

POLICY:

Complaints

Review

Approving Body:	Board of Trustees	Effective Date:	April 2026
Review Cycle:	Annual	Next Review Due:	March 2027

This policy is statutory and applies to all the schools in the Trust.

Where this policy reflects statutory requirements, compliance is mandatory. Failure to comply may result in escalation in line with Trust governance and accountability arrangements.

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1) Statement of Intent

Equinox Learning Trust aims to resolve complaints at the earliest possible stage and, where possible, informally, and is dedicated to continuing to provide the highest quality of education possible in all of its academies throughout the procedure.

This policy has been created to handle complaints relating to any aspects of the provision of facilities or services against:

- Any member of staff
- Any academy within the Trust
- Any LGB of the Trust
- Individual Trustees or the Board of Trustees
- The Trust as a whole.

It is designed to ensure that the Trust's complaints procedure is straightforward, impartial, non-adversarial, allows a full and fair investigation, respects confidentiality, and delivers an effective response and appropriate redress.

This policy outlines the procedure that the complainant, the Trust and its academies will follow. Once a complaint has been made, it can be resolved or withdrawn at any stage.

The Headteacher and/or Chair of Governors of the relevant academy will delegate an appropriate person to be the first point of contact during the complaints procedure.

2) Legal Framework

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

- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Education Act 2002
- Equality Act 2010
- Part 7 of The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014
- Immigration Act 2016
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)
- Data Protection Act 2018
- HM Government (2016) 'Code of Practice on the English Language Requirement for Public Sector Workers'
- DfE 'Best Practice Guidance for Academies Complaints Procedures'
- DfE 'Academy Trust Handbook' 2025

3) Definitions

For the purpose of this policy, a "complaint" is defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction' towards the actions taken or a perceived lack of action. Complaints can be resolved formally or informally.

A "concern" is defined as 'an expression of worry or doubt' where reassurance is required. For the purpose of this policy, concerns will be classed and addressed as complaints.

Any complaint or concern will be taken seriously, whether raised formally or informally, and the appropriate procedures will be implemented.

The definition of "unreasonable complaints" is outlined in the 'Managing unreasonable complaints' section of this policy.

For the purpose of this policy, "duplicate complaints" are identical complaints received from a complainant's spouse, partner or child. These complaints will not be addressed again and the individual making the second complaint will be informed that the complaint has been dealt with on a local level. If the individual is dissatisfied with the result, they can appeal to the DfE. Any new details provided by a complainant's spouse, partner or child, however, will be investigated and managed in line with the complaints procedure.

For the purpose of this policy, "complaints campaigns" are where the Trust, or an academy within the Trust, receives large volumes of complaints that are all based on the same subject.

For the purposes of this policy, having "independence" from an academy is defined as having no association with the school, including through being a governor or employee. Independent panel members will meet the Trust's definition of independence.

4) Who Can Make a Complaint?

Any person, including a member of the public, can make a complaint about the provision of facilities or services that the Trust provides. Complaints may also be made by a third party on behalf of a complainant, contingent on appropriate consent having been obtained to do so.

The Trust will not normally investigate anonymous complaints.

Individuals making complaints about issues relating to separate statutory procedures will be referred as follows:

- **Admissions:** referred to the appeals process outlined in the Admissions Policy
- **Child Protection:** referred to safeguarding procedures outlined in the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- **Exclusion:** referred to the procedures outlined in the Behaviour Policy and Suspension and Exclusion Procedure
- **Whistleblowing:** referred to the internal whistleblowing procedures outlined in the Whistleblowing Policy
- **Staff Grievances:** referred to the internal grievance procedures outlined in the Grievance Policy
- **Staff Conduct:** referred to the internal disciplinary procedures
- **Third-party Suppliers using School Premises or Facilities:** referred to separate complaints procedures. The school will ensure any third-party supplier using school premises or facilities to offer community facilities or services has its own complaints procedures in place and such complaints do not fall within the scope of this policy.

All other complaints will be directed towards the procedures laid out in this policy.

Complainants may make complaints in person, in writing or by telephone. Complaints should be made using the appropriate channels of communication.

Complaints are expected to be made as soon as possible after an incident arises to amend the issue in an appropriate timescale. The Trust upholds a three-month time limit in which a complaint can be lodged regarding an incident. Complaints made outside this time limit will be considered in exceptional circumstances. In the case of any timescales changing, all parties involved will be informed of the changes in a timely manner. Complaints received outside of term time will be treated as being received on the first school day after the holiday period.

A complaint can progress to the next stage of the procedure even if it is not viewed as "justified". All complainants are given the opportunity to fully complete the complaints procedure.

Complaints about Trust Staff or Trustees

Complaints against staff of an academy in the Trust will:

- Be dealt with by the Headteacher of the academy
- Follow the complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against a Headteacher of an academy in the Trust will:

- Be dealt with by the Chair of the LGB of the academy
- Follow the complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against Local Governors or Trustees will:

- Be made in writing to the clerk, who will arrange for them to be heard
- Be dealt with by the Chair of the LGB or the Chair of Trustees, respectively
- Potentially involve escalation to the Trust Board to conduct an investigation which will be handled by the CEO
- Involve a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against the chair of Trustees, or an entire LGB will:

- Be made in writing to the clerk, who will determine the most appropriate course of action dependent on the nature of the complaint.

Complaints against the Board of Trustees will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO
- Follow the complaints procedure, including a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against the CEO will:

- Be dealt with by the Chair of Trustees, with a panel hearing where applicable.

Complaints against the Trust will:

- Be dealt with by the CEO
- Begin with stage two of the 'Complaints procedure' outlined in this policy, i.e. via a formal, written complaint.

5) The Difference Between a Concern & a Complaint

A concern may be defined as 'an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought'.

A complaint may be defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction, however, made, about actions taken or a lack of action'.

Communication can often be identified as a concern rather than a complaint when there is no intended resolution or action to be taken.

It is in everyone's interest that concerns and complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally without using the formal stages of the complaints policy. All schools in the Equinox Learning Trust take concerns seriously and will try to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

We will respect your views if you need help discussing a concern with a particular staff member. In these cases, the Headteacher of the school will refer you to another staff member. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, the Headteacher will refer you to another staff member. The staff member may be more senior but can be someone other than that. The ability to consider the concern objectively and impartially is more important.

We understand, however, that there are occasions when people would like to raise their concerns formally. In this case, all schools in the Equinox Learning Trust will attempt to resolve the issue internally through the stages outlined within this complaints policy.

6) Complaints Policy

The complaints policy for the Trust follows four stages and is available via the schools' websites.

Stage 1- Informal: Complaint heard by a member of staff

The school will respect any views expressed by the complainant and understand that they may have difficulty discussing the complaint with a particular staff member. Where the complaint concerns the Headteacher, the complaint will be heard by the Chair of the Local Governing Body, who will consult with the CEO.

If the staff member feels too compromised to deal with the complaint, they may consider referring the complainant to another staff member, who may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the complaint objectively and impartially is crucial.

Where the first approach is made to the CEO, a trustee or a governor, the next step would be to refer the complainant to the person in the school where the complaint originated from and advise them of this policy. The CEO, trustees or governors must not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the formal policy or are involved at these early informal stages in case they are needed to sit on a panel at a later stage.

Stage 1 will take no longer than five school days to complete.

We do not record these centrally because these are often a blend of concerns and complaints.

Stage 2 - Formal: Complaint heard by Headteacher

If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of Stage 1 the complainant should write to the Headteacher and request their complaint is considered further. The Headteacher will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within two school days.

At this point, the complainant may be dissatisfied with how the complaint was handled at Stage 1 and pursue their initial complaint. The Headteacher may delegate the task of collating the information to another staff member but not the decision or action to be taken.

The Headteacher will write to the complainant with the outcome of the investigation, and this will take at most ten school days to complete. Often the Headteacher will meet with the complainant to understand the complaint more if required, and to feedback where appropriate. The Headteacher will offer escalation to Stage 3 should the complainant remain dissatisfied, and the complainant will be given ten school days during which time their request can be escalated.

The Headteacher will keep a record of complaints heard under Stage 2 - *see section entitled record keeping and confidentiality for further details.*

Stage 3 - Formal: The Chair of the Local Governing Body hears the complaint.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response by the Headteacher (or the complaint is about the Headteacher), the complainant should write to the Chair of the Local Governing Body to request their complaint is considered further. The Chair of the Local Governing Body will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within two school days.

The Chair of Governors will consult with the CEO at this point to consider who best to hear this complaint and communicate with the complainant going forward.

The Chair of the Local Governing Body (or CEO) will write to the complainant with the outcome of the investigation, and this will take no longer than ten school days to complete. The Chair of Governors (or CEO) will offer escalation to Stage 4 should the complainant remain dissatisfied, and the complainant will be given ten school days during which time their request can be escalated.

The Clerk to Governors will keep a record of complaints heard under Stage 3 - *see section entitled record keeping and confidentiality for further details.*

Stage 4 - Formal: The Trustees' Complaints Appeal Committee convene to hear the complaint.

The complainant needs to write to the Clerk to the Trustees, giving details of the complaint and asking that it be put before the Appeal Committee. The Chair will consult with the CEO, and if the CEO has not been involved in the Stage 3 hearing, then it will be agreed at this point who will take the lead.

The Chair, or (if the Chair has been involved at any previous stage in the process) a nominated trustee, will convene an Appeal Committee. This Committee is the last school-based stage of the complaints process. The panel will consist of at least three people who have not been directly involved in the matter, including at least one member who is independent of the management and running of the academy and the trust, in line with DfE guidance (e.g., trustee of a neighbouring academy or local businessperson). The Committee may appoint its own Chair.

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 school systems or processes to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.

Guidance on the Appeals Committee and roles and responsibilities are detailed in the full Department for Education guidance.

The Clerk to Trustees will convene the appeal meeting and invite the complainant to the Appeal Committee within five school days of receipt of the letter from the complainant. The complainant may be accompanied at the Appeal Committee if they wish. The Appeal Committee will be held 15 school days after receipt of letter from the complainant.

The Chair of the Appeal Committee will write to the complainant issuing a letter confirming the Appeal Committee's decision including any findings and recommendations and advise of escalation routes to the Secretary of State for Education within five school days of the Appeal Committee. Where relevant a copy of the Committee's findings and recommendations will also be sent to the person being complained about. This Stage 4 will take no longer than 20 school days to complete.

The Clerk to the Trustees will keep a record of complaints heard under Stage 4, see section entitled record keeping and confidentiality for further details.

Where a complaint has been brought to the school and the policy has been followed properly, it is still possible that the complainant could be dissatisfied. It is appropriate that the Chair of Trustees, if a complainant in that situation tries to re-open the same issue by repeatedly making the same points or similar behaviours, can inform them that the policy has been completed, and the matter is now closed. Thereafter, the school can choose not to respond and mark the correspondence serial. The exception would be where a complainant, regardless of the stage of the complaint, contacts their MP. It is particularly clear that this is the right course of action where the school believes that the individual has an intention of causing disruption or inconvenience. For example, they have said as much in a letter, email or phone call, the communications are often or always abusive or aggressive and they include insulting or personal remarks, including threats about staff or to staff.

7) Complaints to the Department for Education (DfE)

Complaints about academies can be made to DfE, but this is only available once this complaints policy has been completed. Such complaints will be made via the [DfE's online school complaints form](#).

You can also [find more details about what the DfE will do here](#).

8) Anonymous Complaints

We will not usually investigate anonymous complaints. However, if appropriate, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors and Trustees will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

9) Timescales

Complainants must raise the complaint within three months of the incident or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. We will consider complaints made outside this time frame if exceptional circumstances apply.

10) Complaints Received Outside of Term Time

We will consider complaints made outside term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period. Complaints in the last two days of a term will be considered on return from the school holiday. The first day back will count as day one.

11) Scope of this Complaints Policy

This policy covers all complaints about any provision of community facilities or services by schools within the Trust, other than complaints that are dealt with under other statutory procedures, including those listed below.

Exceptions	Who to Contact
• Admissions to schools • Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs • School re-organisation proposals	Concerns about admissions, statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs, or school re-organisation proposals should be raised with West Berkshire Local Authority.
• 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 contact the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) with local responsibility for safeguarding or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) No: 01635 503090.
• Exclusion of children from school*	Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at: www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions . <i>* Complaints about the application of the behaviour policy can be made through the school's complaints policy, available on our school websites.</i>
• Whistleblowing	We have a Whistleblowing Policy available to all staff in schools. For advice or support, staff can contact office@equinoxlearningtrust.co.uk with 'confidential' in the address bar or access the policy independently within the school. Additional support is provided from the DfE: www.education.gov.uk/contactus . Volunteer staff with concerns about our school should complain through the school's complaints policy.
• Staff grievances	Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.
• Staff conduct	Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate. 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.

Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities	Providers should have their own complaints policy to deal with complaints about service. Please contact them directly.
National Curriculum - content	Please contact the Department for Education at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example, the police, local authority (LA) safeguarding teams or tribunals, this may impact our ability to adhere to the timescales within.

12) Resolving Complaints

The school wants to resolve the complaint at each stage in the procedure. If appropriate, we will acknowledge that the complaint is upheld in whole or in part. In addition, we may offer one or more of the following an:

- Explanation
- Admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- Assurance that we will try to ensure the event complained of will not reoccur
- Explanation of the steps that have been or will be taken to help ensure that it will not happen again and an indication of the timescales within which any changes will be made
- Undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint
- Apology.

13) Withdrawal of a Complaint

If a complainant wants to withdraw their complaint, they can do so verbally or in writing. The school will record this.

14) Complaints from Those Who Are Not Parents of Attending Pupils

The Trust will handle all complaints from those not parents or carers of pupils at its schools differently. In these cases, the Headteacher will deal with the complaints directly, i.e. Stage 2, but with no escalation.

15) Complaints Campaigns

Where a volume of complaints is received based on the same subject or from complainants unconnected with the school, this will be dealt with through a separate procedure which involves sending a standard response to all complainants. It is down to the discretion of the Headteacher, in consultation with the Trust CEO, to decide whether the volume of complaints constitutes a complaint campaign, and individual complaints will be escalated via the usual procedure.

The Trust is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. The Trust will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the Trust itself or any of its academies; however, the Trust does not expect staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

For the purposes of this policy, "unreasonable complaints" include:

- Vexatious complaints, which:
 - Are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, or repetitious
 - Insist upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason
 - Insist upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner
 - Are designed to cause disruption or annoyance
 - Demand for redress which lacks any serious purpose or value
- Serial or persistent complaints, which:
 - Are duplicated, sent by the same complainant once the initial complaint has been closed

- Are new complaints that are submitted additionally, as part of an existing open complaint, by the same complainant.

A complaint may also be regarded as unreasonable when 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 cooperate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved
- Refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaints procedure.
- Insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice
- Introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on, or 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 seeks 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 Trust's complaints procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed, including referral to the DfE.
- Seeks an unrealistic outcome
- Makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with.

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the complainant:

- Acts maliciously or aggressively
- Uses threats, intimidation or violence
- Uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language
- Knows the complaint to be false
- Uses falsified information
- Publishes unacceptable information in media such as social media websites and newspapers.

The above applies regardless of the method the complaint is made, e.g. face-to-face, by telephone, in writing or electronically.

Complainants should limit the number of communications with the Trust while a 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 member of staff, local governor or Trustee leading the response to a complaint will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking.

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

If the behaviour continues, the individual handling the complaint will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and asking them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the Trust or any of its academies causing a significant level of disruption, the Trust may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will usually be reviewed after six months.

A decision to stop responding will only be considered in circumstances where the following statements are true:

- Every reasonable step has been taken to address the complainant's concerns
- The complainant has been given a clear statement of the Trust's position and their options
- The complainant contacts the Trust or any of its academies repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time.

If the above criteria are met, in making a decision to stop responding, the Trust will also consider if the complainant is often abusive or aggressive in their communication, makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff, or if the Trust believes their intent is to disrupt or inconvenience the Trust or its academies.

The Trust will not stop responding to a complainant on the basis that they are difficult to deal with or they ask complex questions.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the concerns and actions taken will be put in writing immediately and the police informed. This may include banning an individual from the premises.

Where the Trust becomes the subject of a complaints campaign from complainants who are not connected with the Trust, a standard, single response will be published on [the Trust's website](#).

If the Trust receives a large number of complaints about the same subject from complainants who are connected to the Trust, e.g. parents, each complainant will receive an individual response.

If complainants remain dissatisfied with the Trust's response, they will be directed to the DfE.

16) Barring from the Premises

School premises are private property and therefore any individual may be barred from entering the premises.

If an individual's behaviour is cause for concern, the Headteacher of the relevant academy will ask the individual to leave the premises.

The Headteacher will notify the parties involved in writing, explaining that their implied licence for access to the premises has been temporarily revoked and why, subject to any representations that the individual may wish to make. The individual involved will be given the opportunity to formally express their views regarding the decision to bar them.

This decision to bar will be reviewed by the CEO, taking into account any discussions following the incident. If the decision is made to continue the bar, the individual will be contacted by the Headteacher in writing, informing them of how long the bar will be in place, and when the decision will be reviewed.

Anyone wishing to make a complaint regarding a barring order can do so in writing, including via email, to the Headteacher.

17) Standard of Fluency Complaints

As members of a public authority, all staff are subject to the fluency duty imposed by the Immigration Act 2016, which requires staff members to have an appropriate level of fluency in English in order to teach pupils.

The Trust is free to determine the level of spoken communication necessary in order for staff members to develop effective performance, but it will be matched to the demands of the role in question.

The Trust will be satisfied that an individual has the necessary level of fluency appropriate for the role they will be undertaking, whether this is an existing or potential new member of staff.

If a member of the school community feels that a staff member has insufficient proficiency in spoken English for the performance of their role, they are required to follow the 'Complaints procedure' outlined in this policy.

For the purpose of this policy, a "legitimate complaint" is one which is about the standard of spoken English of a member of staff; complaints regarding an individual's accent, dialect, manner or tone of communication are not considered legitimate complaints. All legitimate complaints regarding the fluency duty will be handled in line with the processes detailed in this policy.

In addition to the processes outlined in this policy, the Trust will assess the merits of a legitimate complaint against the necessary standard of spoken English fluency required for the role in question.

To assess the merits, the academy at which the staff member works will undertake an objective assessment against clear criteria set out in the role specification or, against the level of fluency descriptors relevant to the role in question.

If the complaint is upheld, the Trust will consider what action is necessary to meet the fluency duty. This may include:

- Specific training
- Specific re-training
- Assessment
- Redeployment
- Dismissal.

Appropriate support will be provided to staff to ensure that they are protected from vexatious complaints and are not subjected to unnecessary fluency testing.

Records of complaints regarding fluency will be kept in accordance with the processes outlined in the 'Recording a complaint' section of this policy.

18) Record Keeping & Confidentiality

A written record of all formal complaints made under Stages 2-4 is kept, and this includes whether the complaint was resolved at the formal stages or proceeded to an Appeal Committee and any actions taken by the school as a result of the complaint regardless of whether the complaint was upheld or not.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential unless the school must produce these as part of an inspection. Records are retained in accordance with the Trust's Retention Policy, a copy of which is available on request.