



ASCENT ACADEMIES' TRUST

COMPLAINTS POLICY

(This policy includes the necessary arrangements for EYFS)

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INDEX	PAGE
Procedures for handling concerns and complaints	3
Stage one, informal complaint	5
Stage two, formal complaint	5
Stage three, complaint heard by an Appeals Panel	6
Appendix A, checklist	10
Appendix B, summary of the complaints process	11
Appendix C, complaint form	12
Appendix D, unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants	14
Appendix E Contact with other Organisations	17

COMPLAINTS POLICY

Procedure on the Handling of Concerns and Complaints

This policy applies to all concerns and complaints other than the following which have their own arrangements and policy:

- Admissions
- Statutory assessments of Special Education Needs (SEN)
- School re-organisation proposals
- Safeguarding, Child Protection issues
- Exclusions
- Whistleblowing
- Staff grievances and disciplinary procedures
- Complaints about services provided by other providers used by the Trust, please complain directly to the 3rd party provider.

This policy meets the standards set out in the Education (Independent Schools Standards (ENG) Regs. 2014, schedule 1 part 7

Any personal information recorded in regard to a complaint will be kept in accordance with the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation 2019 (Ref: the Information Commission Office)

Timescales:

We aim to resolve any complaints in a timely manner. Timescales for each stage of the Complaints Procedure are set out below in the relevant paragraphs. For the purposes of this policy, a "working day" is defined as a weekday during term time, when the academy is open. The definition of "working day" excludes weekends and Bank Holidays.

Policy Aim and Statement

Aim:

The aim of this policy is to ensure that a concern or complaint by a parent/carer or any other persons is managed sympathetically, efficiently and at the appropriate level and resolved as soon as possible. Doing so is good practice, it is fair to those concerned and it helps to promote parents' and students' confidence in our ability to safeguard and promote welfare. We will try to resolve every concern or complaint in a positive way with the aim of resolving the issue in a transparent manner. The Trust expects that most concerns can be resolved informally and guarantees to treat seriously and confidentially, all concerns whether raised informally or formally.

Statement:

We need to know as soon as possible if there is any cause for dissatisfaction. We recognise that a difficulty that is not resolved quickly and fairly can soon become a cause of resentment, which could be damaging to relationships and also to our academy culture. We intend that parents and students should never feel – or be made to feel – that a complaint will be taken amiss or will

adversely affect a student or his/her opportunities at the academy. The policy, however, distinguishes between a concern or difficulty which can be resolved informally and a formal complaint which will require further investigation.

Definition of a concern:

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

Definition of a complaint:

An expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or lack of action.

Social Media

In order for complaints to be resolved as quickly and fairly as possible, Ascent Academies' Trust requests that complainants do not discuss complaints publically via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Complaints will be dealt with confidentially for those involved, and we expect complainants to observe confidentiality also.

Timeframes

Ascent Academies Trust will endeavour to abide by timeframes stated under each stage but acknowledges that in some circumstances, this is not always possible due to the complexity of information needed to review a complaint or difficulties regarding individual's availability to deal with the complaint, for example. If it becomes apparent that it is not possible to complete any stage of the complaints procedure within a given timeframe, the individual responsible for handling the complaint will contact the complainant as soon as possible and come to an agreed timeframe that works for all parties involved.

Ascent Academies Trust reserves the right not to investigate complaints that have been made three months after the subject of the complaint took place, except in exceptional circumstances. What is meant by exceptional circumstances is where new evidence has come to light, where the complaint is of an especially serious matter or where there is reasonable justification for why the complainant has been unable to raise the complaint before this time. The Head will review the situation and decide whether or not to enact the complaints procedure, informing the CEO of the decision.

Stage 1: Informal Complaints

- 1.1 **Most concerns**, where a parent/carer or other persons seeks intervention, reconsideration or some other action to be taken, can be resolved informally. Examples might include dissatisfaction about some aspect of teaching, disciplinary matters or issues outside the classroom. Parents/carers should raise the concern initially with the Class Teacher or the Headteacher of the Academy concerned as appropriate. The academy will normally meet with the complainant and ensure that informal complaints are resolved within 10 working days of being raised.
- 1.2 **Unresolved concerns**: A concern which has not been resolved by informal means within ten working days from the receipt of the complaint can be notified as a formal complaint in accordance with Stage 2 below.
- 1.3 **Record of concerns**: In the case of concerns raised under Stage 1 of this procedure, the only record of the concern and its resolution will be file notes by the person dealing with the complaint and/or file correspondence between the person raising the concern and the respondent. The file will normally contain any evidence that has been considered and the outcomes.

Stage 2: Formal Complaints

- 2.1 If at any formal stage of the complaint it is determined that staff disciplinary or capability proceedings are necessary in order to resolve the issue, the details of this action will remain confidential to the head teacher and/or the individual's line manager. The complainant is entitled to be informed that action is being taken and the eventual outcome of any such action, but they are not entitled to participate in the proceedings or receive any detail about them.
- 2.2 Notification: Complaints should be made as soon as possible after the incident arises/ or within 3 months of the incident; unless exceptional circumstances can be provided.

An unresolved concern under Stage 1, or a complaint which needs investigation, or a more serious dissatisfaction with some aspect of the Academy's policies, procedures, management or administration should be set out in writing with full details and sent with all relevant documents and full contact details for the attention of the Headteacher/ Executive Headteacher of the Academy concerned or the Chief Executive, as appropriate (complaints regarding the Headteacher should go to the Chief Executive). Should a formal written complaint be received by another member of the academy's staff, this should be immediately passed to the Headteacher of the Academy concerned, the appropriate Senior Leadership Team or Chief Executive.

In the instance of complaints made against any Trustees, details should be sent to the Clerk of the Board of Trustees.

In the event that the complainant has learning difficulties or a disability, other

communication preferences will be considered.

2.3 Acknowledgement:

The complaint will be acknowledged in writing normally within 3 working days of receipt during term time and as soon as practicable during the holidays. The acknowledgement will indicate the action that is being taken and the likely timescale for resolution.

2.4 Investigation and resolution:

The Head of the Academy concerned may deal with the matter personally or delegate a senior member of staff to act as “investigating officer.” The “investigating officer” may request additional information from the complainant and will fully investigate the issue. In most cases the Head of the Academy concerned or investigating officer will meet or speak with the parent/carer to discuss the matter.

2.5 Outcome:

The aim is to inform any complainant of the outcome of an investigation and the resolution to the complaint within 15 working days from the receipt of the complaint. Please note that any complaint received during a School holiday or within 15 working days of the end of term or half term may take longer to resolve.

2.6 Record of complaints:

Written records will be kept of any meetings, interviews and evidence held in relation to the complaint.

2.7 Unresolved Complaints:

Where the complainant is not satisfied with the academy’s response to their complaint they may have their complaint considered by an independent Complaints Panel.

Stage 3 – Complaint Heard by a Complaints Appeals Panel

3.1 Request:

If a complainant wishes to appeal a decision made at stage 2 of the complaints process, or they are not happy with the action taken at stage 2, the complainant is able to appeal this decision.

They must write to the Clerk of the Board of Trustees as soon as possible after receiving notice of the decision at stage 2, briefly outlining the content of the complaint and requesting that a complaints appeal panel is convened.

3.2 Acknowledgement:

The Clerk will acknowledge, in writing, receipt of the appeal within (three) 3 working days and inform the complainant of the steps involved in the process. The Clerk will be the contact point for the complainant.

3.3 Panel Hearing:

The Clerk will aim to convene an Appeal Panel hearing as soon as possible, normally no later than 20 working days after receipt of the Stage 3 request.

3.4 Panel Membership:

The Panel will consist of two Trustees on the Board of Trustees who have not previously been involved in the complaint, and one person independent of the management and running of the academy (the process used for selecting the independent person will conform to relevant guidance). In deciding the make-up of the Panel, Trustees need to try and ensure that it is a cross-section of the categories of Trustee and sensitive to the issues of race, gender and religious affiliation. The Panel will select its own Chair.

3.5 The Remit of the Complaints Appeal Panel:

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 academy's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur

The aim of the hearing, which will be held in private, will always be to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the academy and the complainant. The panel chair will ensure that the proceedings are as informal as possible.

3.6 Attendance:

The following are entitled to attend a hearing, submit written evidence and address the Panel, the complainant and a companion if they wish

- the Head teacher (SLT) who dealt with the complaint at stage 2 and/or one representative
- any other person who the Complaints Panel considers to have a reasonable and just interest in the appeal and whose contribution would assist the Panel in their decision making

3.7 Evidence:

All parties will be given the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Panel in support of their position including;

- documents
- chronology and key dates
- written statements setting out further detail

The evidence will be considered by the Panel along with the initial submission.

All written evidence must be received by the Clerk no later than (five) 5 working days in advance of the Panel Hearing. The Clerk will distribute the evidence to all parties no later than (three) 3 working days in advance of the Panel Hearing.

3.8 Roles and Responsibilities

The Role of the Clerk:

All appeal panels considering complaints must be clerked. The clerk would be the contact point for the complainant and be 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 decisions

The Role of the Chief Executive or Nominated Trustee:

- check that the correct procedure has been followed

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 or 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 a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or 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. If a new issue arises it would be useful to give all parties the opportunity to consider and comment on it

3.9 Decision:

The Panel will reach a decision, and make any recommendations within five (5) working days of the hearing. The decision reached is final.

3.10 Notification of the Panel's Decision:

The Panel's findings will be sent, in writing, by the Clerk, to the parents/carers, the Trustees and the Head and where relevant, to the person complained about. The letter will state the reasons for the decision reached and any recommendations made by the Panel.

3.11 Appealing the panel's decision:

If a complaint has completed the local procedures and the complainant remains dissatisfied, they have the right to refer their complaint to the EFA and the Department of Education (<https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>) who will consider complaints about academies that fall into any of the following three areas:

1. where there is undue delay or the academy did not comply with its own complaints procedure when considering a complaint
2. where the academy is in breach of its funding agreement with the Secretary of State
3. where an academy has failed to comply with any other legal obligation

3.12 Record Keeping:

The Academy concerned will keep a record of all appeals, decisions and recommendations of the Complaints Appeal Panel.

3.13. Serial and Persistent Complainants:

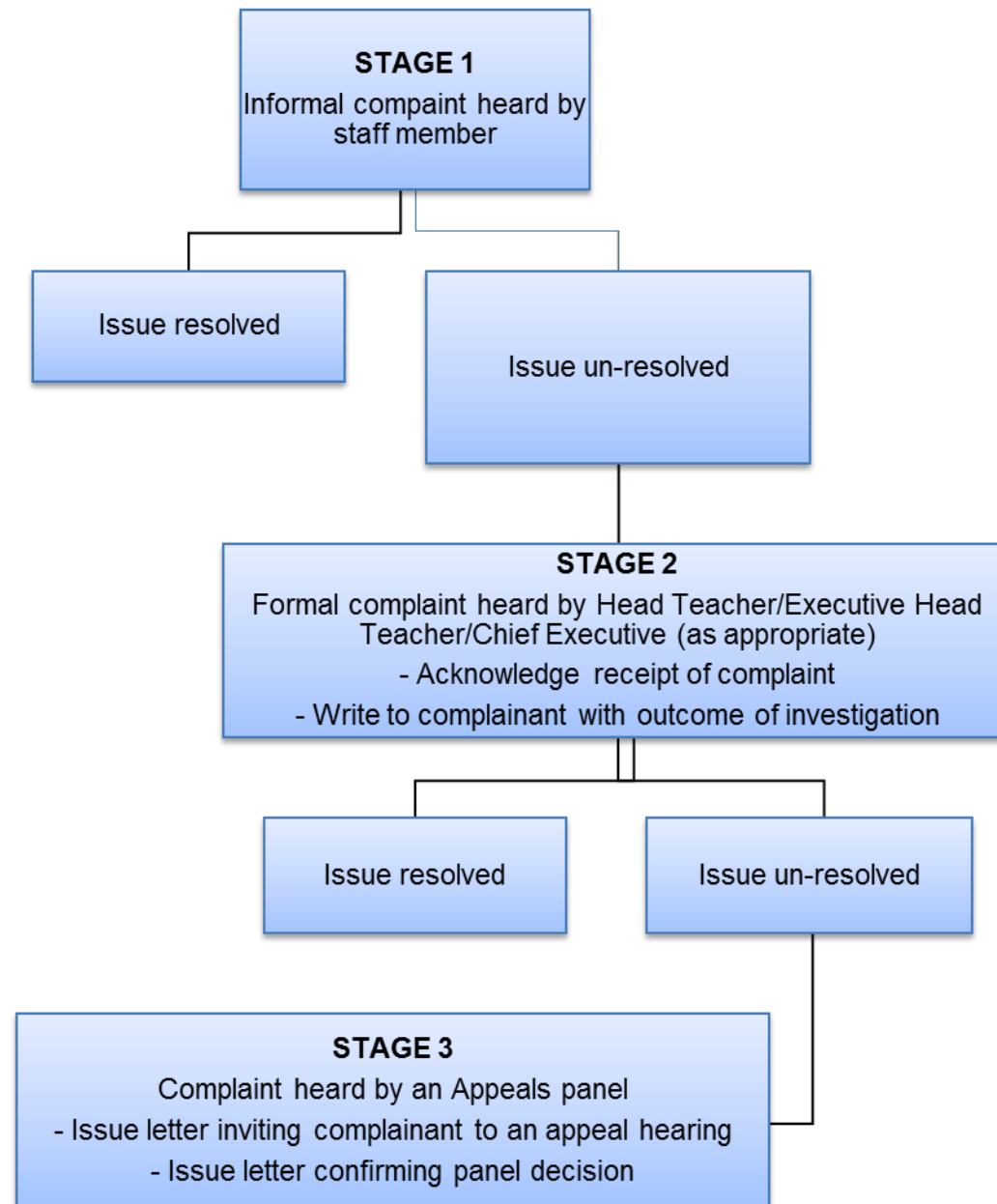
If properly followed, a good complaints procedure will limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite all stages of the procedures having been followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. Please see Appendix D for further details of how such complaints will be dealt with and examples of behaviour, which will not be tolerated.

Appendix A: Checklist

Checklist for a formal complaint:

- 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
- After introductions, the complainant is invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses
- The Head of Academy may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken
- The Head of Academy is then invited to explain the academy's actions and be followed by the academy's witnesses
- The complainant may question both the Head of Academy 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 Head of Academy 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 the panel within a set time-scale

Appendix B: Summary of dealing with complaints



**Appendix C: Complaint
Form ACADEMY -
COMPLAINT FORM**

Please complete and return to the Clerk to Board of Trustees (complaints co-ordinator) who will acknowledge receipt and explain the complaints process.

Your Name

Pupil's name

Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant)

Address

.....

Telephone number (day)

Telephone number (evening)

Please give brief details of your complaint

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

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

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.....

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

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.....

Signature

(Complainant)

Date

Appendix D: Policy on unreasonable and persistent complainants

The Board of Trustees recognises that it is the last resort for complainants. It is also accountable for the proper use of public money and must ensure that money is spent wisely and achieves value for complainants and the wider public.

The Board of Trustees is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and to providing a high quality service to those who make them. As part of this service it does not normally limit the contact complainants have with the academy.

However, there are a small number of complainants who, because of their frequent contact with the academy, hinder consideration of their or other people's complaints. Such complainants are referred to as 'unreasonably persistent complainants' and, exceptionally, the Head of Academy /Chief Executive will take action to limit their contact with academy.

When the Academy has taken every step to address the complainant's needs and given a clear statement of the Academy's position and their options, should the complainant repeatedly contact the Academy substantially making the same points each time, then the Academy may choose not to respond further and notifying the complainant of this action.

Actions and behaviour of unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants

These are some of the actions and behaviours of unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants which are often problematic. It is by no means an exhaustive list and factors may vary, but they are examples that may come to our attention.

- refusing to articulate or specify the grounds of a complaint, despite offers of assistance with this from the academy's staff
- refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved
- refusing to accept that issues are not within the remit of a complaints procedure despite having been provided with information about the procedure's scope
- insisting on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice
- making what appear to be groundless complaints about the staff dealing with the complaints, and seeking to have them replaced changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds and/or denying statements he or she made at an earlier stage
- introducing new information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or raising large numbers of detailed questions which are particularly time consuming and costly to respond to and insisting they are all fully answered
- electronically recording meetings and conversations without the prior knowledge and consent of the other persons involved

- adopting a 'scattergun' approach: pursuing a complaint or complaints with the academy and, at the same time, with a Member of Parliament/a councillor/the authority's independent auditor/the Local Authority/local police/solicitors/the Ombudsman/OFSTED
- making unnecessarily excessive demands on the time and resources of staff whilst a complaint is being looked into, by for example, excessive telephoning or sending emails to numerous academy staff, writing lengthy complex letters every few days and expecting immediate responses
- submitting repeat complaints, after complaints processes have been completed, essentially about the same issues, with additions/variations which the complainant insists make these 'new' complaints which should be put through the full complaints procedure
- refusing to accept the findings of the investigation, where the complaints procedure has been implemented and completed including referral to the Secretary of State
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on Academy time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person. Writing, via e mail, and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with
- the complainant makes a complaint either face –to-face, by telephone, in writing or electronically:
 - maliciously
 - aggressively
 - using threats, intimidation or violence
 - using abusive, offensive or discriminatory language
 - knowing it to be false or using falsified information
 - publishing unacceptable information in a variety of media e.g. social media, websites, newspapers
 - makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff
- combinations of some or all of these

The decision to restrict access to the academy will be taken by the Head of Academy / Chief Executive and will normally follow a prior warning to the complainant. Any restrictions imposed will be appropriate and proportionate. The options we are most likely to consider are:

- requesting contact in a particular form (for example, letters only)
- requiring contact to take place with a named member of staff
- restricting telephone calls to specified days and times; and/or
- asking the complainant to enter into an agreement about their future contacts with us

In all cases where we decide to treat someone as an unreasonable or persistent complainant, we will write to tell the complainant why we believe his or her behaviour falls into that category, what action we are taking and the duration of that action. We will also tell them how they can challenge the decision if they disagree with it. If we decide to

carry on treating someone as an unreasonable or persistent complainant and we are still investigating their complaint six months later, we will carry out a review and decide if restrictions will continue.

Where a complainant whose case is closed, persists in communicating with us about it, we may decide to terminate contact with that complainant. In such cases, we will read all correspondence from that complainant, but unless there is fresh evidence which affects our decision on the complaint, we will simply acknowledge it or place it on the file with no acknowledgement.

New complaints from people who have come under the unreasonable or persistent complainant's policy will be treated on their merits.

Appendix E Procedure for complaints about our Academies.

Should the above policy and procedures not address or resolve the content of your complaint, the following organisations may be able to assist you further:

In the instance complaints relating to:

- The quality of education or leadership, or concerns affecting the Academy as a whole, please contact Ofsted
<https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>
- Discrimination, please contact Equality Advisory Support Service
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en>
- Data protection, please contact Information Commissioner's Office
<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/handling/>
- Exam malpractice or maladministration, please contact the Office of Qualifications and Exams Regulations (Ofqual) and relevant awarding body
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about/complaints-procedure>
- Criminal behaviour, please contact the Police
- Employment matters, please refer to the Academies other published policies or the Employment Tribunal Service
<https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunals>
- Child protection, please refer to the Trust's safeguarding policies or refer to the Local Authority designated officer (LADO) and/ or the Director of Children's Services
- A young person's EHCP needs, please refer as an example to the First Tier Tribunal (Special Education Needs and Disability) service formerly the Special Education Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST)