

# **Complaints Procedure**

## **A Guide for Parents and Carers**

<b>LAST REVIEW DATE</b>	<b>March 2024</b>	<b>REVIEW PERIOD</b>	<b>Annually</b>
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<b>TYPE OF POLICY</b>	<b>Statutory</b>	<b>APPROVAL LEVEL</b>	<b>Board level</b>

# The Parallel Learning Trust Complaints Procedure

The Trust's Board and the CEO are committed to providing the best educational experience they can for all learners attending PLT academies and provisions. They recognise the value to all concerned of dealing fairly, speedily and effectively with any complaint against their decisions, actions or omissions, which a pupil or parent or other aggrieved person may have. To this end, they have adopted the underlying principles and procedures set out in this document.

## Legislation and Guidance

This document meets the requirements of section 29 of the [Education Act 2002](#), which states that schools must have and make available a procedure to deal with all complaints relating to their school and to any community facilities or services that the school provides. It is also based on [guidance for schools on complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE).

This document meets the requirements set out in part 7 of the schedule to [the Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), which states that we must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents of pupils at the school. It is also based on guidance published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on [creating a complaints procedure that complies with the above regulations](#), and refers to [good practice guidance on setting up complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE).

This policy complies with our funding agreement and articles of association.

## Framework of Principles

Our complaints procedure:

- encourages resolution of problems by **informal** means wherever possible;
- is easily **accessible** and **publicised**;
- is **simple** to understand and use;
- is **impartial**;
- is **non-adversarial**;
- allows **swift** handling with established **time-limits** for action and keeping people informed of the progress;
- promotes a full and **fair** investigation by an independent person where necessary;
- respects people's desire for **confidentiality**;
- addresses the issues and provides an **effective** response and **appropriate** redress, where necessary;
- provides **information** to the Trust's Board so that services can be improved.

When investigating a complaint, we will try to clarify:

- What has happened
- Who was involved?
- What the complainant feels would put things right

We also intend to address complaints as quickly as possible. To achieve this, realistic and reasonable time limits will be set for each action within each stage.

Where further investigations are necessary, new time limits will be set, and the complainant will be sent details of the new deadline with an explanation for the delay.

The school expects that complaints will be made as soon as possible after an incident arises and no later than 3 months afterwards. We will consider exceptions to this time frame in circumstances where there were valid reasons for not making a complaint at that time and the complaint can still be investigated in a fair manner for all involved.

Arrangements for handling complaints from parents of children with SEN about a PLT Academy's support are within the scope of this policy. Such complaints should first be made to the Headteacher; they will then be referred to this complaints policy. Our SEN policy includes information about the rights of parents of pupils with disabilities who believe that our school has discriminated against their child.

## **Who can make a complaint?**

This complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of children that are registered at any Academy within the Parallel Learning Trust. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to a Trust Academy 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.

## **The difference between a concern and a complaint**

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. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to use the formal stages of the complaint's procedure. The Parallel Learning Trust takes concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

If you have difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff, we will respect your views. In these cases, the Headteacher will refer you to another staff member. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, they will refer you to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior, but does not have to be. The ability to consider the concern objectively and impartially is more important.

We understand however, that there are occasions when people would like to raise their concerns formally. In this case, the Headteacher will attempt to resolve the issue internally, through the stages outlined within this complaint's procedure.

## **How to raise a concern or make a complaint**

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

Concerns should be raised with either the class teacher or Headteacher. If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint.

Complainants should not approach individual Governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis and it may also prevent them from considering complaints at Stage 2 of the procedure.

Complaints against school staff (except the Headteacher) should be made in the first instance, to the Academy Headteacher via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints that involve, or are about, the Headteacher should be addressed to the Chair of the Academy Council via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints about the Chair of Academy Council, any individual Governor or the whole Academy Council/Advisory Board should be addressed to (the Clerk to the Academy Council/Advisory Board) via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

For ease of use, a template complaint form is included as Appendix 1 in this policy. If you require help in completing the form, please contact the school office. You can also ask third party organisations 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. We also encourage and support the use of advocates to support parents and carers within the process.

## **Anonymous complaints**

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

## **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.

## Scope of this Complaints Procedure

This procedure covers all complaints about any provision of community facilities or services by a PLT Trust Academy, other than complaints that are dealt with under other statutory procedures, including those listed below.

Exceptions	Who to contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admissions to schools</li> <li>• Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs</li> <li>• School re-organisation proposals</li> </ul>	<p>Concerns about admissions, statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs, or school re-organisation proposals should be raised with the Local Authority for the Academy in question.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation</li> </ul>	<p>Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance.</p> <p>If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). LADO/MASH</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exclusion of children from school*</li> </ul>	<p>Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at: <a href="https://www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/challenging-exclusion">https://www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/challenging-exclusion</a></p> <p><i>*Complaints about the application of the Behaviour Policy can be made through the school's complaints procedure.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whistleblowing</li> </ul>	<p>We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors.</p> <p>The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for whistleblowers in education who do not want to raise matters direct with their employer. Referrals can be made at: <a href="https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe">https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe</a></p> <p>Volunteer staff who have concerns about our school should complain through the school's complaints procedure. You may also be able to complain direct to the LA or the Department for Education (see link above), depending on the substance of your complaint.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff grievances</li> </ul>	<p>Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff conduct</li> </ul>	<p>Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate.</p> <p>Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint. However, the complainant will be notified that</p>

	the matter is being addressed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities</li> </ul>	Providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with complaints about their service. Please contact them direct.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National Curriculum - content</li> </ul>	Please contact the Department for Education at <a href="https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe">https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe</a>

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example; the Police, Local Authority (LA) Safeguarding teams or Tribunals, this may impact on our ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations.

If a complainant commences legal action against in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure in relation to their complaint until those legal proceedings have concluded.

## Resolving complaints

At each stage in the procedure the Trust wants to resolve the complaint. 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.

## Withdrawal of a Complaint

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

### Stage 1

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

The Headteacher will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within 2 school days.

Within this response, the Headteacher will seek to clarify the nature of the complaint, ask what remains unresolved and what outcome the complainant would like to see. The Headteacher can consider whether a face-to-face meeting is the most appropriate way of doing this.

*Note: The 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 Headteacher (or investigator) will:

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

At the conclusion of their investigation, the Headteacher will provide a formal written response within 12 school days of the date of receipt of the complaint.

If the Headteacher 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 and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions the Academy will take to resolve the complaint.

The Headteacher will advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint, should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of Stage 1.

## **Stage 1A**

If the complaint is about a member of the Academy Council/Advisory Board, including Vice Chair, a suitably skilled member of the Academy Council/Advisory Board, usually the Chair, is appointed to complete all the actions at Stage 1.

## **Stage 1B**

If the complaint is about the Headteacher this must be made to the CEO, via the CEO's Personal Assistant, Lizzie Kennedy: [lkennedy@plt.org.uk](mailto:lkennedy@plt.org.uk)

If the complaint is about the Chair of the Academy Council/Advisory Board the CEO will be appointed to complete all actions at Stage 1 via the CEO's Personal Assistant, Lizzie Kennedy: [lkennedy@plt.org.uk](mailto:lkennedy@plt.org.uk)

## **Stage 2**

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 1 and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to Stage 2 – a meeting with members of the Academy Council/ Advisory Board complaints committee, which will be formed of the first three, impartial, Academy Councillors available. This is the final stage of the complaint's procedure.

A request to escalate to Stage 2 must be made to the Clerk, via the school office, within 5 school days of receipt of the Stage 1 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 2 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 meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within 12 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.

The complaints committee will consist of at least three Academy Councillors with no prior involvement or knowledge of the complaint. Prior to the meeting, they will decide amongst themselves who will act as the Chair of the Complaints Committee. If there are fewer than three Academy Councillors from the Academy Council available, the Clerk will source any additional, independent Academy Councillors through another local Trust Academy Council in order to make up the committee. Alternatively, an entirely independent committee may be convened to hear the complaint at Stage 2.

When a committee panel is set up to hear a complaint during Stage 2 of the complaint's procedure one of the committee members will be independent of the management and running of the Academy.

A parent/carer has the ability to attend, and be accompanied, at a panel hearing if they wish. All communication must be made to the Chair of the panel. For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by a union and/or legal representative.

*Note: Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaint's 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.

At least 7 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 Academy 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 Department for Education if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled by the Academy.

If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or
- the entire Academy Council/Advisory Board or
- the majority of the Academy Council/Advisory Board

Stage 2 will be heard by a committee of independent, co-opted Academy Councillors and Directors within the 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 Academy will take to resolve the complaint.

The response will also advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied.

## **Next Steps**

If the complainant believes the school 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 Department for Education after they have completed Stage 2.

The Department for Education will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by the Academy. They will consider whether the Academy has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint.

The complainant can refer their complaint to the Department for Education online at: <https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe> by telephone on: 0370 000 2288 or by post:

Department for Education  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

## **Record-keeping**

The Trust will record the progress of all complaints, including information about actions taken, at all

stages. The stage at which the complaint was resolved and the final outcome. The records will also include copies of letters, emails and notes relating to meetings and phone calls. This material will be treated as confidential and held centrally, and will be viewed only by those involved in investigating the complaint or on the review panel.

This is except where the Secretary of State (or someone acting on their behalf) or the complainant, requests access to records of a complaint through a freedom of information (FOI) request or under the terms of the Data Protection Act, or where the material must be made available during a school inspection. Records of complaints will be kept for 10 years.

The details of the complaint, including the names of individuals involved, will not be shared with the whole Academy Council in case a review panel needs to be organised at a later point. Where the Academy Council is aware of the substance of the complaint before the review panel stage, the school will, where reasonably practicable, arrange for an independent panel to hear the complaint. Complainants also have the right to request an independent panel if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. The decision to approve this request is made by the Academy Council, who will not unreasonably, withhold consent.

## **Learning lessons**

The Trust will review any underlying issues raised by complaints with the Headteacher/Senior Leadership Team/appropriate staff member, where appropriate, and respecting confidentiality to determine whether there are any improvements that the school can make to its procedures or practice to help prevent similar events in the future.

## **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 notetaker to record minutes of the meeting
- ensure that any papers produced during the investigation are kept securely pending any appeal
- be mindful of the timescales to respond
- prepare a comprehensive report for the Headteacher or complaints committee that sets out the facts, identifies solutions and recommends courses of action to resolve problems.

The 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 / Designated Complaints Governor 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, Chair of Academy Council, Clerk and Trust (if appropriate) to ensure the smooth running of the complaint's procedure
- be aware of issues regarding:
  - sharing third party information
  - 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 Academy Council**

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 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 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 Co-ordinator, 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 Academy Councillor 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

## Appendix 1 - Complaint Form

Please complete and return to (*Headteacher / Clerk / Complaints Co-ordinator / Designated Academy Councillor*) – *school to delete as appropriate* who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

<b>Your name:</b>
<b>Pupil's name (if relevant):</b>
<b>Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant):</b>
<b>Address:</b>
<b>Postcode:</b> <b>Daytime telephone number:</b> <b>Evening telephone number:</b>
<b>Please give details of your complaint, including whether you have spoken to anybody at the school about it.</b>

**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 whom:**

**Complaint referred to:**

**Date:**