

Fylde Coast Academy Trust



Procedures for the Handling of Complaints 2025-2027

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1 Aims, scope and principles

FCAT aspires to work in partnership with parents and the wider community, based on the belief that co-operation and a sense of joint purpose between staff, parents and the academies will assist in ensuring open and positive relationships.

This policy has been written to support this aspiration by acknowledging that, from time to time, there may be cause for parents or members of the local community to express a concern or make a complaint about any provision of facilities or services by FCAT with the exception of complaints that are dealt with under other statutory procedures, including those listed below.

We are committed to dealing with concerns and complaints as speedily as possible and aim to complete each stage of the procedure within 15 school-days. When we are not able to complete the process within that timescale, the complainant will be informed of any delays and provided with a revised timeline. Should the Trust or academy fail to meet a deadline without providing an update, the complainant may escalate their complaint to the next stage of the procedure.

Exceptions	Who to contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Admissions to schools 	<p>Concerns about admissions should be handled through a separate process – either through the appeals process or via the local authority.</p> <p>Please see the admissions policy on the academy’s website.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statutory assessment of special educational needs 	<p>Concerns about statutory assessments of special educational needs should be raised directly with local authorities</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation 	<p>Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our safeguarding and child protection 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</p> <p>Blackpool LADO: lado@blackpool.gov.uk</p> <p>Lancashire LADO: Referral Form</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exclusion of children from school* 	<p>Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at: www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions.</p> <p><i>*Complaints about the application of the behaviour policy can be made through the school's complaints procedure which can be found on individual academy websites.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Whistleblowing 	<p>We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors.</p> <p>A whistle-blower is deemed to be someone with privileged knowledge. These may be:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Members of staff (e.g., teachers, headteachers, administration support employees) 2. Volunteers (e.g., Trustees, governors) <p>The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for matters relating to education for whistle-blowers in education who do not want to raise matters directly with their employer. Concerns can be raised with the ESFA using their contact form: www.education.gov.uk/contactus.</p> <p>You can read further how the ESFA handles whistleblowing disclosures here: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-esfa-handles-whistleblowing-disclosures</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff grievances 	<p>Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff conduct 	<p>Complaints about staff conduct 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 the matter is being addressed and can choose to progress through the complaint's procedure.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complaints about services provided by other suppliers who may use school premises or facilities 	Complaints about external providers should be addressed through the providers' complaints procedures.
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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 this happens, we will inform you of a proposed new timescale.

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

2 Definitions

- A **complaint** is defined as: “an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action”
- A **concern** is defined as: “an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought”. For the purpose of this policy, all concerns, once formally submitted, will be classed and addressed within the complaints procedure. However, FCAT strongly encourages and facilitates the informal resolution of concerns as the crucial first step.
- A **grievance** is: an issue raised by a member of staff where they feel the school has not implemented a policy or process fairly or properly. Grievances will be dealt with in line with the school's Grievance Policy.

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. FCAT takes all concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible. Where informal resolution is not successful, the Academy or Trust will attempt to resolve the issues internally, through the stages outlined within this complaint's procedure.

For the purpose of this policy, “**unreasonable complaints**” include:

- Vexatious complaints (see Managing Violent and Abusive Parents, Carers and Visitors Policy and FCAT Policy for managing serial and unreasonable complaints), which:

- Are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, abusive, offensive, threatening or repetitious.
 - Insist upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason.
 - Insist upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner.
 - Are designed to cause disruption or annoyance.
 - Demand for redress which lacks any serious purpose or value.
- Serial or persistent complaints, which:
 - Are duplicated, sent by the same complainant once the initial complaint has been closed.
 - Are new complaints that are submitted additionally, as part of an existing open complaint, by the same complainant.

Serial or persistent complaints will only be marked as 'serial' once the complainant has completed the complaints procedure. It is the complaint that will be marked as 'serial', meaning the complainant can complain about a separate issue if necessary.

For the purpose of this policy, “**duplicate complaints**” are identical complaints received from a complainant’s spouse, partner, grandparent or child. These complaints will not be addressed again, the individual making the second complaint will be informed that the complaint has been dealt with on a local level and if they are dissatisfied with the result, they can appeal to the DfE.

FCAT is committed to handling all complaints fairly. However, in cases where a complaint is deemed vexatious or serial, the Trust may take action to manage the complainants contact. This decision will be made by a senior staff member not previously involved in the complaint. The decision and the reasons for it will be communicated to the complainant in writing. The complainant may appeal this decision in writing to the Chair of the Trust Board.

Any new details provided by a complainant’s spouse, partner, grandparent or child, will be investigated and dealt with in line with the complaint procedure.

3 How to raise a concern or make a complaint.

FCAT is committed to resolving concerns at the earliest possible opportunity. We believe that open communication and early intervention are key to fostering positive relationships and achieving swift, effective resolutions.

Therefore, we strongly encourage all complainants to engage in Stage 1 – Informal Resolution – as their crucial first step.

This informal approach is often the quickest and most effective way to address and resolve issues, preventing the need for a more formal process.

How to raise a concern:

Concerns and complaints can be made in person, in writing or by telephone. Third-party complaints are acceptable with appropriate consent.

Ensure all communications are marked “private and confidential” and addressed appropriately:

- **School-based concerns**
 - Raise initial concerns with the relevant member of staff (e.g., class teacher, subject head, year head)
 - If related to a staff member (other than the Headteacher) raise the concern with the Headteacher
- **Concerns about the Headteacher**
 - Address to the Deputy CEO via Trust Office or complaints@fcatschools.org.uk
- **Concerns about the Chair of Governors or any Governors**
 - Addressed to the Governance Lead via Trust Office or complaints@fcatschools.org.uk
- **Concerns about FCAT, its policies, or Central staff**
 - Addressed to the Chief Operating Officer via Trust Office or complaints@fcatschools.org.uk
- **Concerns about the CEO or a Trustee**
 - Addressed to the Governance Lead via Trust Office or complaints@fcatschools.org.uk

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 3 of the procedure.

Benefits of Informal Resolution (Stage 1):

- **Speed:** Resolutions are typically much faster
- **Direct communication:** Encourages clear dialogue with the person best placed to help
- **Relationship preservation:** Maintains a positive atmosphere
- **Flexibility:** Allows for practical, tailored solutions

Expectations of engagement

In line with this policy, we expect that all complainants will have made reasonable attempts to resolve their concern informally before progressing to formal stages.

Timescales:

- All complaints must be raised within 3-months of the incident, or the last in a series of incidents, unless exceptional circumstances apply. Exceptional circumstances will be determined on a case-by-case basis by the CEO or a designated senior leader not involved in the subject of the complaint. This may include, but is not limited to, cases of significant ill health or bereavement.
- Complaints made outside of term time will be considered received on the first school day after the break

Should a complaint regarding a member of staff employed by FCAT require management in accordance with any of FCAT's HR Policies or Procedures or referral to a separate body through legal compliance, such processes would run concurrently with this FCAT Complaints Policy.

Anonymous complaints

The merits of investigating anonymous complaints will be determined by the appropriate person on receipt, although the trust will not normally investigate anonymous complaints.

4 Stage 1 – Informal Resolution of Concerns

Most concerns can and should be resolved through informal discussion. This stage is designed to be constructive, timely and flexible.

Process:

1. **Initial Contact:** Engage with the relevant staff member (see section 3)
2. **Explain Clearly:** State the concern and desired outcome
3. **Investigate and Dialogue:** A designated person will investigate and discuss the matter
4. **Informal Written Response:** ~~If resolved~~, a brief written confirmation will be provided within 15-school days
5. **Closure or Escalation:** If unresolved, the complainant may proceed to Stage 2. If no escalation request is received within 10 school-days of the informal response, the matter will be considered closed. Where possible, and especially where a complainant may be vulnerable, a courtesy reminder may be sent before the complaint is formally closed.

Exceptions:

Stage 1 is bypassed for:

- Allegations involving proven criminal activity and/or on police advice received by the Trust
- Financial/accounting irregularities
- Allegations of abuse (refer to LADO or safeguarding protocols)

In dealing with complaints FCAT will take account of its public sector equality duty and have due regard for the need to: -

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

Where complaints are made against an individual member of staff or governor, that person will be informed of the complaint at the earliest opportunity.

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.

5 Stage 2 – Formal Complaints

Formal complaints must be made to the appropriate person (see Section 3), ideally using the Complaints form (appendix A).

- Acknowledge receipt within 5 school-days
- Clarify issues, desired outcomes, and meeting options
- Investigation may be delegated but not the final decision
- A formal written response will be provided within 15 school-days, or a revised timetable will be communicated

The complainant will be advised of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of Stage 2.

6 Stage 3 – 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 governors or Trustees 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. This is the final stage of the complaint's procedure.

A request to escalate to Stage 3 must be made by email to complaints@fcats.org.uk or to the Governance Lead, FCAT Offices, Mereside Primary Academy, Langdale Road, Blackpool, FY4 4RR, via the school office, within fifteen school days of receipt of the Stage 2 response.

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

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

The Governance Lead will write to the complainant to inform them of the date of the meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within fifteen school days of receipt of the Stage 3 request. If this is not possible, the Governance Lead will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed. If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Governance Professional 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 three trustees and an independent panel member.

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 meeting. However, we recognise there may be occasions when legal representation is appropriate. To ensure fairness, if either the complainant or the Trust intends to be legally represented, they must notify the Governance Lead at least five-school-days before the meeting. The other party will then be informed and offered the same opportunity.

Note: Following investigation of the complaint at the appropriate stage of this Complaints Policy; complaints about staff conduct may then be dealt with under the trust's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate.

In line with Data Protection legal requirements for personal data; 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 the matter is being addressed and can choose to progress through the complaint's procedure.

At least ten school days before the meeting, the Governance Professional 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 panel at least six school days before the meeting.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least five school days before the date of the meeting. The panel will not normally accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.

The panel 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 panel will consider the complaint and all the evidence presented. The panel 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 panel 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 panel will provide the complainant and Academy with a full explanation of their decision and the reason(s) for it, in writing, within ten school-days.

The letter to the complainant will include details of how to contact the Department for Education (DfE) if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled by the Trust or Academy.

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 required 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 head teacher.

A written record will be kept of all complaints, and of whether they are resolved at the preliminary stage 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.

8 Handling of Confidential Information

Where evidence submitted for the hearing is deemed confidential (for example, due to data protection or safeguarding concerns), the Panel Chair will decide how it is to be handled. This may include redacting information, providing a summary to the complainant, or the panel considering the material without sharing it directly, in which case the panel must explain in its final decision that confidential information was considered. The Chair's primary duty is to ensure a fair hearing for all parties.

9 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 DfE after they have completed Stage 3.

The DfE will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by FCAT or their academies. They will consider whether education legislation and statutory policies connected with the complaint have been adhered to and whether [Part 7 of the Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#) has been followed.

The complainant can refer their complaint to the DfE online at: <https://www.gov.uk/complain-to-dfe> or by writing to:

Ministerial and Public Communication Division
Department for Education
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

10 Appendix A: FCAT Complaints Procedure Flowchart

Stage	Action	Timeline
Initial Concern	Complainant raises concern with relevant staff member (teacher, HOY, Headteacher etc)	As soon as possible
Stage 1: Informal Resolution	Staff investigate/discuss concern. Informal written response issued	Within 15 school-days
Escalation	If unresolved, complainant submits formal complaint (preferably using form)	Within 10 school-days of informal response
Stage 2: Formal Complaint	Complaint acknowledged. Clarification sought. Investigation conducted and a formal written response issued.	Within 5 school-days Within 15 school-days
Escalation	Complainant can request panel hearing if still unresolved	Within 10 school-days of formal response
Stage 3: Panel Hearing	Governance Lead acknowledges request for panel hearing Governance Lead to organise the panel hearing	Within 2 school-days Hearing within 15 school-days
Panel outcome	Written decision shared with complainant	Within 10 school-days
External Referral	If still unresolved, complainant may contact the Department for Education	As per DfE processes

11 Stage 2 Complaint Form

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

Your 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:

12 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 mindful 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 head teacher 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 head teacher, Governance Lead, CEO etc.)

The complaints co-ordinator should:

- ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure
- liaise with staff members, head teacher, CEO, Chair of Governors, Chair of Trust or the Governance Professional and 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.

Governance Professional to the Governing Body / Trust Board

The Governance Professional is the contact point for the complainant and the panel 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.

Panel Chair

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

- both parties are asked (via the Governance Professional) 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 panel 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 panel is open-minded and acts independently
- no member of the panel 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 Governance Professional (and complaints co-ordinator, if the school has one).

Panel Member

Panel 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 panel 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 panel 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 panel 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 panel considers is not in the child/young person's best interests.