

Brighter Futures Academy Trust

Complaints Policy



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This academy trust strives to provide an excellent education for all our children. The executive headteacher, trustees, governors and staff work diligently to build positive relationships with parents, carers and all stakeholders. However, if parents, carers or other stakeholders have a concern this policy sets out the procedure to be followed in such cases. (Any complaints emanating from staff should be dealt with under the academy's grievance procedure.)
- 1.2 We are committed to developing a robust, transparent, reflective approach to remedy any identified complaints or concerns and to ensure that the academy is an exemplar of the very highest of standards.
- 1.3 The majority of issues raised are concerns rather than complaints. We are committed to taking concerns seriously at the earliest stage without the need to necessarily invoke formal procedures. However, depending on the nature of the complaint, you may wish to follow (or may be asked to follow) the academy's formal complaints procedure.
- 1.4 All schools/academies are required to have a procedure for dealing with complaints relating to the school (or to any community facilities or services that the school may offer). For complaints (other than those relating to allegations of child protection, breach of trust or misconduct for which specific protocols are in place) from parents or carers of pupils, this procedure should comply with recommendations from the Department for Education and government legislation (The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010) in offering:
- an opportunity to resolve the complaint with the school on an informal basis, for example through discussion with the class teacher in the first instance
 - a formal complaint stage should the complainant be dissatisfied with the response at the informal stage
 - a formal appeal hearing with a panel set up by the school, comprising at least three people not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint, one of whom must be wholly independent of the management and running of the academy.
- 1.5 The academy trust will at all times be conscious of the requirement to make special provision where the complainant may have particular needs or requirements due to disability or to limited facility in use of the English language.
- 1.6 For the academy trust to be able to investigate a complaint, it must be brought to the attention of the academy trust within three months of the incident occurring (or coming to light should this be later). **If a complaint is not made within 3 months of the relevant incident occurring or coming to light it will not be investigated.**
- 1.7 Similarly, escalation (to the next stage) of a concern or complaint is dependent upon the submission of written notification from the complainant of his or her continuing dissatisfaction within ten working days of receiving a written (or verbal) response to either the informal (stage 1) or formal (stage 2) process. **If no such notification is received within this timescale the complaint shall be deemed to have lapsed and will not be investigated further.**
- 1.8 All complainants should be made aware that publicising their complaint through social media or any other means of communication will be likely to prejudice any investigation and may make it impossible to explore their complaint further.

2. Purpose and scope

- 2.1 The primary aim of this policy is to resolve the complaint as fairly and speedily, and as near to the point of origin, as possible. Formal complaints will be dealt with in a sensitive, impartial and confidential manner. Vexatious complaints will not be entertained by the academy trust (see section 9 below). Anonymous complaints will be considered but will not necessarily be investigated further.
- 2.2 Any complaints concerning the conduct of academy trust staff will be handled in accordance with the academy trust's internal disciplinary procedures.
- 2.3 There are four stages within the standard procedure of this policy:
- **Stage 1:** The informal stage in which a concern (or complaint) is raised with a staff member (ideally the individual against whom the complaint is directed although provision is made for an alternative (normally senior) member of staff should this be felt appropriate) and is hopefully resolved.
 - **Stage 2:** Should the complainant submit an indication (in writing) that he or she remains dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 1 then formal procedures are invoked and the complaint is reviewed by the head of school.
 - **Stage 3:** Should the complainant submit an indication (in writing) that he or she remains dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 2 then formal procedures are invoked and the complaint is reviewed by the executive head teacher.
 - **Stage 4:** Should the complainant submit an indication (in writing) that he or she remains dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 3 then the complaint is heard by the governing body complaints appeal panel.
- 2.4 A modified procedure (outlined in sections 6–8) is applicable in instances where the concern or complaint is directed specifically against the head of school or executive head teacher.

3. Raising a concern

Stage 1: The informal stage

- 3.1 Concerns can be raised with the academy at any time and should generate an immediate response, which will often resolve the concern. The academy trust requests that parents make their first contact with the pupil's teacher or, where this is not possible or is deemed inappropriate, either a nominated complaints co-ordinator or the head of school. (For complaints against the head of school please refer to the modified procedure in section 6 below.)
- 3.2 The recipient of the concern may be able to respond immediately. However, on some occasions the concern raised may require investigation, or discussion with others, in which case we will endeavour to provide an informal response (which may be either verbal or written) within two working days. The vast majority of concerns will be satisfactorily dealt with in this way.
- 3.3 However, if the complainant is not satisfied with the result at the completion of Stage 1, they can request from the academy trust an official complaint form (Appendix 1) which must be completed and returned to the head of school within ten working days of receiving an initial response (whether verbal or written). The official complaint form

should, ideally, present an opportunity to communicate their expectations as to how their complaint might best be satisfactorily resolved.

- 3.4 On receipt of the official complaint form, the complaint will be logged by the academy, including the date of receipt. The academy trust will then progress the complaint to the next (formal) stage.

4. Dealing with complaints – formal process

Stage 2: Complaint formally reviewed by the head of school

- 4.1 If the matter has not been resolved at Stage 1, as evidenced by receipt of further correspondence to this effect, the head of school will further review the complaint by considering all relevant written material and by discussion with the appropriate member(s) of staff and/or the complainant.
- 4.2 The aim will be to resolve the matter as quickly as possible and an appropriate response will normally be in writing, in which event it should be despatched within five working days of the written complaint having been received.
- 4.3 This time scale may be extended if, as may be the case, a review meeting with the complainant requires to be arranged at this point to explore the matter further. Any such meeting will normally take place within five working days of the written complaint having been received, and an appropriate response in writing should then be provided within a further five working days.
- 4.4 However, if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the result at the completion of Stage 2 they should write to the executive head teacher within ten working days of receipt of said correspondence to confirm that the complaint has not yet been resolved to their satisfaction.
- 4.5 Once again any such written communication will be logged by the academy trust, including the date of receipt. The academy trust will then progress the complaint to the next stage.

5. Dealing with complaints – formal process

Stage 3: Complaint formally reviewed by the executive head teacher

- 5.1 If the matter has not been resolved at Stage 2, as evidenced by receipt of further correspondence to this effect, the executive head teacher will further review the complaint by considering all relevant written material and by discussion with the appropriate member(s) of staff and/or the complainant.
- 5.2 The aim will be to resolve the matter as quickly as possible and an appropriate response will normally be in writing, in which event it should be despatched within five working days of the written complaint having been received.
- 5.3 This time scale may be extended if, as may be the case, a review meeting with the complainant requires to be arranged at this point to explore the matter further. Any such meeting will normally take place within five working days of the written complaint having been received, and an appropriate response in writing should then be provided within a further five working days.

- 5.4 However, if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the result at the completion of Stage 3 they should write to the chair of trustees within ten working days of receipt of said correspondence to confirm that the complaint has not yet been resolved to their satisfaction.
- 5.5 Once again any such written communication will be logged by the academy, including the date of receipt. The academy trust will then progress the complaint to the next stage.

6. Dealing with complaints – formal process

Stage 4: Complaint formally reviewed by the chair of the board of trustees

- 6.1 If the matter has not been resolved at Stage 3, as evidenced by receipt of further correspondence to this effect, the chair of the board of trustees will further review the complaint by considering all relevant written material and by discussion with the appropriate member(s) of staff and/or the complainant.
- 6.2 The aim will be to resolve the matter as quickly as possible and an appropriate response will normally be in writing, in which event it should be despatched within five working days of the written complaint having been received.
- 6.3 This time scale may be extended if, as may be the case, a review meeting with the complainant requires to be arranged at this point to explore the matter further. Any such meeting will normally take place within five working days of the written complaint having been received, and an appropriate response in writing should then be provided within a further five working days.
- 6.4 However, if the complainant remains dissatisfied with the result at the completion of Stage 4 they should write to the appeals committee chair within ten working days of receipt of said correspondence to confirm that the complaint has not yet been resolved to their satisfaction.
- 6.5 Once again any such written communication will be logged by the academy, including the date of receipt. The academy trust will then progress the complaint to the next stage (appeal).

7. Appeal mechanism

Stage 5: Complaint heard by the governing body Complaints Appeal Panel

- 7.1 If the matter has not been resolved at Stage 4, as evidenced by receipt of further correspondence to this effect, the chair of complaints committee will then convene a complaints appeal panel.
- 7.2 The complaints appeal panel will consist of three persons, two of whom may be trustees with no previous involvement in the case but one of whom must be wholly independent of the management and running of the academy. The latter may be a member of a local governing body of a trust school or a local business person of good standing.
- 7.3 The complaints appeal panel should meet within a maximum of ten working days of receipt of said correspondence. Both the complainant and the head of school (representing the academy) will be invited to attend the appeal hearing and all parties will be issued with relevant documentation (that will be referred to in the hearing) no less than five working days in advance of the hearing.

- 7.4 At this point the complainant may (if unwilling or unable to attend in person) elect to submit a written statement for consideration by the panel in their absence.
- 7.5 The invitation to attend the hearing should make clear that if the complainant fails to respond by confirming their intention (either to attend the hearing or to elect to have the complaint heard in their absence) the complaint will not be investigated further and the process will cease at this point.
- 7.6 The appeal hearing will be held within the academy (unless a suitable alternative venue is agreed by all parties) and will be minuted by the clerk to governors. The panel chair should conduct the hearing in accordance with the guidance set out in Appendix 3.
- 7.7 The aim of the complaints appeal panel hearing is to impartially resolve the complaint and to achieve reconciliation between the academy and the complainant. All parties will be notified in writing of the panel's decision within five working days of the date of the hearing.
- 7.8 This stage is the last school based stage of the complaints procedure and the decision of the complaints appeal panel is final.

8. Resolved complaints – storage and confidentiality

- 8.1 All documentation (correspondence, statements and records) relating to individual complaints should be stored in an appropriate manner and should be kept confidential (except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 requests access to them).

9. Complaints unresolved at conclusion of process

- 9.1 There will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant attempts to reopen the same issue following the complaints appeal panel hearing, the chair of the governing body should inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.
- 9.2 Any such correspondence may wish to point out that the complainant remains at liberty to consult the Department for Education website (www.education.gov.uk) to assess whether their complaint might be capable of being pursued by alternative means, should they so desire.

Appendix 1

School Complaint Form

Please complete and return to **Complaints Co-ordinator/Head of School/Executive Head Teacher/Chair of Directors** who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your name:

Pupil's name:

Your relationship to the pupil:

Address:

Postcode:

Day time telephone number:

Evening telephone number:

Please give details of your complaint:

**What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint?
(Who did you speak to and what was the response?)**

What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?

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

Signature:

Date:

Official use

Date acknowledgement sent:

By whom:

Complaint referred to:

Date:

Appendix 2

Guidance for Staff Investigating Complaints*

It is suggested that at each stage, the person investigating the complaint, makes sure that they:

- Establish **what** has happened so far, and **who** has been involved
- Take details of the complaint to clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved
- Meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or if further information is necessary)
- Clarify what the complainant feels would put things right
- Interview all persons identified by the complainant as being relevant to the matter (and any others deemed appropriate) allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- Conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
- Keep notes of the interview.

You should normally offer an appointment to discuss the issue as quickly as possible, as this will give both parties time to talk about it calmly and politely without being interrupted. Complaints need to be considered and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible, however where further investigations are necessary, new time limits can be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

At each stage in the procedure you will want to consider ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part*. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- An apology
- An explanation
- An admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- An assurance that the event complained of will not recur
- An explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again
- An undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint and, if found appropriate, to modify practice and protocols accordingly.

It is useful if complainants are encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that the school could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence[†].

An effective complaints procedure will identify areas of agreement between the parties. It is also of equal importance to clarify any misunderstandings that might have occurred as this can create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

*All staff investigating a complaint should have received (through INSET) appropriate instruction on how to conduct an enquiry.

[†]If a complaint is upheld which does lead to disciplinary action being taken against a member of staff, such detailed information cannot be divulged to the complainant, who should merely be informed that appropriate management action has been taken.

Appendix 3

Guidance for Governing Body Complaints Appeal Panel Hearing

The Complaints Appeal Panel will be made up of three persons, two of whom may be academy governors with no previous involvement in the case but one of whom must be wholly independent of the management and running of the academy. Normally the panel will be chaired by the chair of governors although another governor may be nominated to lead the process (and this may be necessary when the complaint is directed against the head of school or executive head teacher).

It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial; no individual may sit on the appeal panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it.

The aim of the hearing, which should be held in private, is to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised that the complainant may not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that his or her complaint has been taken seriously.

An effective panel will acknowledge that many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child. The parent or carer may, should they wish, be accompanied at the hearing. The panel chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial.

The Role of the Clerk

The clerk is the contact point for the complainant and is required to:

- set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing, ensuring that complainants are aware that they may be accompanied
- meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing
- record the proceedings
- notify all parties of the panel's decision

The Role of the Chair of the Panel

The chair of the panel has a key role, ensuring that:

- the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption
- the issues are addressed (and that in the event of a new issue arising during the course of the hearing, all parties are afforded the opportunity to consider and comment on it)
- key findings of fact are made
- parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease
- the hearing is conducted in a manner that allows each party to treat the other with respect and courtesy
- the panel is open minded and acting independently

- no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or has had any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure
- each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions
- written materials are seen by all parties

Before the meeting:

- The formal complaints letter should be passed to the vice-chair if the chair will be unable to receive the letter within 5 days
- Members of the panel should have no prior knowledge of the complaint and it is, therefore, unlikely that staff governors will be members of the panel
- The letter inviting the parent/carer to attend should indicate that they may be accompanied by a friend

At the meeting:

- The panel must be made up of three members and a clerk
- One member of the panel must be completely independent from the school
- Although this is a formal meeting, every effort should be made to make it as informal as possible for all concerned and parent / carer put at ease - the parent or carer may, should they wish, be accompanied at the hearing.
- The clerk should take notes of the meeting, listing who is present and make everyone aware of the confidential nature of the process
- The chair of the panel should open the meeting, introducing panel members and stating the purpose and the format of the meeting to clarify this to all in attendance. The chair should note that the meeting will be minuted and that its outcome will be final, indicating that a record of the complaint and its outcome will be forwarded to the complainant.
- Other persons present should introduce themselves stating their reason for being at the meeting
- The chair of the panel should request a verbal statement from the complainant in support of his or her written letter of complaint and why he or she feels the issue has not been resolved. The panel members can ask questions to make sure they understand the issue from the parent's point of view
- The chair of the panel should request a verbal statement from the headteacher (or his or her representative) in support of his or her 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 headteacher's point of view
- 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 his or her representative) if they are satisfied that they have provided all the information they wanted to present or if there is something they wish to add and if they feel they have had a fair hearing
- When the panel members understand all the issues, the chair will ask all parties to leave except the panel members and the clerk

After the meeting:

- The panel members will need to consider the information presented in order to come to a decision and suggest a way to resolve the issue taking into account the best interests of the child or children.
- The panel members will discuss the issues in private and the clerk will remain to record their decision. The panel can:
 - Dismiss the complaint in whole or in part
 - Uphold the complaint in whole or in part
 - Decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
 - Recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur
- When the panel have reached a decision the clerk will inform everyone concerned in writing as soon as possible, but in any event, within five working days of the panel meeting. The letter will also contain what the complainant should do if they wish to take the matter further, although it should be noted that if the correct procedure has been followed, the decision of the panel will be final.
- A record should be kept of the outcome of the hearing.
- Written records of complaints will be kept and reported on an annual basis to governors.