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

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

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

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

For the purpose of this policy, “complaints campaigns” are where a school or the schools within the primary cluster receive large volumes of complaints that are all based on the same subject.

1.2. Associated policies and procedures

This procedure operates in conjunction with the following policies:

- School Complaints Procedure
- Admissions Policy
- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Behaviour Policy and Behaviour Procedure
- Suspension and Exclusion Policy
- Whistleblowing Policy



- Grievance Policy
- Trust-wide Data Protection Policy
- Trust-wide Data Retention Policy

1 Principles

A concern may be defined as ‘an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought’. A complaint may be defined as ‘an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action’. It is in everyone’s interest that concerns and complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage.

The primary cluster and its schools welcome comments on its services. Comments enable the schools to clarify any misunderstandings that arise and give us the opportunity to review our processes if necessary. We are also pleased to learn of things that have gone well.

If a person has difficulty discussing a concern or complaint with a particular member of staff, they will be referred to another staff member. Similarly, if a member of staff feels unable to deal with a concern, the concern will be referred to another staff member.

If any person, including members of the public, wishes to raise their concerns more formally or make a complaint to the school about any provision of facilities or services that they provide, the school will attempt to resolve the issue internally, through the stages outlined within this Complaints Procedure; except for matters subject to a separate statutory procedure as listed in section 3 of this Policy.

The school will handle complaints from people who are not parents of children at its schools respectfully and expediently, and as far as is appropriate in line with this Complaints Procedure; except that for such complaints the school reserves the right to amend the procedure and omit a hearing before a panel with an independent member.

In accordance with equality law, the head teacher 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.



The school will always deal with complaints in a courteous and reasonable manner, and follow its agreed Policies. We ask that those with comments and complaints present them in a similarly reasonable manner.

At each stage of this Procedure the school will seek to resolve the complaint. If a complainant wants to withdraw their complaint, they should notify the school in writing.

2 Raising a concern or making a complaint

A concern or complaint can be made in person, in writing or by telephone. A concern or complaint may also be made by a third party acting on behalf of a complainant, as long as they have appropriate consent to do so.

If a person has a comment or complaint about the school as a whole they should in the first instance contact the school in person, or by telephone, email or letter, via the member of staff they have been dealing with, or via the contact details, available on the school website, for an appointment to discuss the matter with an appropriate member of staff.

Complaints about school staff should be made in the first instance, marked Private and Confidential to the head teacher, through the secretary. Contact details are available on the school website.

Complaints about the head teacher should be made in the first instance, marked Private and Confidential, to the Chair of the Local Governing Body. Contact details are available on the school website.

If a person has a comment or complaint about another school in Athena Learning Trust then it should be taken up with the school, and if necessary through the school's complaints Procedure, by contacting the school. Contact details are available on each school's website.

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated. However, the head teacher will determine whether an anonymous complaint warrants an investigation.

Complaints made outside of term time will be considered to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.



If a school governor is contacted directly by a complainant in relation to a complaint about a school, then the matter should be referred to the head teacher of the school to be dealt with under the school's Complaints Procedure.

If a school governor or a Trustee or member of school staff is contacted directly by a complainant in relation to a complaint about the Trust as a whole, then the matter should be referred to the CEO to be dealt with under the Trust Complaints Procedure.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual concerns and 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, and retained in line with the Data Retention procedure and Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

A written record will be kept of all complaints and whether they are resolved following a formal procedure, or proceed to a committee or panel hearing; and the action taken by the school as a result of those complaints (regardless of whether they are upheld).

3 Exceptions to the Complaints Procedure

Certain matters are dealt with under separate procedures, and not through the Complaints Procedure (information on these policies and procedures can be found on the school or the Trust website or by contacting the Trust or school):

- Complaints about child protection matters are handled under the school's child protection and safeguarding procedures and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance.
- Complaints about the administration of the appeals process for admissions to schools within the Trust are dealt with through the Admissions Appeals Procedure.
- Representations against a pupil's suspension or exclusion from school are dealt with under the school's exclusions procedures and the relevant statutory guidance.
- Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the Trust's internal grievance procedures.
- Complaints about the conduct of shared service staff will be considered under the Athena Learning Trust Complaints Procedure



Staff disciplinary procedures: Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint, but will be notified that the matter is being addressed and allowed to progress their complaint through the school's complaint Procedure.

- Complaints about the conduct of Trustees or governors or non-Trustee members of Trust Committees will be considered under the Trust's Trustee and Governor Code of Conduct, if appropriate, but complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken.
- The Trust also has a Whistleblowing Policy for all members of Trust staff, contractors, Trustees and governors.
- Concerns about statutory assessments of special educational needs should be raised directly with the relevant local authority.

School pupils who have comments or complaints should in the first instance take them up through their school teacher or the head teacher, rather than through the Complaints Policy.

Complaints about third-party users of school premises or facilities should be taken up with the third party directly, and not through the school Complaints Procedure.

4 The Stages of the Complaints Procedure

The Complaints Procedure has three stages that must be followed consecutively.

Once a complaint has been addressed under stage 1, the complainant may escalate it to Stage 2 if they are not satisfied, or the head teacher may refer the matter to Stage 2 so that it can be dealt with more effectively.

Once a complaint has been addressed under stage 2, the complainant may escalate it to Stage 3 if they are not satisfied, or the head teacher may refer the matter to Stage 3 so that it can be dealt with more effectively.



A complaint at school level may be escalated to the Trust at any point at the discretion of the CEO. A complaint made to the Trust at any stage may be referred back to school.

At any meeting with staff or governors or any panel, the complainant may be accompanied by a friend and/or interpreter; and the head teacher or any other staff may be accompanied by a fellow employee or professional representative.

The school will need written consent from the complainant before they can disclose any information about their complaint to a third party.

Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to any meeting. However, there may be occasions when legal representation is appropriate. The 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. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken. Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

4.1 Stage 1: Informal resolution

In the first instance, if a person has a complaint, they should contact the school in person, or by telephone, email or letter, via the member of staff they have been dealing with, or via the contact details available on the school website, for an appointment to discuss the matter with an appropriate member of staff.

In line with the DfE's guidance on complaints procedures [Best practice guidance for academies complaints procedures - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/best-practice-guidance-for-academies-complaints-procedures), a complaint will not normally be considered if it is lodged formally in writing more than three months after the incident being complained about took place.

A complainant may find it helpful to write down the main substance of their complaint before contacting the school.

An appropriate member of school staff will seek to find a resolution through discussion and meetings with the complainant, informally.



The head teacher may arrange for a member of staff from outside the school, or a volunteer or governor to meet with the complainant, where they believe that an independent perspective may help to resolve the matter.

At the conclusion of Stage 1 the person who has sought to resolve the complaint, or the head teacher or their nominee, will provide an informal response to the complainant in writing or by email.

If it does not prove possible to reach a resolution, the complainant may put their complaint formally in writing to the head teacher who may refer the matter to Stage 2 so that it can be dealt with more effectively.

Most concerns should be resolved at this informal stage.

4.2 Stage 2: Formal Complaint

If the complaint has not been resolved informally, the complainant may put their complaint formally in writing, in a letter addressed for the attention of the head teacher and sent to the school secretary. Contact details are available on the school website.

A complaint would generally not be considered where:

- Over 3 months has elapsed since the incident complained of and, in the opinion of the school, there are no exceptional circumstances which would allow the school to accept the complaint; or
- Where the complaint has not been escalated within 10 school days of receipt of the stage 1 response

If the complainant has sufficient reason to request a reasonable adjustment, an alternative method of lodging the complaint and corresponding will be made available.

On receipt of a formal complaint the head teacher may, if they think it may yet resolve the matter:



- refer the matter back to an appropriate member of staff for further consideration and to seek a resolution informally under Stage 1; or
- meet with the complainant themselves, to seek to resolve the matter informally under Stage 1.

Otherwise, the head teacher will address the complaint as a formal complaint under stage 2.

The head teacher will investigate the complaint. The investigation will seek to address all the points at issue and enable the head teacher to give an effective response and propose appropriate redress. The head teacher may delegate the investigation to an appropriate member of staff, but not the decision or the formal response.

The head teacher may arrange for a member of staff from outside the service, or a volunteer or governor, to meet with the complainant where they believe that an independent perspective may help to resolve the matter.

The head teacher will endeavour to give a written response to the complainant within 10 school days of receipt of the formal complaint. However, the thorough investigation of a complaint may involve a number of members of staff and progress will depend on their availability; timescales are likely to be extended during school holidays.

If the matters that are the subject of the complaint are also subject to other proceedings within the school or Trust (as set out in section 3 of this Policy) or external proceedings (e.g. DfE, local authority or Police), those proceedings may take precedence over this Complaints procedure and may require the timeframes in this procedure to be extended.

Complainants will be advised of the reason for any delay beyond 10 days.

The head teacher will write to the complainant setting out their response to the complaint and advising the complainant of their right to take the matter to a Complaints Panel under Stage 3.

4.3

Stage 3: Complaints Panel

If the complainant is not satisfied with the written response to their formal complaint or the way that it has been handled, they may take the matter to a Complaints Panel appointed by the governing body, by writing to the Clerk to Governors (gfahey@athenalearningtrust.uk) within 20 school days of the written response from the head teacher, enclosing a copy of the original written complaint, and indicating which matters remain unresolved and/or why they are not satisfied with how the complaint has been handled. No new complaints may be included. Contact details may be found on the school website.

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

The Clerk will establish a Complaints Panel made up of at least three people who do not have any conflict of interest and have not been involved with the matters that are the subject of the complaint, at least one of whom is independent of the management and running of the school.

The Clerk will arrange a meeting of the Complaints Panel at a convenient time for all parties, as soon as possible and within 10–20 school days of receipt of the complainant's letter.

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

Details of the complaint will be sent to the head teacher. The head teacher will then have 5 school days to submit their response to the Clerk.

Any documents from either the complainant or the head teacher and/or their nominee to be considered by the Panel and the names of any witnesses who may be called must be received by the Clerk at least 5 school days before the meeting.

Electronic recordings are not normally accepted as evidence. However, transcripts of recordings may be accepted if independently notarised and with the written consent of all recorded parties. Recordings obtained covertly or without informed consent of all parties being recorded will not be accepted.



The agenda for the meeting and copies of all papers submitted will be sent to members of the Panel, the complainant and the head teacher and/or their nominee before the meeting. The head teacher and/or their nominee will copy relevant papers to any Trust staff named in the complaint.

The Complaints Panel will choose one of their number to chair the meeting.

The Complaints Panel will consider the complaint on the basis of the papers they receive and what is said at the meeting. The Panel should seek reconciliation and ways to put right things that may have gone wrong.

In the event of either party not attending the meeting, the Chair of the Panel has the discretion to proceed or to adjourn the meeting.

Once the Complaints Panel has heard from both parties, both parties will withdraw so that the Panel can make its decision. The Panel may:

- Uphold the complaint in full;
 - Uphold the complaint in part; or
 - Dismiss the complaint.
- Or they may give a more complex response.

The Complaints Panel may make findings and recommendations and may refer issues of principle or general practice to the head teacher and the governing body.

The complainant, any staff complained about, the head teacher and Chair of governors will be advised in writing or by electronic mail of the outcome of the meeting, including relevant findings and recommendations, within 5 school days of the meeting.

The complainant will be advised of their right to make a complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency – see section 7 of this Policy.

5 Reporting and Monitoring

The head teacher and/or their nominee will:

- record the progress of the complaint and the final outcome.
- record whether the case progressed to a panel hearing.
- record the action taken by the school or the trust, regardless of outcome.
- determine who is responsible for these records and make sure the data is kept secure and in accordance with the Data Protection Policy and Data Retention Procedure.

The findings and recommendations of the Panel at stage 3 will be copied to relevant senior managers in the school, and to the Governing Body, so that services can be improved, and will be made available for inspection on the school premises by the head teacher.

6 Variations to the Policy

If the complaint is about the head teacher:

At stage 1 - the complaint should be sent to the Clerk to the Governing Body; 'Principal' will be read as 'Director of Education'.

At stage 2 - the complaint should be sent to the Clerk, marked for the attention of the CEO. 'Principal' will be read as 'CEO'; the CEO will arrange for its investigation and will write the response.

A complaint may be presented as being 'about the head teacher', but if it is actually a complaint about the policies and procedures of the school and their implementation, rather than the personal conduct of the head teacher, it may be referred back to the head teacher to seek a resolution under the standard school Complaints Procedure.

If the complaint is about a school governor or the Governing Body: at stage 1 and 2 the complaint should be sent to the Clerk to governors, marked for the attention of the chair of the trust board; the chair will arrange for the complaint to be investigated and will write the response.



There may be occasions where it may be reasonable to deviate from this Policy, including not doing something the procedure states will, should or may be done; any deviations from the procedure must be agreed and properly documented.

A complaint at school level may, where appropriate, be escalated to the Trust to be dealt with under the Trust Complaints procedure at any point, by the CEO.

A complaint made to the Trust may, where appropriate, be referred back to the relevant school at any stage, to be dealt with under the School Complaints Policy, by the CEO.

7 Complaints to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)

If a complaint has been considered in accordance with this Policy, but the complainant is still not satisfied, then the complainant can make a complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

The ESFA will normally only consider a complaint after this Complaints procedure has been exhausted.

The ESFA cannot review or overturn decisions about complaints made by the Trust; they can only investigate whether the Trust considered the complaint appropriately and may request the Trust to re-consider the complaint or to review its Policy.

If a complainant wishes to refer their complaint to the ESFA, they should write to:

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

Or use the online enquiry form which can be found on the ESFA website.

8 Complaint campaigns and serial, persistent and vexatious complaints

If the school and/or Trust receives a complaint that is on the same subject as a complaint that has already been investigated and responded to in accordance with this Policy, the head teacher may use relevant aspects of that investigation and response in responding to the new complaint, rather than repeating them.



If the school and/or Trust receives a large number of complaints all based on the same subject, the school and/or Trust may send a common response to all complainants and/or publish a single response on the school and/or Trust website.

If an Athena Learning Trust school and/or the Trust receives a number of similar complaints from persons unconnected with the school and/or Trust, the school and/or Trust may send a common response to all complainants and/or publish a single response on the school and/or Trust website.

If a complainant tries to re-open the same issues that have been addressed through all stages of the Complaints procedure the head teacher will inform the complainant that the procedure has been completed and that the matter is now closed.

If a complainant continues to raise the same issues that have been addressed through all stages of the Complaints Policy, the head teacher may deem the complaint to be 'serial' or 'persistent'; in which case the head teacher will inform the complainant that the complaint has been addressed in accordance with the Complaints procedure and correspondence in the matter is now closed.

If a complaint is deemed persistent or serial, that does not prevent the complainant contacting an Athena Learning Trust school and/or the Trust about other matters or raising other complaints.

If an individual:

- seeks to pursue a complaint in a manner which is obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, repetitious, excessive, unreasonable, abusive or offensive, or is designed to cause disruption or annoyance;
- insists upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or outcomes that are unrealistic;
- demands redress that lacks any serious purpose or value or is beyond the remit of the school and/or Trust; or
- behaves in a way that causes a significant level of disruption, regardless of whether or not they have raised a complaint; then the Headteacher and/or CEO may deem it to be a vexatious complaint; in which case the Headteacher and/or CEO may:
 - restrict the individual to a single named member of school and/or Trust staff or single point of contact via a school and/or Trust email address;



- limit the number of times the individual can make contact with the school and/or Trust, and/or the number of times the school and/or Trust will respond, such as a fixed number of times per term;
- prohibit the individual from communicating with specific school and/or Trust staff or groups of staff;
- place other appropriate and reasonable restrictions on the individual in the interests of the safe and efficient operation of the school and/or Trust.

If an individual persists to the point that may constitute harassment of members of staff of a school and/or the Trust, the Headteacher and/or CEO may bar the individual from school and/or Trust premises and the school and/or Trust may seek legal remedy to safeguard its staff and students.