



UNITY SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

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3.0	October 2022	Head of Governance & Director of HR	Document control page, clarity on wording and check against DfE template. Under the different stages, references to 'should' changed to 'will'. Amended conduct wording, page 5. Added wording covering recordings.
4.0	October 2023	Head of Governance	Insertion of contents table, clarity on wording; changes to ensure timeframes are realistic; simplifying wording to help accessibility; rearranging paragraphs to help with document flow
05	January 2024	Head of Governance	Rearrangement of pages for ease of understanding process
06	April 2026	Director of HR	Compliance and structure update. S stage 2 investigation within 10-20 school days to reflect more consistent practice as per DfE guidance.

Authorisation (Responsible Owner)

Name	Role	Approval Date
Tim Coulson	Chief Executive	25.3.24

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Introduction

We want to resolve concerns and complaints as quickly, fairly and informally as possible. Most issues can be sorted out by listening carefully, talking things through and agreeing the best way forward.

If the issue cannot be resolved informally, this procedure explains how to make a formal complaint. It sets out the steps to follow, who will deal with the complaint, and the timescales you can expect.

Complaints Procedures

Principles

Unity Schools Partnership takes all complaints seriously. We will consider complaints fairly, investigate them properly and use what we learn to improve our services where needed.

We will keep the complainant informed, explain decisions clearly and aim to avoid confusion or mixed messages during the process.

The difference between a concern and a complaint

A **concern** is usually a worry or question about something that has happened and can often be resolved quickly through discussion.

A **complaint** is an expression of dissatisfaction about something that has happened, something that has not happened, or the way an issue has been handled.

It is in everyone's interest to resolve concerns and complaints as early as possible. Many issues can be dealt with informally, without using the formal stages of this procedure.

If you want to raise the matter formally, we will follow the stages set out in this procedure.

Scope of this Complaints Procedure

This procedure covers complaints about the services, facilities or actions of the Trust and its schools, except where the law requires a different procedure to be used.

Exceptions	Who to contact
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Admissions to schools	Concerns about admissions should be handled through a separate process – either through the appeals process or via the local authority.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation	Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our child protection and safeguarding policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance. 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).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Exclusion of children from school*	Schools' behaviour policies explain how parents may raise concerns about exclusions. <i>*complaints about the application of the behaviour policy can be made through the school's Complaints Procedure. Please refer to the school's behaviour policy.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Whistleblowing	The Trust has an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors.

	Volunteers who have concerns about one of our schools should complain through the school's Complaints Procedure.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff grievances 	Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the Trust's internal grievance procedures.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff conduct 	<p>Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the Trust'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.</p>

Who can make a complaint?

This procedure is not limited to parents or carers. Anyone can make a complaint about the services or facilities provided by Unity Schools Partnership or one of its schools, unless another statutory process applies.

How to raise a concern or make a complaint

You can raise a concern or complaint in person, by phone, by post, by email or through a representative acting for you with your consent. If you are making a formal complaint, it should normally be in writing.

If your complaint is about a member of school staff other than the Headteacher, send it to the Headteacher through the school office and mark it **Private and Confidential**.

If your complaint is about the Headteacher, send it to the Trust's Director of Education, with a copy to the Chair of Governors, through the school office and mark it **Private and Confidential**.

If your complaint is about the Chair of Governors, a governor or the whole governing body, send it to the Trust's Director of Education through the school office or central trust office and mark it **Private and Confidential**.

If your complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer or a Trustee, send it to the Chair of Trustees through the trust office and mark it **Private and Confidential**.

A complaint form is included in Appendix 1. Using the form can help you explain clearly what happened, what has already been done, and what outcome you are seeking. If you need help completing it, please contact the school office. You may also ask an organisation such as Citizens Advice to support you.

We will consider reasonable adjustments where needed so that complainants can access this procedure. This may include providing information in a different format, helping someone to make a complaint, or arranging meetings in an accessible location.

Time scales

A complaint should normally be raised within three months of the incident, or within three months of the last incident if there has been a series of related events. Complaints raised later may still be considered where there are exceptional circumstances. Unless stated otherwise, the timescales in this procedure apply during school term time.

Complaints received outside of term-time

If a complaint is received during a school holiday, it will be treated as received on the first

school day after the holiday period.

Resolving complaints

At every stage, the Trust will try to resolve the complaint. Where appropriate, this may include one or more of the following:

- an explanation.
- an acknowledgement that the issue could have been handled better.
- an assurance that steps will be taken to reduce the risk of the issue happening again.
- details of what has been done, or will be done, and when.
- a review of relevant school or trust policies.
- an apology.

Each complaint will be considered on its own facts and circumstances.

Withdrawal of a complaint

A complainant may withdraw their complaint at any time, but this should be confirmed in writing. The Trust may still keep a record of the complaint and any action taken so that similar issues can be reduced in future.

Anyone with a conflict of interest must not take part in handling the complaint. If there is any reasonable doubt about whether someone can act impartially, they should step aside.

Stage 1

Stage 1 is the informal stage. Most concerns should be raised and, where possible, resolved at this stage.

In the first instance, raise your concern with the class teacher, head of year, subject leader or Headteacher, depending on the issue. Individual governors should not normally be approached at this stage, as they may need to remain impartial if the complaint reaches a later stage.

Conclusion of Stage 1

You will normally receive a written response within 10 school days of the concern being received. If this is not possible, the school will explain why and tell you when you can expect a response.

If you are not satisfied after Stage 1, you may move to Stage 2 and make a formal complaint.

Stage 2

At Stage 2, a formal complaint should normally be sent to the Headteacher through the school office, unless the complaint is about the Headteacher. The complaint may be made in writing using the complaints form in Appendix 1.

The complaint will be recorded and acknowledged in writing within 2 school days.

Investigation

The Headteacher, or a senior leader appointed to act on their behalf, will investigate the complaint. They may contact the complainant to clarify the complaint, understand what remains unresolved and ask what outcome is being sought. A meeting may be arranged if that would help.

The Headteacher may delegate the investigation but remains responsible for the final decision.

During the investigation, the person handling the complaint may:

- interview people involved in the matter or complained about and allow them to be accompanied if appropriate.
- keep a written record of meetings, conversations and evidence considered as part of the

investigation.

Conclusion of stage 2

At the end of Stage 2, a formal written response will usually be sent within 10 to 20 school days of the complaint being received. If more time is needed, the complainant will be told why and given a revised response date.




The response will explain what was investigated, what decision was reached, the reasons for that decision and, where appropriate, what action will be taken.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, the response will explain how to ask for the complaint to be reviewed at Stage 3.

Complaints about the Headteacher or Governors at stage 2.

If the complaint is about the Headteacher, or a member of the governing body (including the Chair or Vice-Chair), either the Trust Director of Education, Head of Governance, or an independent adviser from outside the Trust, will be appointed by the Trust to complete all the actions at Stage 2.

If the complaint is:

-  jointly about the chair and vice chair
-  the entire governing body or
-  the majority of the governing body

Stage 2 will be heard by the Deputy CEO or Member of the Trust's central team.

Stage 3

If the complainant is not satisfied with the Stage 2 outcome, they may ask for a Stage 3 panel hearing. This is the final stage of the Trust's complaints procedure.

Requesting a Stage 3 panel

A request for Stage 3 must be made within 10 school days of receiving the Stage 2 response. It should be sent to the Head of Governance, or in their absence the Director of HR or Deputy CEO, through email, the trust office or the school office. The request will be acknowledged in writing within 2 school days.

The relevant trust officers and the trust secretary will then be notified so that the panel can be arranged.

Panel Administration

Note: Complaints about staff conduct are treated as complaints about the school. Any individual responsibility will not be handled under this Complaints Procedure. Complainants will be advised that any staff conduct complaints will be considered under (Human Resources) staff disciplinary procedures, if appropriate, but outcomes will not be shared with them.

The Trust works with Schools' Choice to organise and clerk Stage 3 hearings. They will aim to arrange the hearing within 20 school days of receiving the Stage 3 request. If this is not possible, the complainant will be told the expected date and kept updated.

If the complainant refuses three reasonable proposed dates without a good reason, the Trust and Schools' Choice may decide the hearing date and proceed on the basis of written submissions.

Up to 7 days before the hearing, both the complainant and the school may submit written information for the panel to consider. This should explain the complaint and the outcome sought. Appendix 1 should be used as the basis of the complainant's submission.

At least 5 school days before the hearing, Schools' Choice will:

- confirm the date, time and venue of the hearing, making sure the arrangements are accessible and, where possible, convenient.
- circulate written papers to all parties at least 5 school days before the hearing. Covert recordings will not normally be accepted as evidence.

Panel Hearings

A complainant may bring a relative or friend to the panel hearing for support.

Staff involved in the hearing may also be accompanied where appropriate, for example by a union representative.

Legal representatives are not normally expected to attend the panel hearing.

The panel will consider the complaint that has already been investigated. New complaints or unrelated evidence will not normally be considered at this stage and must be raised separately.

Panel hearings are private. Meetings or conversations should not normally be recorded unless this is needed as a reasonable adjustment. Any recording must be agreed in advance by all parties. Representatives of the media are not allowed to attend.

Panel Outcomes

The panel will consider the complaint and the evidence presented. It

may:

- 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 may:

- decide, or recommend, what action should be taken to resolve the complaint.
- recommend changes to school or trust systems and procedures to reduce the risk of the same issue happening again.

The Chair of the panel will send the complainant, the respondent and the CEO a written decision within 5 school days. The letter will explain the panel's findings, the reasons for them and any actions to be taken.

Where appropriate, the decision letter will also explain what action the school or Trust will take to resolve the complaint.




The findings and recommendations will be shared with the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about, and kept on record in line with the Trust's procedures.

The letter will explain how to contact the Department for Education if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the way the complaint has been handled.

A written record will be kept of all complaints and whether they were resolved informally or progressed to a panel hearing.

Complaints about Governors at stage 3.

If the complaint is:

-  jointly about the chair and vice chair
-  the entire governing body or
-  the majority of the governing body

Stage 3 will be heard by the CEO or nominee and two independent panel members.

Persistent, trivial, or serial complaints

There may be rare occasions when, despite a complaint being considered under all stages in this Complaints Policy, the complainant persists in making the same complaint to the school. There may also be rare occasions when a complainant raises unreasonable persistent complaints or raises complaints about matters which do not affect them. There may also be rare occasions when a complaint is made about a matter which is clearly so trivial that it would be a poor use of the school's resources to deal with it under the formal stages of the procedure. In these cases, the school reserves the right to regard the complaint as persistent or serial and to refuse to investigate further, if it appears reasonable and fair to do so (see appendix 2 for specific details). This procedure may also be used to manage unreasonable or persistent contact not directly associated with, or resulting from formal complaints.

Notification of persistent, trivial or serial complaints

Where it is decided that a complaint is persistent or serial and will not be investigated, the Trust will write to the complainant within 5 school days of the complaint being received to notify them of the decision. If the complainant is unhappy with the decision not to investigate a persistent or serial complaint, they may write to the Chair of Governors to ask for the decision to be reviewed. The Chair of Governors will review the decision not to investigate the complaint after considering all documentation relating to the complaint, together with the letter from the school to the complainant. The Chair of Governors will not investigate the complaint itself during the review. In exceptional circumstances, the Chair of Governors can delegate the authority for the review to the Vice-Chair of Governors. Following due consideration (including taking advice from the Director of Education or Trust Head of Governance), the Chair of Governors will confirm the outcome of their review to the complainant in writing within 10 school days after the receipt of the letter from the complainant seeking a review.

If the Chair of Governor's review indicates that the decision not to investigate the concern or complaint should be quashed, it will be referred to the appropriate staff member to be dealt with under the procedure in this Complaints Policy in the usual way. If the Chair of Governor's review indicates that the decision not to investigate the concern or complaint should be upheld, the complainant may refer the concern or complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency using the procedure identified under the fourth stage of the formal procedure.

Anonymous complaints

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated. However, the CEO, Headteacher or Chair of Governors may decide that an anonymous complaint should be considered under another appropriate policy, such as whistleblowing, if the circumstances justify this.

Complaints about the Central Team, CEO or Trustee

If a complaint is about a member of the central team, the CEO or a Trustee, it should be sent to the appropriate senior trust leader for investigation in line with this procedure.

The complaint will be acknowledged in writing within 5 school days and the complainant will be told who will investigate it and when they can expect a response.

Following the investigation, a written outcome will normally be sent within 10 school days. If this is not possible, the complainant will be told the reason for the delay and given a revised date.

If the complaint concerns the CEO or a Trustee, it will be investigated by an appropriate Trustee.

If the complaint concerns the Chair of Trustees, it will be referred to the Vice-Chair.

NB. Where the Chair of the Trust Board has investigated the complaint, they will write the letter of outcome to the complainant and provide a copy to the CEO.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may request a complaint panel in line with the Stage 3 process set out above.

Investigations by external agencies

If another body is investigating the same issue, such as the police, safeguarding teams or a tribunal, the Trust may need to pause this complaints procedure or extend the timescales. If that happens, the complainant will be told.

If legal action is started in relation to the complaint, the Trust may decide to suspend this procedure until those proceedings have ended.

Record Keeping

Records of complaints, responses and related documents will be kept confidential, except where disclosure is required by law or for an inspection or other proper purpose.

Next Steps

If a complainant believes the school or Trust did not follow this procedure properly, or acted unlawfully or unreasonably under education law, they may contact the Department for Education after completing Stage 3.

The Department for Education will not usually reinvestigate the complaint itself or overturn a decision. It will normally consider whether the school or Trust followed the correct process and complied with relevant education law and statutory requirements.

The complainant can refer their complaint to the DfE online at: <https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>

APPENDIX 1: Complaints Template

Unity Schools Partnership Complaints Form

Please complete and return to the staff member (or Headteacher) who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

A copy may also be shared with the Director of Education, Head of Governance and other agencies as appropriate.

School name:	
Your name:	
Pupil's name:	
Your relationship to the pupil:	
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?	

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Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.

Signature:
Date:

Official use

Date acknowledgement sent:

By who:

Complaint referred to:

Date:

Appendix 2: Managing serial and unreasonable complaints.

Unity Schools Partnership and our Trust schools are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with our schools. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

The Trust defines unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders the consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complaints contact with the school, Examples of unreasonable behaviour may be (but not limited to)

- ▲ refusal to articulate the complaint, specify the grounds of the complaint or the outcomes sought, despite offers of assistance
- ▲ refusal to co-operate with the complaints investigation process
- ▲ refusal to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the Complaints Procedure
- ▲ insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice
- ▲ introducing trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be considered and commented on
- ▲ raising large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales
- ▲ making unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced
- ▲ changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- ▲ repeatedly making the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed)
- ▲ refusal to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education
- ▲ seeking an unrealistic outcome
- ▲ making excessive demands on school 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
- ▲ using threats to intimidate
- ▲ using abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence
- ▲ knowingly providing falsified information
- ▲ publishing unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint, while the complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent (either by letter, phone, email or text), as it could delay the outcome being reached.

Whenever possible, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an '*unreasonable*' marking. They must also seek advice from the Director of Education, Deputy CEO or Chief Executive Officer.

If the behaviour continues, the Headteacher will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and ask them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school, causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from the school site.