

Three Counties Academy Trust



Reference Policy

#HR44

Last amended 10th July 2026 (v1.0)

Policy lifespan: 3 years. Subject to annual compliance check. Next full review 9th July 2029.

Version history

Date	Version	Details	Actioned by	PDF to Websites	Word to Governor Hub
10.07.26	1.0	Formatted to house style and checked against model for updates	MF	✓	✓

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Trust Glossary

Policy Abbreviations and Acronyms

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
DfE	Department for Education
DPO	Data Protection Officer
DSL	Designated Safeguarding Lead
TCAT	Three Counties Academy Trust
UK GDPR	UK General Data Protection

NB. Where the term “parent” or “parents” is used this includes those who act as carers or have parental responsibility.

Statement of intent

At Three Counties Academy Trust (TCAT), we recognise the importance of having an effective reference policy to ensure our schools use references appropriately to support a fair and justifiable recruitment and exit system. TCAT is committed to obtaining objective and factual information to support and scrutinise appointment decisions, providing only verifiable information and statements, and encouraging a spirit of reciprocity with other trusts, schools and employers by providing references when requested.

This policy is designed to cover procedures for all TCAT schools requesting references as part of our recruitment process, as well as procedures for when it is appropriate for our schools to provide a reference for a former or current employee. The policy applies to both internal and external candidates.

Member, Trustee, Local Governor and Staff Summary

Purpose and Principles

- TCAT uses references to support fair, objective and evidence-based recruitment decisions
- References must contain factual, verifiable information and support safer recruitment practices
- The policy applies to both requesting and providing references for current and former employees

Recruitment Expectations

- References are obtained for shortlisted candidates and scrutinised before appointments are confirmed
- References must come directly from an appropriate referee with suitable authority
- Concerns, discrepancies or unclear information must be investigated and resolved

Leadership and Governance Responsibilities

- Trust Boards and Local Governing Bodies must ensure effective and compliant recruitment processes
- Only authorised individuals may provide references on behalf of TCAT or its schools
- Leaders must ensure references comply with policy requirements and protect the Trust's reputation

Assessing Candidate Suitability

- References are checked for accuracy, completeness and consistency with application information
- Previous capability, disciplinary or safeguarding information may be considered where relevant and lawful
- HR advice may be sought where concerns arise

Providing References

- References should normally be provided only following a written request
- Information provided must be objective, factual and capable of verification
- Personal references must be clearly identified as personal and not representing TCAT

Information Included in References

- References may include employment history, duties, skills, experience and other verifiable information relevant to the role
- Speculation, opinion, hearsay or misleading statements must not be included
- Information should provide a fair and accurate representation of the individual

Confidentiality and Data Protection

- Personal data relating to references must be handled securely and in accordance with data protection legislation
- Sensitive personal information will only be disclosed where lawful and appropriate consent or justification exists
- References should be treated as private and confidential documents

Disciplinary and Safeguarding Information

- Disciplinary matters may be disclosed where relevant, appropriate and legally permissible
- False, malicious or unsubstantiated allegations must not be included
- Safeguarding information must be considered carefully and disclosed where required to protect children

Key Assurance

- The policy promotes consistency, fairness, legal compliance and safer recruitment
- It supports robust appointment decisions while ensuring references remain accurate, objective and proportionate

1. Legal framework

This policy has due regard to all relevant legislation and statutory guidance including, but not limited to, the following:

- [Equality Act 2010](#)
- [Data Protection Act 2018](#)
- [UK General Data Protection Regulation \(UK GDPR\)](#)
- [DfE 'Keeping children safe in education'](#)
- [DfE 'Staffing and employment advice for schools'](#)

Where legislation has been passed or updated during the shelf life of this policy, we will always apply the latest version available irrespective of the version quoted here.

This policy operates in conjunction with the following policies:

- Data Protection Policy (FI20)
- Complaints Policy and Procedure (GN9)
- Teacher Capability Policy and Procedure (HR1)
- Disciplinary Policy and Procedure (HR3)
- Appraisal Policy (Teaching Staff) (HR9)
- Appraisal Policy (Support Staff) (HR9A)
- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and Procedures (SG1)

Central TCAT policies have the policy number identified, e.g. "SG1". Where no policy number is identified this indicates the policy is a school specific policy available from an individual TCAT school's website.

2. Roles and responsibilities

The Trust Board and where delegated, Local Governing Bodies will:

- Ensure they have the skills to carry out effective selection processes, including knowing when and how to request references
- Establish a selection panel when appointing a candidate that includes at least one person who has completed safer recruitment training within the past three years

The selection panel will:

- Check that references have been received where requested
- Consider any advice provided by TCATs HR manager or provider
- Ensure that all references for a shortlisted candidate are properly scrutinised and that information is not contradictory, unclear, or incomplete, with clarification requested when appropriate
- Ask previous employers when appointing Executive Headteachers/Headteachers/Heads of School and teachers, and where appropriate to do so when appointing a CEO or CFO, for details about whether the individual has been subject to capability procedures in the previous two years where they were employed within the education sector

The CEO, Executive Headteachers, Headteachers and Heads of School will:

- Provide references when requested in line with this policy
- Determine which other members of staff it is appropriate to be permitted to provide references where requested, e.g. line managers
- Ensure all other members of staff are aware that they are not permitted to provide references on behalf of TCAT or any TCAT school
- Decide in exceptional circumstances when it may be inappropriate for TCAT or a TCAT school to provide a reference
- Ensure that all references provided by TCAT or a TCAT school adhere to this policy and will not bring TCAT or our schools into disrepute
- Ensure that all relevant staff are familiarised with this policy and adhere to it when requesting or providing a reference

Other members of staff will:

- Provide references only if they have the express permission of the CEO or their Executive Headteacher, Headteacher or where delegated their Head of School
- Follow this policy's procedures when providing a personal reference
- Request references from a suitable member of staff, e.g. their line manager or their Headteacher/Head of School

The DPO will:

- Ensure that references are handled in line with the Data Protection Policy and relevant legislation.

DSLs will:

- Decide when it is appropriate or necessary to disclose safeguarding concerns or allegations as part of a reference
- Discuss with their Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School the suitability of a candidate when a reference has disclosed safeguarding concerns or prior allegations

3. Requesting references

Once a candidate, including an internal candidate, has been shortlisted for a position, references will be requested and scrutinised by the selection panel. Any concerns will be resolved satisfactorily prior to confirming an appointment. References will always be requested directly from the referee, who must be a senior person with appropriate authority rather than a colleague.

If the candidate is a school leaver or has not been in work for over two years, a character reference will be requested.

When a candidate is applying for a teaching role (including the role of Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School), information about the details of any capability procedures in the previous two years that they may have been subject to, and the reasons for these, will be requested from their current or former employer.

Concerns raised following a candidate's reference(s) will be explored further with the referee where appropriate and discussed with the candidate at interview.

Before requesting references, those involved in the recruitment process will be clear that they will:

- Not accept open references, e.g. to whom it may concern
- Not rely on applicants to obtain their reference
- Ensure any references are from the candidate's current employer and have been completed by a senior person with appropriate authority
- Obtain verification of the individual's most recent relevant period of employment where the applicant is not currently employed
- For applicants who have never been employed, references will be sought from the last known educational establishment
- Secure a reference from the relevant employer from the last time the applicant worked with children where applicable
- Always verify any information with the person who provided the reference
- Ensure electronic references originate from a legitimate source
- Contact referees to clarify content where information is vague or insufficient
- Compare the information on the application form with that in the reference and take up any discrepancies with the candidate
- Establish the reason for the candidate leaving their current or most recent post
- Ensure any concerns are resolved satisfactorily before appointment is confirmed

4. Checking references

References will be checked upon receipt to ensure that all questions have been answered satisfactorily and that information is not contradictory or incomplete. The referee will be contacted to provide further clarification where appropriate, e.g. if some answers are vague or insufficient, or contradictory information has been provided. The reference will be compared for consistency with the information on the candidate's application form. Discrepancies between the reference and the application form will be discussed with the candidate at interview.

The selection panel will ensure that any past disciplinary action or allegations disclosed as part of a reference are considered carefully when assessing the candidate's suitability for the role. If this involves safeguarding or potential safeguarding concerns, the DSL will be consulted to help assess the candidate's suitability.

Before making a decision to not appoint a candidate based on an unsatisfactory reference, the selection panel will consider if HR advice is necessary. Once the decision is made, the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School will record this on the recruitment file as the reason for non-appointment.

All members of staff who provide a reference will be responsible themselves for checking the content to ensure that it only contains factual and verifiable statements. If there is any doubt about whether to include information, caution will be exercised, and it will be omitted. Alternatively, advice will be sought from a senior figure, e.g. the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School or the Chair of the relevant Local Governing Body.

5. Providing references

References will only be provided following a request in writing. Where a telephone reference is requested, we will ask for written confirmation of that request and will keep a record of the conversation.

The member of staff, Member, Trustee or Local Governor providing a reference will follow this policy's procedures and the prospective employer's requests as much as is reasonably possible, e.g. if a pro-forma is provided, they will complete the form. If the reference is not requested in a specific format, the member of staff, Member, Trustee or Local Governor will decide the most appropriate method, e.g. a pro-forma or a letter-formatted reference.

The Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School in consultation with the CEO and CFO, will decide in exceptional circumstances if a reference cannot be provided or if certain questions asked by the prospective employer cannot be answered, with HR advice sought when appropriate.

Staff members will make their Headteacher/Head of School aware when they have been asked to provide a personal reference, e.g. for a current or former colleague. Where a Member, Trustee or Local Governor receives a personal reference request they will notify the CEO and the Chair of the Trust Board. The staff member, Member, Trustee or Local Governor will make it clear within the reference that it is a personal one and is not written for or on behalf of TCAT or any TCAT school. The staff member, Member, Trustee or Local Governor will use their own paper or an email address unaffiliated with TCAT or any TCAT school and ensure that the reference is not linked to TCAT or any TCAT school.

Details of any capability procedures in the previous two years for a teacher (including Executive Headteacher, Headteacher or Head of School) or former teacher at the school, and the reasons for these, will be provided if requested.

If, as part of a settlement agreement, a TCAT school has agreed to provide a reference for a member of staff, the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School will ensure it is provided in line with the agreement and this policy. In circumstances where new evidence emerges that indicates information provided in the reference is incorrect, the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School, in

consultation with the CEO and CFO will decide if the reference is changed or withdrawn, with legal advice sought where necessary, and will notify the employee of any decision first.

6. Content of references

Basic information will always be provided when completing a reference, e.g. skills, knowledge, duties undertaken, experience working with children, and personal characteristics, in addition to any relevant or necessary information relating to safeguarding. Further relevant comments will be made as much as is reasonably possible in line with the employer's requests, provided they are verifiable and objective, e.g. through appraisals or attendance records.

References will contain only factual and verifiable information and will not include speculation, e.g. about a former employee's suitability for a job, or hearsay. The person providing the reference will ensure all comments have a factual basis and that an impression is not given which is misleadingly positive or negative. Performance issues or concerns which have not been discussed or raised with the employee beforehand will not be mentioned.

All members of staff providing references will be made aware that information provided verbally to the prospective employer is subject to the same duties as written information and will avoid making verbal statements. Where it is necessary or appropriate, verbal information will be provided only in line with this policy's procedures, e.g. all statements must be verifiable and objective.

7. Confidentiality

Personal data relating to references will be handled in line with TCATs Data Protection Policy. All references will be properly addressed and marked private and confidential.

Information relating to an individual's health and sensitive personal data, e.g. information relating to the individual's ethnicity, religion or trade union membership, will not be disclosed as part of a reference unless 'express consent' has been received from the individual for this purpose.

The person requesting a reference will be offered the opportunity to see it before it is sent, unless the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School, in consultation with the CEO and CFO decides this is not appropriate; however, TCAT is aware that ultimately, they cannot prevent the person receiving a copy in line with the Data Protection Act. If the person raises comments about the reference before it is sent, the member

of staff responsible for the reference will consider the comments and, if they decide to leave it unchanged, record the reason(s) behind their non-agreement.

8. Disciplinary action

The selection panel will ensure that any references requested by TCAT or a TCAT school include a section asking for any past disciplinary action or allegations to be disclosed. Any disclosures will be carefully considered when assessing the candidate's suitability for the role, in line with this policy.

Information from DBS checks will not be included in references provided by TCAT or our schools. Information regarding criminal offences from other sources will not be included, unless the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School, in consultation with the CEO and CFO deems it appropriate and HR advice has been sought.

When providing references, the disclosure of information about past disciplinary action or allegations not relating to safeguarding will be provided where it is deemed appropriate, e.g. it is relevant to the staff member or former staff member's suitability for the role. Information relating to disciplinary action will generally only be disclosed if penalties or sanctions remain in place for the employee.

Allegations which were proven to be false, unsubstantiated or malicious, e.g. relating to misconduct, will not be included in a reference – this includes if it is a history of repeated concerns or allegations which have been found to be false, unsubstantiated or malicious. The member of staff providing the reference will make no comments about their own personal views on the veracity of allegations.

If an allegation exists which has yet to be investigated or an investigation is incomplete, the Executive Headteacher/Headteacher/Head of School, in consultation with the CEO and CFO will seek HR advice, and legal advice where necessary, on what information, if any, should be provided to the prospective employer.

9. Safeguarding

For references provided to TCAT or our schools, the candidate's suitability will always be assessed with particular regard paid to their suitability to work with children. The relevant DSL will be consulted where appropriate.

The DSL will recognise TCAT and their school's duty to disclose safeguarding concerns overrides any other duties to an employee, and ensure their school complies with its safeguarding obligations. The DSL will ensure records are kept of all allegations against staff in line with the most up-to-date version of the DfE's 'Keeping children safe in education' guidance.

When asked to provide references, TCAT and our schools will ensure the information confirms whether we are satisfied with the person's suitability to work with children and provide the facts of any substantiated safeguarding concerns or allegations that meet the harm threshold.

For all safeguarding allegations, excluding those proven to be malicious, a clear and comprehensive summary of the allegation, details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, and a note of any action taken, and decisions reached, will be kept on the confidential personnel file of the accused member of staff. Accurate information based on these records will be given in response to future requests for a reference, where appropriate.

Safeguarding information will not be given in circumstances where the allegation was found to be false, unsubstantiated or malicious – this includes if it is a history of repeated concerns or allegations which have been found to be false, unsubstantiated or malicious. The member of staff providing the reference will make no comments about their own personal views on the veracity of allegations.

Monitoring and review

At any point this policy is updated or fully reviewed, it will be updated on the main TCAT website and will automatically update on all TCAT school websites simultaneously.

Where an annual check or other check results in minor changes, the Version History will be reviewed and updated with a change in the number following the decimal point, for example, v1.1 ⇒ v1.2. Where the policy is reviewed in full, then the number before the decimal point will change and reset, for example v1.4 ⇒ v2.0.

Any changes made by the CEO in collaboration with the Board Appointed Trustee will be passed to the Trust Board for ratification and subsequently be notified to Clerks to Local Governing Bodies, Executive Headteachers, Headteachers and Heads of School.

The next scheduled full review date for this policy is 9th July 2029.

Date approved by the Board Appointed Trustee: 10th July 2026.

To be ratified and recorded in the minutes at the first Trust Board Meeting after 10th July 2026.

Trust Glossary

AA	Admissions Authority	H&S	Health and Safety
AAI	Adrenaline Auto-Injector (Epi Pen)	HoS	Head of School
ACM	Asbestos Containing Materials	HSE	Health and Safety Executive
AHT	Assistant Headteacher	ICO	Information Commissioners Office
AIR	Attendance Intervention Reviews	IDSR	Inspection Data Summary Report
APDR	Assess Plan Do Review Cycle	IHP	Individual Healthcare Plan
APIs	Application Programming Interfaces	IRMS	Information and Records Management Society
ASC	Autistic Spectrum Condition	IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
ASP	Analyse School Performance	KCSIE	Keeping Children Safe in Education
ATH	Academy Trust Handbook	KS1/2/3/4	Key Stage 1/2/3/4
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Backgrounds	LAC	Looked After Child
BAT	Board Appointed Trustee	LADO	Local Authority Designated Officer
BCP	Business Continuity Plan	LGB	Local Governing Body
BFR	Budget Forecast Return	LLC	Low-Level Concerns
CEO	Chief Executive Officer	LSA	Learning Support Assistants
CFO	Chief Financial Officer	MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
CIF	Condition Improvement Fund	MAT	Multi-Academy Trust

CIN	Child in Need	MFA	Multi-Factor Authentication
CLA	Children Looked After	MFL	Modern Foreign Language
CMIE	Child Missing in Education	NCSC	National Cyber Security Centre
COO	Chief Operating Officer	NoV	Note of Visit
COSHH	Control of Substances Hazardous to Health	NPQ	National Professional Qualifications
CP	Child Protection	PA	Persistent Absence
CPD	Continuing Professional Development	PAN	Published Admission Number
CPOMS	Child Protection Online Management System	PECR	Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations
CSCS	Children's Social Care Services	PEP	Personal Education Plan
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation	PEEP	Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan
CTIRU	Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit	PEx	Permanent Exclusion
CWD	Children with Disabilities	PP	Pupil Premium
CYPMHS	Children and Young People's Mental Health Services	PPG	Pupil Premium Grant
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service	PSHE	Personal, Social and Health Education
DDSL	Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead	PSED	Public Sector Equality Duty
DfE	Department for Education	PTFA	Parent, Teacher and Friends Association
DHT	Deputy Headteacher	QA	Quality Assurance

DSE	Display Screen Equipment	RIDDOR	Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations
DSL	Designated Safeguarding Lead	RHE	Relationships and Health Education
DPO	Data Protection Officer	RPA	Risk Protection Arrangement
EAL	English as an Additional Language	RSHE	Relationships, Sex and Health Education
ECT	Early Career Teacher	SA	Severely Absent
EDIB	Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging	SALT	Speech and Language Therapist
EHA	Early Help Assessment	SARC	Sexual Assault Referral Centre
EHNA	Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment	SBM	School Business Manager
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan	SCC	Standard Contractual Clause
EHE	Elective Home Education	SCITT	School-Centred Initial Teacher Training
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant	SCR	Single Central Record
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency	SDP	School Development Plan
EVC	Educational Visit Coordinator	SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
EWOSSE	Education Welfare and Safeguarding Support Officer	SEF	Self-Evaluation Form
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage	SEMH	Social, Emotional, and Mental Health
FBV	Fundamental British Values	SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
FFT	Fischer Family Trust	SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

FGM	Female Genital Mutilation	SIP	School Improvement Partner
FGMPO	FGM Protection Order	SLA	Service Level Agreement
FOI	Freedom of Information	SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
FSM	Free School Meals	SLT	Senior Leadership Team
FTS	Find a Tender Service	SPOC	Single Point of Contact
GAG	General Annual Grant	STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation	TA	Teaching Assistant
GIAS	Get Information about Schools	TAC	Team Around the Child
HASH	Herefordshire Association of Secondary Heads	TCAT	Three Counties Academy Trust
HBA	Honour Based Abuse	TUPE	Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)
HR	Human Resources	VSH	Virtual School Headteacher