



Outcomes Focused, Child Centred

Complaints Procedure

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NORTHERN EDUCATION TRUST (NET)

Complaints Procedure

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1.0 Introduction

Northern Education Trust is committed to ensuring that all children and young people are provided with a first class educational experience and that each Academy works in a productive and positive partnership with all parents, carers and other members of the public.

However, if a parent/carer or member of the public feels that a situation has arisen that they are unhappy about then they have a right to make a complaint. Any and every complaint made will be taken seriously and dealt with swiftly and professionally. All parents/carers and members of the public will be made aware of this policy and the procedures to follow if they wish to make a complaint.

2.0 Principles

This policy applies to all employees of the Trust. The relevant academy will try to resolve problems informally wherever possible. An effective response and appropriate redress will be provided to all complaints as quickly as possible dependent upon the complexity of the issues raised.

This policy relates to complaints about the academy and typically applies to complaints made by parents and carers of children and young people. However, it also applies to other members of the public. It does not relate to matters which are governed by employment legislation or those where the principles of civil contract law would normally apply e.g. service/supply contracts entered into with an academy; or where separate statutory procedures apply, e.g. admissions.

3.0 Statutory obligations

- 3.1. The complaints procedure must consist of at least three stages, informal (usually a meeting with the complainant); formal (the complaint is put in writing) and a panel hearing;
- 3.2. Complainants must be aware that there is a complaints procedure. Copies of this policy are on the academy website and will also be available on request;
- 3.3. If the complaint progresses to a hearing with the Academy Council, the complainant must be allowed to attend and be accompanied if they wish. In addition, at least one member of the panel must be independent of the management and running of the academy.

4.0 Policy Implementation

The officer with responsibility for ensuring that this policy is implemented in NET academies is the Director of HR & Communications at NET. Complainants should be aware that Principals may refer complaints received to the Director of HR & Communications at NET because they consider the matter is one of such a nature that it should be investigated independently of the academy. Likewise, complaints may be retrieved and dealt with by NET for the same reason. Where a complaint is made direct to NET, it will be logged by the Director of HR & Communications and forwarded to the academy unless it is retrieved as stated above.

5.0 Dealing with complaints

At each stage, the investigating officer will ensure that they:

- 5.1. Clarify the nature of the complaint and unresolved issues;
- 5.2. Clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;

- 5.3. Interview, meet or contact those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied at meetings if they wish;
- 5.4. Keep appropriate notes of any telephone discussions, meetings or interview(s) held;

6.0 Resolving Complaints

The investigating officer will seek ways to resolve the complaint satisfactorily. It may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- 6.1. An acknowledgement that the complaint is valid in whole or in part and/or acknowledgement that the situation could have been handled differently or better (this is not the same as an admission of negligence);
- 6.2. An apology;
- 6.3. An explanation;
- 6.4. An admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- 6.5. An assurance and an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again;
- 6.6. An undertaking to recommend a review of Academy or Trust procedures in light of the complaint.

It would be useful if complainants were encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage.

7.0 Records

All complaints will be recorded by the academy, including informal complaints. The Principal is responsible for ensuring that staff record all complaints and their outcome.

- 7.1. Records relating to individual complaints are confidential, except where the Secretary of State or a statutory body conducting an inspection requests access to them.
- 7.2. The Academy Council will monitor the level and the subject matter of complaints and review the outcomes on a regular basis through the mechanism of performance and data reporting.

8.0 Dealing with Complaints – Initial Concerns (Informal Stage)

It is important to be clear about the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the number that develop into formal complaints.

This policy deals with complaints but the underlying principle is that concerns ought to be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally. In most cases the class teacher or the individual delivering the service in the case of extended Academy provision, will receive the first approach on an informal basis. Staff should meet with the complainant and attempt to resolve issues on the spot, including apologising where necessary. Should the complainant not be satisfied with the outcome at the informal stage they can escalate their complaint to Stage 1 of the formal procedure by putting their complaint in writing using **Appendix A**.

9.0 Dealing with Complaints about SEND Provision

Any concerns or complaints about SEND provision by parents or carers should be initially raised informally, whether by e-mail, letter or a telephone call with the academy's SENDCo. The SENDCo will investigate and report back within a week.

If the parents/carers continue to be dissatisfied, a complaint should be raised as per the formal procedure within this complaints procedure by completing the **Appendix 1**.

10.0 Dealing with Complaints – Formal Procedures

The formal procedures will need to be invoked when initial informal attempts to resolve the issue are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the matter further.

11.0 Framework of Principles

This Complaints Procedure:

- encourages resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible;
- is easily accessible and publicised;
- is simple to understand and use;
- is impartial;
- is non-adversarial;
- allows swift handling within agreed time-limits for action and keeping people informed of progress;
- ensures a full and fair investigation;
- respect people's desire for confidentiality;
- addresses all the points at issue and provide an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary;
- provides information to the Academy's senior management team so that services can be improved.
- aims to put right any matter which may have gone wrong;
- may result in a review of systems and procedures in the light of the relevant circumstances.

Please note:

- Complaints brought by staff should be investigated using the Grievance procedure and not this Complaints Policy;
- Only complaints received in writing (preferably using the Complaints form at **Appendix 1**) will be considered at the formal stage (unless under the Equalities Act 2010 there is a legitimate reason the complainant is unable to comply with this);
- Anonymous complaints will not normally be considered under this policy (the whistleblowing policy will be more appropriate);
- Complaints must be made within 3 months of the event. Complaints after this period will not be considered except in extenuating circumstances;
- Line Managers or other nominated managers will investigate the complaint.

12.0 Investigating Complaints

At each stage, the investigating officer will ensure that they:

- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved;
- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;

- meet with the complainant or contacts them (if unsure or further information is necessary);
- clarify what the complainant feels would put things right;
- interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish;
- conduct the interview with an open mind and is prepared to persist in the questioning;
- keep notes of the interview;
- record interviews using the template at **Appendix 3** and ensure they are signed and dated by the individual as soon as they have been typed up.

13.0 Serial and Persistent Complaints

This procedure aims to limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If the complainant tries to reopen the same issue, the Chair of the Academy Council or Chief Executive is able under this policy to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed. Please refer to the NET Policy for Unreasonable Complainants.

14.0 Time-Limits

Complaints need to be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible using time limits published in this policy. 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.

The Academy will publicise the complaints policy and procedure on the Academy website.

See Complaints Procedure Flow Chart at **Appendix 2**.

15.0 Formal Complaints Procedure Stage One: Complaint Heard by Staff Member

- 15.1. It is in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. The experience of the first contact between the complainant and the Academy can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, staff will periodically be made aware of the procedures so that they know what to do when they receive a complaint.
- 15.2. Parents should never feel or be made to feel that a complaint made in a reasonable and appropriate way will be taken amiss or will reflect adversely on the student or his/her opportunities at the Academy. The Academy will investigate and try to resolve every complaint in a positive manner and will treat every complaint as an opportunity to improve the service offered.
- 15.3. The Academy will try to respect the views of a complainant who indicates that he/she would have difficulty discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff. In these cases, the matter will be referred to a Vice Principal or to the Principal who may, if they feel it appropriate, refer the complainant to another staff member. Alternatively they may not feel this is necessary. Where the complaint concerns the Principal, the complainant can be referred to the Executive Principal. Where the complaint is about the Executive Principal, the complainant can be referred to another Executive Principal.
- 15.4. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the Vice Principal or Principal may consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior

- but does not have to be. The ability to consider the complaint objectively and impartially is crucial.
- 15.5. Where the first approach is made to a governor, the next step would be to refer the complainant to the appropriate line manager. Governors should not act unilaterally on an individual complaint outside the formal procedure or be involved at the early stages in case they are needed to sit on a panel at a later stage of the procedure.
 - 15.6. The investigating officer will ensure that a written acknowledgement is provided to the complainant within 5 working days of receiving a complaint. The acknowledgement will give a brief explanation of the Academy's complaints procedure and will give a target date for providing a response to the complaint which should normally be within 10 working days. If the target cannot be met a letter should be written within 10 working days explaining the reason for the delay and providing a revised target date. See Appendix 4 for example letters.
 - 15.7. The investigating officer will seek to meet or speak with all of the appropriate people in order to establish the facts relating to the complaint, if the information given on the complaints form necessitates this. This may include the complainant, staff and any other person.
 - 15.8. Once all of the facts have been established the investigating officer will then produce a written response to the complainant, or may wish to meet the complainant to discuss/resolve the matter directly.
 - 15.9. A written response should contain an outline of the complaint and a summary of the response to the complaint including the decision reached and the reasons for it. Where appropriate this should also include what response the Academy will take to resolve the complaint. This may be by way of a general description e.g. 'Action taken within the Disciplinary Procedure'.
 - 15.10. When the investigation has been concluded the complainant and the member of staff concerned will be informed in writing of the outcome. This may be to the effect that:
 - There is insufficient evidence to reach a conclusion, so the complaint cannot be upheld;
 - The concern was not substantiated by the evidence;
 - The concern was substantiated in part or in full. Some details may then be given of the action the Academy may be taking to review procedures etc. but details of the investigation or of any disciplinary procedures will not be released;
 - The matter has been fully investigated and that appropriate procedures are being followed which may be strictly confidential (e.g. where staff disciplinary procedures are being followed).
 - 15.11. This letter or report must be endorsed by the Principal. It should also inform the complainant that should he/she wish the complaint to progress to the second stage of this procedure then he/she should send a written request stating this to the Principal within 10 working days of receiving the response.
 - 15.12. If no further communication is received from the complainant within 10 working days it is deemed that the complaint has been resolved and should end.

16.0 Stage Two: Complaint Heard by Principal

- 16.1. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled at Stage One they may go to Stage Two and have the Principal hear the complaint. The Principal may delegate the task of collating the information to another staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken. If the complaint is about

the Principal or Executive Principal then at Stage Two the complaint will be heard by an Executive Principal.

- 16.2. The same timings and process as in Stage One will apply. If the complainant is not satisfied with the response at Stage Two, they can escalate their complaint to Stage Three.

17.0 Stage Three: Complaint Heard by Academy Council Complaints Appeal Panel

- 17.1. The complainant needs to write to the Executive Principal as directed by the Principal giving details of the complaint.
- 17.2. The Executive Principal (or nominated Officer) should write to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the written request for the complaint to be heard. This acknowledgement must be sent within 5 working days and should inform the complainant of the arrangements for hearing the complaint within 20 working days of receiving it. The letter should explain that the complainant has the right to submit any further documents relevant to the complaint. These must be received within 10 working days of the date of the hearing to allow adequate time for the documents to be circulated.
- 17.3. No person involved should have previous involvement in the complaint.
- 17.4. The Academy Council appeal hearing is the last Academy-based stage of the complaints process, and is not convened to merely rubber-stamp previous decisions.
- 17.5. Individual complaints would not be heard by the whole Governing Body at any stage, as this could compromise the impartiality of any hearing set up for disciplinary purposes against a member of staff following a serious complaint.
- 17.6. The Academy Council may nominate a number of governors with delegated powers to hear complaints at that stage (the Complaints Committee), and set out its terms of reference. These include:
- making recommendations on policy as a result of complaints
- 17.7. The Chair will typically chair the Complaints Panel, but in their absence the panel can be drawn from the nominated governors. In this case the panel may choose their own Chair. The panel must consist of two Governors and one member who is independent of the management and running of the academy.

18.0 The Remit of the Complaints Appeal Panel

- 18.1. The panel can:
- uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
 - decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
 - recommend changes to the Academy's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.
- 18.2. There are several points which any governor sitting on a complaints panel needs to remember:
- a. It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so. No Governor may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it.
 - b. The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the

Academy and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised the complainant might 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.

- c. 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 panel Chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible.
- 18.3. The Academy will write and inform the complainant and any witnesses, the panel etc. of the date and location of the meeting no later than 5 working days in advance. The notification to the complainant should also inform him/her of the right to be accompanied to the meeting by a friend/ interpreter. The letter should explain how the meeting will be conducted. The Principal has the right to bring representation if so desired.
 - 18.4. Intervention of parallel investigations relevant to the complaint by the Police or social services may cause variation to these time scales. Any such variation will be notified to the complainant.

19.0 Hearing the Complaint at the Meeting

The aim of the meeting will be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the Academy and the complainant.

In the interest of natural justice, the introduction of previously undisclosed evidence or witnesses would be a reason to adjourn the meeting so that the other side has time to consider and respond to the new evidence.

The recommended conduct of the meeting is as follows:

- a. The Chair of the panel will welcome the complainant, introduce the panel members and explain the procedure.
- b. The Chair of the panel will invite the complainant to explain the complaint.
- c. The Committee members may question the complainant about the complaint and the reasons why it has been made.
- d. The Principal will be invited by the Chair of the panel to question the complainant about the complaint and why it has been made.
- e. The Chair of the panel will invite the Principal to make a statement in response to the complaint. At the discretion of the Chair of the panel the Principal may invite members of staff directly involved in the complaint to supplement his/her response.
- f. The Committee members may question the Principal and/or members of staff about the response to the complaint.
- g. The Chair of the panel will allow the complainant to question the Principal and/or members of staff about the response to the complaint.
- h. Any party has the right to call witnesses, subject to the approval of the Chair of the Committee.
- i. The Committee, the Principal and the complainant have the right to question any such witness.
- j. The Principal will be invited by the Chair of the panel to make a final statement.
- k. The complainant will be invited by the Chair of the panel to make a final statement.
- l. The Chair of the panel will explain to the complainant and the Principal that the decision of the panel will now be considered and a written decision will be sent to

both parties within 15 working days. The Chair of the panel will then ask all parties to leave except for members of the Committee.

- m. The Committee will then consider the complaint and all the evidence presented and;
- n. Reach a decision on the complaint and the reasons for it.
- o. Decide upon the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint.
- p. The Governors sitting on the panel need to be aware of the complaints procedure before the meeting.

If the complainant remains unsatisfied, they may then take their complaint to the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) by using the on-line complaints form at https://form.education.gov.uk/en/AchieveForms/?form_uri=sandbox-publish://AF-Process-f1453496-7d8a-463f-9f33-1da2ac47ed76/AF-Stage-1e64d4cc-25fb-499a-a8d7-74e98203ac00/definition.json&redirectlink=%2Fen&cancelRedirectLink=%2Fen or by writing to them directly at Ministerial and Public Communications Division, Department for Education, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester M1 2WD.

20.0 Roles and Responsibilities

20.1. The Role of the Director of HR & Communications

The person in charge of coordinating the complaints procedure at the academy is the Principal. Overall responsibility is retained by NET through the Director of HR & Communications. The role of governors arises only in respect of appeals where the complainant remains dissatisfied with attempts to resolve the issue of complaint and as set out above.

The Director of HR & Communications is the contact point for the complainant at Stage 3 of the complaint 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;
- meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing;
- record the proceedings;
- notify all parties of the panel's decision.

The Director of HR & Communications may delegate elements of this role to relevant officers, but retains the responsibility of ensure that all of the above is completed in line with this policy.

20.2. 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;
- 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 an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy;
- the panel is open minded and acting independently;
- no member of the panel has any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure;
- each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions;
- written material is seen by all parties.

Checklist for a Panel Hearing

The panel needs to take the following points into account:

- The hearing is as informal as possible.
- Witnesses are only required to attend for the part of the hearing in which they give their evidence. Students may not appear as witnesses, but they may provide statements.
- After introductions, the complainant is invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses.
- The Principal may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken.
- The Principal is then invited to explain the Academy's actions and be followed by the Academy's witnesses.
- The complainant may question both the Principal and the witnesses after each has spoken.
- The panel may ask questions at any point.
- The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint.
- The Principal is then invited to sum up the Academy's actions and response to the complaint.
- Both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues.
- The Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale.

Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the Principal who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Academy name:
Your name:
Child's name:
Your relationship to the Child:
Address: Postcode: Daytime telephone number: Evening telephone number:
Please give details of your complaint:

What action, if any, have you already taken to 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 who:

Complaint referred to:

Date:

Complaints Procedure Flowchart

