

Complaints Policy

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1. Application of this policy

The policy is applicable to all complaints received by Grace Schools academies as defined under this policy, except for as set out below (which are covered by their own policy or framework):

- Matters that are the responsibility of the Local Authority such as pupil admissions and home-to-school transport.
- Statutory assessment of Special Educational Needs.
- Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation (handled under our Child Protection and Safeguarding policy and in line with statutory guidance).
- Exclusion of pupils from school.
- The National Curriculum and related matters, including Religious Education.
- Whistleblowing (handled under our Whistleblowing Policy for all employees, including temporary staff and contractors);
- Staff grievances (handled under our Grievance Policy).
- Complaints about the services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities (providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with this).
- Any staff conduct complaints will be considered under Grace Schools's staff disciplinary procedures. Where these are relevant in part to complaints under this policy, outcomes will not be shared with complainants.
- Complaints which relate to an unaffiliated Nursery setting, where parents/carers are not satisfied that their child is receiving the free entitlement correctly (as set out in the funding agreement and in Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities), a complaint can be submitted directly to the head teacher and/or the Local Authority Early Years Funding Team.

2. Associated Policies and documents

Grace Schools Policy for managing serial and unreasonable complaints & communications.

3. Definitions

Complainant	Applies to an individual stakeholder. Complainant may also be interpreted to encompass stakeholders, who may not be seeking to make formal complaints but whose communications and/behaviour falls under categories defined in the Implementation section of this policy.
Community Councils	Academy specific governance forums.
Hub Directors	Line Managers of Grace Schools Head Teachers, in which capacity it is appropriate for them to handle stage 2 complaints.
Regional Schools Boards	Governance forums reflect the Grace Schools Hub Schools structure focusing on the educational performance of those schools.
Trust	Grace Schools, which consists of all academy staff, governors, central team, executives, trustees and members of Regional School Board or Community Councils.
Unreasonable behaviour	Behaviour which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complaints' contact with the Academy, such as, if the complainant: • refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance. • refuses to co-operate with the complaint's investigation process. • refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaint's procedure. • insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways that are incompatible with the complaint's procedure or with good

	practice. • introduces trivial or irrelevant information, which they expect to be considered and commented on. • raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales. • makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues and seek to have them replaced. • changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds. • repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed). • refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the Academy's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education or the Education Funding Agency. • seeks an unrealistic outcome. • makes excessive demands on Academy staff time by frequent, lengthy, and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with. • publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.
	A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the person making the complaint acts in a manner which is: • Malicious • Aggressive • Threatening, intimidating, or violent • Made using abusive, offensive or discriminatory language • Made knowing the complaint to be false • Made using falsified information • Otherwise made using conduct, which is intended to intimidate, harass or is otherwise similarly inappropriate

4. Requirements and Guidance

Academies are required to have a complaints procedure in place meeting the requirements of Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards England) Regulations 2014 which includes making the procedure available to parents or carers of pupils and parents of prospective pupils.

If anyone requires help in submitting a complaint, please contact the school office. You can also ask a third- party organisation to help you, for example, the Citizens Advice.

It is recommended that Parents and Carers should consult the **"Parentkind Guide to School Complaints"**. This is an independent body who has produced the Guide to help parents and carers:

- Understand whether they're raising feedback, a concern or a formal complaint
- Contact the right person at the right time
- Communicate clearly, calmly and effectively
- Follow the school's process without getting stuck or ignored
- Avoid common mistakes that make situations worse, not better

The aim of the Guide is resolution, not conflict. It can be accessed via the following link:

[V8- Parent Complaint Guide](#)

5. Overview

Grace Schools is committed to ensuring that the highest standards are maintained, both in the provision of education to students and in every other aspect of the running of all its academies.

Grace Schools accepts that the actions of those individuals who work in the school will and should be open to comment, question and, on occasions, criticism. It aims to deal positively with all complaints and the procedure set out below allows complainants and others the opportunity to voice any concerns they may have through appropriate channels.

This policy sets out the procedure which has been adopted by the Trust to ensure a timely, systematic, and fair approach to the resolution of such concerns.

Parents and Carers may find it helpful to refer to the Parent guide to school complaints (issued by ParentKind) which can be accessed via the link below when raising concerns or complaints.

<https://www.parentkind.org.uk/assets/parents-resources/Parent-Guide-to-School-Complaints.pdf>

6. Procedure

Principles

The approach to complaint management is underpinned by the following principles:

- A concern is defined as '*an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought*'.
- A complaint is defined as '*an expression of dissatisfaction 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 and without the need to use the formal stages of the complaint's procedures.
- Concerns and complaints will be considered and resolved as quickly and as efficiently as possible.
- The resolution of concerns and complaints will normally only be considered by those with a direct interest in the matter. They will be dealt with by a member of staff best suited to deal with the matter.
- If the concern or complaint is about an individual member of staff, they have a right to know the substance and source of any allegation made against them unless there are exceptional reasons for not doing so (e.g. safety considerations).
- Concerns and complaints will be dealt with having due regard for confidentiality and the security of any records in line with current data protection policy and guidance.
- It is recognised that people feel passionate about education and may express complaints in robust terms. However, where a complainant acts in an aggressive, abusive, vexatious, or otherwise unreasonable manner, the Trust may decline to further investigate a complaint. In this case, you should refer to the "Managing Serial and Unreasonable Complaints and Communication Policy".
- For complaints against Grace Schools Central Team staff, this policy will apply, substituting an Officer's line manager for Hub Director at Stage 2.

- Complaints will be dealt with in line with any relevant national legislation and statutory obligations.

We recognise that Artificial Intelligence ("AI") applications are a powerful tool which can make written communication more inclusive and accessible. However, parents and staff will always be able to speak about our pupils and schools with greater accuracy and understanding than a generative AI chatbot such as ChatGPT. AI generated text can often be excessive in length, misquote legal or procedural documents, and obscure the key points of any communication. It can confirm biases and viewpoints without foundation, or make up inaccurate guidelines, leading to misunderstandings between parents and staff.

We respectfully request that parents do not use AI excessively in raising complaints with schools. If staff feel that a piece of communication has been largely AI generated, to the point at which it is inaccurate, excessively long, or difficult to understand, parents may be asked to resubmit their complaint in a new form, or invited into school to discuss their concerns in person.

Anonymous Complaints

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated. However, the person tasked with receiving the complaint will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

Timescales for considering complaints

Complaints must be raised within **three months** of the incident occurring or where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. Complaints made outside of this time frame may be considered in exceptional circumstances.

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

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

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint (e.g. the police, local authority (LA) safeguarding teams or Tribunals), this may impact on the Trust's ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations.

Time Limits for responding to complaints

All complaints will be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible and as far as possible within the time limits for each action within each stage. However, where further investigations are necessary, new time limits may need to be set to enable the complaint to be effectively considered, in which case the complainant will be sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

In exceptional circumstances, such as the full or partial closure of schools or other disruption, time scales related to responses to formal complaints in this policy may be extended. In such circumstances, new timescales should be communicated to the complainant.

Implementation

Grace Schools has a four-stage process for dealing with concerns and complaints.

The four stages are:

- Informal – concern heard by a member of staff.
- Stage 1 - complaint heard by the Headteacher, unless it is about the Headteacher then it is heard by the Hub Director (complaint that is put in writing).
- Stage 2 – complaint response reviewed by Hub Director or by Director of Education, if Stage 1 was heard by the Hub Director
- Stage 3 – complaint heard by a separately convened Complaint Appeal Panel.

Informal

A concern 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, if they have appropriate consent to do so.

Concerns should be raised with the appropriate member of staff, most likely the class teacher or member of the Senior Leadership Team.

Academy staff will work to informally resolve a concern at the earliest possible opportunity by way of a discussion(s) between the complainant and the appropriate member of staff.

If a concerned party has difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff, their views will be respected. In these cases, the Headteacher will refer them to another staff member. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, another member of staff will be asked to liaise. 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.

Where a member of staff is dealing with a complaint informally, they should record details

of the complaint, agreed actions and timescales, and check if the complainant feels the matter is resolved.

Stage One

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the response provided in relation to their concern, then they may initiate Stage One of the complaints process by writing to the Headteacher, setting out the details of their complaint (or Director of Education if the informal concern was about the Headteacher and raised to the Hub Director).

The Stage One request must be made within **10 school days** of the informal response from the academy. The Headteacher will respond in writing within **10 school days** of receipt of the Stage One request.

Stage Two

If the complainant feels that their complaint has not been resolved, the next step is to request a Stage Two review.

Complaints should be submitted in writing within **10 school days** of receipt of the Stage One letter:

The Content of Complaints

The Complaint should be submitted using the form included in Appendix 2 to this document. This should be submitted to the Grace Schools Complaints mailbox (complaints@graceschools.org.uk)

If the complaint is about the Headteacher, the complaint should be addressed to the Hub Director and submitted to Grace Schools via the link above. For this Policy, a complaint against the Headteacher is an expression of dissatisfaction about actions taken or a lack of action taken by the Headteacher concerning a particular matter. It is not considered to be against the Headteacher where it relates to the proper application of the operational procedures of the school.

The Governance Team at Grace Schools will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within **2 school days**. To enable the school to fully investigate, the complaint notification should include:

- the name and date of birth of the relevant pupil(s).
- the name and contact details of the complainant(s).
- a summary of the complaint, including key times and dates and any

witnesses to any specific incident(s).

- any steps already taken to attempt to resolve the complaint.
- any suggested steps to resolve the complaint / desired outcomes.

The Stage 2 reviewer will only review the adequacy of the investigation carried out by the Headteacher as part of the Stage 2 Complaint response. They will therefore not repeat the investigation.

Outcome

A formal written response setting out the complaint, the findings of the investigation, and any appropriate steps to resolve the complaint will be sent to the complainant within **10 school days** of receipt of the stage 2 complaint.

The response will also detail the complaints' ability to request a panel hearing should they remain dissatisfied.

Stage 3

If the complainant remains dissatisfied with previous attempts to resolve the complaint, they may request a panel hearing about their complaint.

The request must be made in writing by the complainant within **10 school days** of notification of the outcome of the formal investigation and sent to: complaints@graceschools.org.uk or Head of Governance, Grace Building, 8 High Street, Ely, Cambridgeshire, CB7 4JU

Convening a Panel

Upon receipt of a request, the Trust will acknowledge the receipt and convene a panel hearing on behalf of the Academy within **20 school days**. The complainant should be notified of the hearing time, date, and location at least **5 school days** before the hearing. This may be a private in-person meeting or 'virtually' if circumstances require. The complainant must be invited to attend the panel meeting, and can, if they wish, be accompanied by a relative or friend when attending the panel, but not by legal representatives.

The academy will ensure that the venue is accessible.

If the complainant rejects the offer of **three proposed dates** without good reason, the Chair will decide when to hold the meeting; it will then proceed using written submissions from both parties if the complainant cannot make the date.

Whilst it is necessary to resolve complaints as quickly and efficiently as possible, there is no requirement to hear a complaint over school holidays. It is likely a reasonable position would be that any complaints made at the end of term should be postponed until the start of the next term, so that staff are available to engage in the process.

Panel Membership

The panel will be appointed by the Trust governance team on behalf of the Academy and consist of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint, this may include a member of the Community Council or Regional Schools Board who does not have prior involvement in the complaint. The Trust will ensure that one panel member is independent of the management and running of the Academy.

Information provided to the Panel

The Complaints Panel will not accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded. The Complaints Panel will also not review any new issues at this stage or allow evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New issues must be raised in line with this policy.

Panel Outcome

The Complaints Panel will aim to reach an outcome in respect of the complaint (i.e. upheld, partially upheld, not upheld, unable to substantiate). The panel will also decide and agree on any appropriate action to be taken because of the complaint and make recommendations to change processes/procedures to ensure problems of a similar nature do not recur.

Any disciplinary outcome of any investigation into the conduct of a member of staff is a confidential matter between the member of staff and the Senior Leadership of the Academy and will not be disclosed to the complainant.

The panel will consider the complaint and any evidence it considers relevant and report its findings and recommendations. A copy of those findings and recommendations will be provided within **10 school days** of the panel hearing to the complainant; the Trust; the Headteacher; and where relevant the person complained about.

The report of the panel hearing is final, and no appeal is possible on the

substance of the complaint. The Panel Hearing procedure is set out in Appendix 1.

Following conclusion of complaints procedure

Should a complainant remain dissatisfied following a Stage 3 complaint, they will be advised of their right to escalate their complaint to the following body:

Department for Education

If a complainant feels that the school has or is proposing to act unreasonably, or has failed to discharge a duty under certain legislation, they can contact the

Department for Education via the following link: [Contact the Department for Education - Contact type - DFE Online Forms](#)

Other Information

Complaints against members of the Grace Schools Trust Board

Where complaints are directed at members of the Grace Schools Trust Board or a decision of the Trust Board, they will be managed as set out below.

<u>Where the complaint relates to the behaviour of the following person(s)</u>	<u>The complaint will be handled by the following person(s) as a Stage 2 complaint</u>
Chief Executive Officer	Chair of the Trust Board
Chair of the Trust Board	Vice-Chair of the Trust Board
Vice-Chair of the Trust Board	Chair of the Trust Board
Other members of the Trust Board on an individual basis	Chair of the Trust Board

Should the complainant remain dissatisfied with the outcome at stage two then they may request for the complaint to be dealt with at stage 3 as set out in the table below.

Where a complaint relates to a decision of the Grace Schools Trust Board, it will be managed in accordance with a three-stage complaint management process. The persons responding to the complaint are detailed below and the implementation process will follow the stage 1, 2, and 3 procedures detailed in pages 8-9.

	<i>Dealt with by:</i>
Stage 1	Chief Executive Officer
Stage 2	Chair of the Trust Board
Stage 3	Panel Hearing which consists of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. The Trust will ensure that at least one panel member is independent of the management and running of the Trust.

Should a complainant remain dissatisfied following a Stage 3 complaint, they will be advised of their right to escalate their complaint to the following body:

Department for Education

If a complainant feels that the school has or is proposing to act unreasonably, or has failed to discharge a duty under certain legislation, they can contact the Department for Education via the following link: [Contact the Department for Education - Contact type - DFE Online Forms](#)

SEND complaints

Specific guidance relating to SEND complaints is set out at Appendix 2.

Confidentiality

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

Record Keeping

A written record will be kept of all complaints that were resolved at the formal stage of the Complaints Procedure. The Trust reserves the right to record meetings. Records will contain details of whether the complaint was resolved at **stage 2** or **stage 3**. The action taken by the Academy or the Trust because of a complaint (regardless of whether they are upheld) will also be recorded.

Grace Schools academies will:

- request confirmation in writing if a complainant decides to withdraw their formal complaint.
- deal with complaints from people who are not parents of attending pupils in the same way by applying the process outlined above.
- consider if staff likely to be involved in handling a complaint are suitably trained and supported to do so.
- provide a copy of the findings and recommendations to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about.
- ensure that records of all complaints, findings and recommendations are available for inspection on the school premises by the Headteacher and / or officers of the Trust as appropriate.
- not tolerate abusive language or behaviour at any time and reserve the right to postpone the process should it feel that the welfare of staff and pupils is at significant risk.
- consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure if a complainant commences legal action against the Trust in relation to their complaint, until those legal proceedings have concluded.

The implementation and adherence to this procedure should reduce the number of

complaints that become protracted or vexatious. If a complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the Hub Director or Head of Governance will write to the complainant explaining that the complaint has been through all stages of the procedure, is now exhausted and the matter is now closed. Any further attempt to reopen the issue will be dealt with under the Serial and Unreasonable Complaints Policy.

This policy is published on the Trust and Academy website and is available from the school office on request.

7. Legal duties under the Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination against an individual based on the protected characteristics, which include, sex, race, religion or belief, and gender reassignment.

It is not considered that the provisions of this policy would create the risk of discrimination as contemplated under this Act.

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

Panel Hearing Procedure

1. Panel remit

The panel should aim to:

- Uphold or dismiss the complaint, either in whole or in part.
- Decide on how the complaint should be resolved (if upheld).
- Recommend changes to the school's systems to prevent similar issues in future (sometimes there won't be enough information for the panel to make a judgement on the specific complaint, and recommendations for the future are all that will be possible)

The DfE recommends that the panel considers every aspect of the complaint, not just how the complaint was handled by the school in earlier stages. If the complaint is escalated to the DfE, it will consider how the school handled the complaint overall.

2. Panel membership

The panel will be appointed on behalf of the Academy by the Trust governance team and consist of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. The Trust will ensure that one panel member is independent of the management and running of the school.

3. At the hearing

Although this is a formal meeting, every effort should be made to make it as informal as possible for all concerned. Consideration should be given to the seating arrangements to make everyone feel equal and comfortable. A clerk or Trust Central Team officer may attend to take notes but will take no formal part in the meeting. The chair of the panel should open the meeting stating the purpose and the format of the meeting to clarify this to all in attendance. People present should introduce themselves, stating their reason for being at the meeting.

The chair of the panel should request a short verbal statement from the complainant in support of their written letter of complaint and they feel the issue has not been resolved. The panel members can ask questions to make sure they understand the issue from the complainant's point of view.

The chair of the panel should request a short verbal statement from the Headteacher or Hub Director in support of their written account of the complaint and the steps taken to resolve the issue. The panel members can ask questions to make sure they understand the issue from the Head or Hub point of view.

The members of the panel should make sure they fully understand the issues and ask any further questions to clarify any points that are still not clear to them.

The chair of the panel must ask the complainant and the Headteacher or Hub Director if they are satisfied that they have provided all relevant information and if they feel they have had a fair hearing. When the panel members understand all the issues, the chair will close the hearing.

4. *After the hearing*

The panel members will discuss the issues in private and, with the assistance of the clerk or Trust note-taker, produce a written report on findings and recommendations. A copy of the findings & recommendations will be provided within 10 school days of the panel hearing to: The complainant; the Trust; the Head; and where the person complained about.

SEND Complaints Procedure

Special Educational Needs (SEN)

If a parent or carer wishes to complain about a school's SEN support, they should do so while their child is still registered at the school. This includes complaints that the school has not provided the support required by your child's SEN Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

Make a Complaint Relating to SEN

To make a complaint in this regard, the following steps are available. If a complaint is not resolved, complainants may wish to escalate to the next step.

2. Talk to the Academy's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).
3. Follow the Grace Schools Complaints Policy.
4. Complain to their local authority if their child has an EHCP:
5. Complain to the Department for Education instead of the local authority if both the following apply:
 - The school is an academy or free school.
 - Your complaint is not about an SEN statement, or an EHC Plan.

There is a different process if complainants disagree with a decision your local authority has made about an EHCP. This can be found on each local authority's local offer website.

Disability Discrimination

If it is felt that the school has discriminated against someone because of their disability, the Grace Schools Complaints Policy should be followed.

If this does not resolve the complaint, or the complainant does not want to complain to the school first, they may be able to complain to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Tribunal.

<https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school/disability-discrimination>

For further information on the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal process contact:

sendistqueries@justice.gov.uk

Free help and advice for complainants can also be accessed via:

- Independent Parental Special Education Advice
(<https://www.ipsea.org.uk/what-are-special-educational-needs>)
- your local Parent Partnership Service through the Information, Advice and Support Services (IASS) Network iassn@ncb.org.uk

Complaint reporting form

School Name:	
Complainant's Name:	
Pupil's Name:	
Complainant's relationship to pupil:	
Address of Complainant:	
Telephone number(s):	E-mail:
Please describe what your complaint is and when it arose	
What do you think the school/trust did wrong or did not do?	
Please provide details about the consequences of what did / did not happen:	
What action(s), if any, have you already taken to try to resolve your complaint:	

What do you think should be done to resolve matters at this stage?

Please list copies of any documents you are attaching to this complaint:

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