



COMPLAINT POLICY AND PROCEDURE

Version 6.0

Statutory

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Complaint Policy and Procedure

1.0 Introduction

Esteem Multi-Academy Trust (the “Trust”) are committed to providing the highest standards of education and care for our pupils and their families. We recognise, however, that concerns or complaints may occasionally arise.

We view complaints positively as an opportunity to:

- Resolve concerns fairly and promptly
- Improve services and relationships
- Learn lessons where appropriate and
- Strengthen trust between families, schools and the Trust.

We encourage concerns to be raised as soon as possible and expect that most will be resolved informally.

The Trust is committed to handling concerns and complaints in a way that:

- Is accessible and easy to understand
- Supports constructive dialogue and resolutions
- Takes account of the needs of children and families
- Protects the confidentiality of all parties
- Complies with equality, safeguarding and data protection legislation.

Where concerns cannot be resolved informally, this policy provides a clear formal procedure.

The use of “Trust” relates to either a school, academy or central trust function.

2.0 Scope

This policy and procedure applies to:

- Parents and carers of current pupils attending a Trust school/academy
- Members of the public affected by Trust services
- Former parents where the complaint arose while the pupil attended a school/academy in the Trust
- Individuals acting with the written consent of the complainant

This procedure does not apply to pupils. Where pupils wish to raise concerns, they should use the academy's pupil voice, safeguarding or behaviour procedures.

Where an anonymous complaint is received, the Trust will use its reasonable endeavours to consider the complaint as best as it reasonably can. However the Trust will not be required to consider the complaint pursuant to any specific process and will handle anonymous complaints on a case by case basis

2.1 Additional Information for Parents

Before using this policy and procedure we encourage parents to read the “Parent Guide to School Complaints” published by Parentkind, the Department for Education, Ofsted and the Education Together Board.

It provides helpful guidance on how to provide feedback, resolve concerns and raise complaints. A copy of the guide is available at <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/assets/parents-resources/Parent-Guide-to-School-Complaints.pdf>.

3.0 Our Principles

We will:

- Treat complainants with courtesy and respect.
- Deal with concerns fairly and impartially.
- Provide reasonable adjustments where required.
- Keep complaints confidential wherever possible.
- Respond within published timescales.
- Seek resolution at the lowest appropriate level.
- Review complaint outcomes and identify opportunities to improve policies, procedures, communication and practice.

We ask complainants to:

- Be respectful to staff and governors.
- Raise concerns honestly and promptly.
- Keep complaints concise and focused on the issues.
- Avoid publishing complaint details on social media whilst investigations are ongoing.

The EMAT Communication Charter (on the Trust website) provides further information on our commitment as a Trust and our expectations of parents and carers.

4.0 What is a Complaint?

A complaint is:

"An expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about the Trust, an academy, a member of staff, governor, trustee or service provided by the Trust."

Before making a complaint, we encourage individuals to raise:

- **Feedback** – information or suggestions to improve services where no response is required,
- **Concerns** – issues where reassurance or clarification may resolve matters
- **Complaint** – where dissatisfaction remains and a formal response is sought.

5.0 Timescales

Complaints should normally be raised:

- Within 3 months of the incident
Or
- Within 3 months of the last incident in a series of related events

Complaints raised outside these timescales may only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

School days mean days when pupils are in attendance and exclude weekends, holidays and INSET days. Where correspondence is received during school holidays, it will be deemed received on the first school day after the holiday period.

The Trust will always seek to meet the timescales contained within this policy. However, where investigations are complex or circumstances outside the Trust's control arise, revised timescales may be issued. The complainant will be informed of any delay and provided with an explanation.

5.1 Multiple Complaints and Timescales

We have a duty to use our staff time and resources proportionately and in the best interests of all pupils, and we will take this into account when deciding how to manage multiple concerns or complaints raised at the same time.

Where you raise more than one concern or complaint at the same time or raise a new concern or complaint while an existing matter is still being considered under this procedure, we may combine these and deal with them together.

Where you raise a new concern or complaint while a complaints committee hearing or review in respect of an earlier complaint is pending, we may at our discretion pause the complaints committee hearing or review until the new matter has been investigated and responded to under this procedure.

6.0 Summary Overview of the Stages Within the Trust Complaint Process

The process will follow the following stages:

1. Stage 1 – Informal Resolution
2. Stage 2 – Formal Complaint
3. Stage 3 – Complaints Review Panel

Details information relating to each stage of the complaint process is provided in sections 7 to 9 of this policy.

7.0 Stage 1 – Informal Resolution

7.1 Commitment to an Early Resolution

The Trust believes that the majority of concerns can be resolved quickly and effectively through informal discussion. We therefore encourage all parents, carers and other stakeholders to raise concerns as soon as possible with the member of staff best placed to address the issue. Early resolution is generally in the best interests of the pupil and often prevents misunderstandings or concerns from escalating unnecessarily.

The informal stage is an important part of the complaints process and should be used wherever appropriate before a formal complaint is submitted.

7.2 Raising a Concern

Concerns may be raised in person, by telephone or by email.

Where the concern relates to a pupil, complainants should normally contact the member of staff closest to the issues such as:

- The class teacher
- Form tutor
- Head of Department
- SENDCO (where appropriate)
- Appropriate member of staff

The Trust expects concerns to be raised calmly, respectfully and with sufficient information to enable the matter to be properly understood and addressed.

7.3 Information to Provide

To assist in resolving concerns promptly, individuals should explain:

- What happened
- When it happened
- Who was involved
- What steps have already been taken
- Any documents or evidence that might be relevant
- What outcome they are seeking

Providing clear and concise information helps staff understand the issue and identify an appropriate solution.

7.4 Informal Meetings and Discussions

To explore the concern and seek a resolution the school/academy may suggest:

- A face to face meeting

- An online meeting
 - A telephone discussion
- or
- An exchange of correspondence

Where appropriate the school/academy may involve other members of staff who have knowledge of the circumstances or who are able to assist in resolving the matter.

The Trust encourages open and constructive dialogue during these discussions and expects all participants to treat one another with courtesy and respect.

7.5 Resolution at the Informal Stage

Possible outcomes at the informal stage may include:

- Clarification of information or school procedures
 - An explanation of actions taken
 - An apology where appropriate
 - Agreement of actions to resolve the concern
 - Mediation or facilitated discussion
- or
- Referral to another process where the matter falls outside this policy.

The Trust will always seek a reasonable and practical solution.

7.6 Timescale

The Trust will aim to resolve concerns raised at an informal stage within 15 school days of the concern being raised.

Where this is not possible the individual raising the concern will be informed of the reasons for the delay and provided with an indication of when a response can be expected.

7.7 Escalation to a Formal Complaint (Stage 2)

If the complainant remains dissatisfied after informal discussions have concluded, they may submit a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure.

The Trust may also advise a complainant to move directly to the formal stage where:

- The matter is particularly serious
- Information resolution is unlikely to be effective
- The concern involves a significant issue of governance or leadership or
- Previous attempts at informal resolution have been unsuccessful.

7.8 Record Keeping

Staff are encouraged to maintain an appropriate record of significant concerns raised at the informal stage and any actions taken to resolve them.

This helps ensure continuity, supports effective communication and enables the Trust to identify recurring issues and improvement opportunities.

7.9 Support and Reasonable Adjustment

The Trust recognises that some individuals may require assistance to raise a concern.

Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Alternative formats
- Assistance in writing down concerns
- Access to interpreters
- Accessible venues and
- Additional communication support where required.

Individuals requiring assistance should contact the academy/trust office who will make appropriate arrangements wherever reasonably practicable.

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint

8.1 Purpose of the Formal Stage

Where a concern has not been resolved through the informal stage, or where the nature of the matter is sufficiently serious to warrant formal consideration, a complainant may submit a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this procedure. Formal investigation provides an opportunity for the Trust to review the issues raised thoroughly, consider relevant evidence and determine whether further action is required.

The Trust remains committed to resolving complaints fairly, proportionately and as quickly as possible, whilst ensuring all parties are treated with dignity and respect.

8.2 Submitting a Formal Complaint

Formal complaints should normally be made in writing using the Trust's Formal Complaint Form (Appendix A)

Complaints should be submitted:

- Within **15 school days** of the outcome of the informal stage
- By email or in writing to the person identified within this policy
- Clearly and concisely and
- With sufficient information to enable the complaint to be investigated.

The complainant should provide:

- Their full name and contact details
- The name of the pupil, where relevant
- Details of the complaint
- Relevant dates and times
- Names of individuals involved
- Details of action already taken to resolve the matter
- Copies of relevant documentation and
- The outcome they are seeking.

8.3 Who Should Receive the Complaint

Formal complaints should normally be addressed as follows:

Complaint Relates to	Complaint should be Sent to
Academy operations or decisions	Headteacher
Trust operations or decisions	CEO or nominated Trust Leader
Headteacher	CEO or nominated Trust Leader
CEO	Chair of Trustees via the Governance Professional
Trustee	Chair of Trustees via the Governance Professional
Chair of the Trustees	Members via the Governance Professional
Local Governing Committee	Chair of Local Governing Committee via the Governance Professional
Local Governing Committee Chair	Chair of Trustees via the Governance Professional

If a complainant is unsure who should receive their complaint, they should contact the Director of Governance and Compliance (Clerk to the Trustees) for guidance.

8.4 Acknowledgement

The Trust will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing within **ten school days**. The acknowledgement will normally:

- Confirm receipt of the complaint
- Identify the investigating officer
- Explain the next steps
- Confirm the anticipated timescale and
- Request any additional information required.

8.5 Clarification of the Complaint

Where the complaint is unclear, overly broad or contains multiple issues, the Trust may:

- Request clarification in writing;
- Provide a summary of the issues understood to form the complaint; or
- Arrange a meeting or telephone discussion to ensure the complaint is correctly understood.

The timescales within this policy may be paused until sufficient information is received.

8.6 Appointment of an Investigator

The complaint will be investigated by an appropriately senior person who has not been directly involved in the matters complained of wherever possible.

Depending upon the nature of the complaint, the investigator may be:

- A senior leader
- A Trust leader
- A governor
- A trustee; or
- An independent external investigator.

The Trust reserves the right to appoint an external investigator where:

- The complaint is complex;
- The complaint raises significant governance issues;
- There is a potential conflict of interest; or
- Specialist expertise is required.

8.7 Investigation Process

The investigator may undertake any actions considered necessary to establish the facts, including:

- Reviewing documents and records

- Examining policies and procedures
- Meeting with the complainant
- Interviewing staff
- Interviewing governors or trustees
- Gathering witness statements and
- Speaking with pupils where appropriate.

Where pupils are interviewed, an appropriate adult will normally be present and any safeguarding considerations will be taken into account.

8.8 Meeting with the Complainant

The investigator will normally offer the complainant an opportunity to discuss the complaint through:

- A face-to-face meeting
- An online meeting or
- A telephone discussion.

The purpose of the meeting is to:

- Clarify the issues
- Understand the complainant's concerns
- Explore potential solutions and
- Ensure the desired outcome is fully understood.

A complainant may be accompanied by:

- A friend;
- A family member;
- An interpreter; or
- An advocate.

The Trust may object to a companion where there is a legitimate reason, including safeguarding, conflict of interest or disruption concerns.

8.9 Outcomes that are Not Available

Certain outcomes cannot be achieved through this procedure, including:

- Dismissal of a member of staff
- Specific disciplinary action against staff
- Disclosure of confidential employment matters
- Financial compensation or
- Outcomes beyond the Trust's legal powers.

Where staff conduct is relevant to a complaint, any internal disciplinary action will remain confidential. The Trust may confirm that appropriate action has been taken but will not disclose employment-related details.

8.10 Investigation Findings

Once the investigation is complete, the investigator will consider:

- The evidence available
- Relevant policies and procedures
- Statutory requirements
- Whether the complaint is upheld, partially upheld or not upheld and
- Any lessons or improvements that should be implemented.

8.11 Written Outcomes

The Trust will normally provide a written outcome within 20 school days of the complaint being received or of the investigation meeting, whichever is later.

The outcome letter will normally include:

- A summary of the complaint
- Details of the investigation undertaken
- Findings and conclusions
- Whether the complaint has been upheld, partially upheld or not upheld
- Any actions that will be taken and
- Details of how to request a Stage 3 Review Panel.

8.12 Resolution Following Investigation

Possible outcomes may include:

- Clarification or explanation
- An apology
- Staff guidance or training
- Review of policies or procedures
- Improvements to communication
- Additional support arrangements or
- Recommendations for future practice.

The Trust will always seek outcomes that are proportionate, realistic and in the best interests of pupils and the wider school community.

8.13 Escalation to Stage 3

If the complainant remains dissatisfied with the Stage 2 outcome, they may request a review by a Complaints Review Panel under Stage 3.

The request must:

- Be submitted within **15 school days** of the Stage 2 response
- Explain why the complainant remains dissatisfied and
- State the outcome they are seeking.
-

The Stage 3 Review Panel is the final stage of the Trust's complaints procedure.

8.0 Stage 3 – Complaints Review Panel

9.1 Purpose of the Review Panel

If a complainant remains dissatisfied following the outcome of the Stage 2 investigation, they may request that their complaint be considered by a Complaints Review Panel.

The Review Panel is the final stage of the Trust's internal complaints procedure. Its purpose is not to reinvestigate the complaint, but to review:

- Whether the complaint was handled fairly and in accordance with this policy;
- Whether the conclusions reached at Stage 2 were reasonable based upon the evidence available;
- Whether any further recommendations should be made to resolve the complaint and improve future practice.

The Review Panel provides an independent and objective consideration of the complaint and the Trust's response.

A Parent Guide to Complaint Panels (Appendix C) is available to explain what to expect at a panel meeting.

9.2 Requesting A Review Panel

A request for a Review Panel must:

- Be made in writing using the Review Panel Request Form (Appendix B)
- Be submitted within **15 school days** of the Stage 2 outcome letter
- Clearly explain why the complainant remains dissatisfied
- Identify any aspects of the investigation or outcome that they believe were incorrect or unreasonable and
- State the outcome they are seeking.

Requests should be sent to:

The Director of Governance and Compliance (Clerk to the Trustees) or the Governance Professional to the Local Governing Body as specified within the Stage 2 outcome letter.

Late requests will only be accepted where exceptional circumstances apply.

9.3 Scope of the Review

The Review Panel will consider:

- The original complaint
- The Stage 2 investigation process
- The Stage 2 findings and outcome
- The reasons given by the complainant for requesting a review.

The Review Panel will not normally:

- Reinvestigate the complaint from the beginning
- Consider new complaints
- Consider issues unrelated to the original complaint
- Consider information that could reasonably have been provided during the Stage 2 investigation.

Where significant new evidence becomes available, the Panel may determine that further investigation is required before considering the complaint.

9.4 Composition of the Review Panel

The Review Panel shall consist of:

- At least three individuals
- Individuals who have had no prior involvement in the complaint
- At least one member who is independent of the management and running of the Trust (this can include a governor from another academy's Local Governing Committee).

Panel members may include:

- Trustees;
- Local Governors
- Governors from another academy
- Trustees or governors of another academy trust
- Independent educational professionals or
- Other suitably qualified independent individuals.

The Governance Professional will appoint a Chair for the Panel.

The independent member must be capable of providing objective scrutiny and must not have any conflict of interest.

9.5 Role of the Governance Professional

A Governance Professional will support the Panel by:

- Managing correspondence
- Arranging the hearing
- Circulating documentation
- Providing procedural advice
- Taking minutes of the hearing and
- Issuing the Panel's findings and recommendations.

The Governance Professional will not participate in decision-making.

9.6 Acknowledgement of the Request

The Trust will acknowledge receipt of the request within **5 school days** and will provide information about:

- Membership of the Panel (where available)
- Proposed hearing arrangements (where available)
- Submission deadlines
- Attendance arrangements and
- The next steps in the process.

9.7 Arranging the Hearing

The Trust will normally convene the Review Panel hearing within **20 school days** of receiving the request for review.

The hearing may take place:

- In person
- Via video conference or
- Through a hybrid arrangement where appropriate.

The Governance Professional will confirm at least **10 school days** before the hearing wherever practicable:

- The date
- Time
- Venue or online arrangements
- Names of Panel members and
- Documentation deadlines.

9.8 Documentation

The complainant and Trust representative will normally be required to submit all documentation they wish the Panel to consider at least **five school days** before the hearing.

Documentation may include:

- Complaint forms
- Correspondence
- Policies
- Meeting notes
- Investigation reports
- Witness statements and
- Other relevant evidence.

The Governance Professional will circulate a hearing bundle to all participants before the hearing at least **three school days** before the hearing.

Where required to comply with GDPR requirements, documentation may be redacted.

The Panel may decline to consider late evidence unless there are exceptional reasons to do so.

9.9 Attendance

The complainant may attend the hearing and may be accompanied by:

- A friend
- A relative
- An interpreter
- An advocate or
- Another support person.

The Trust may also be represented by individuals involved in the Stage 2 investigation.

Legal representatives will not normally be permitted except where exceptional circumstances exist. The hearing is not a legal proceeding and is intended to remain accessible and proportionate.

Media representatives are not permitted

9.10 Conduct of the Hearing

The hearing will be conducted in a respectful, fair and inquisitorial manner.

The Chair may adapt procedures where necessary; however, the hearing will normally proceed as follows:

1. Introductions by the Chair
2. Explanation of the procedure
3. Presentation by the complainant
4. Questions from the Panel
5. Presentation by the Trust representative
6. Questions from the Panel
7. Final comments from both parties
8. Private deliberation by the Panel.

The Panel may ask questions of either party at any stage to assist its understanding of the issues.

9.11 Non Attendance

If the complainant is unable to attend, they should notify the Governance Professional as soon as possible.

The Chair may decide to:

- Rearrange the hearing
- Consider the complaint through written submissions alone or
- Proceed in the complainant's absence where appropriate.

Repeated failure to engage without reasonable explanation may result in the complaint being concluded.

9.12 Confidentiality

Review Panel hearings are private and confidential.

Those attending the hearing must:

- Respect the confidentiality of proceedings
- Refrain from sharing documentation externally
- Avoid publication of hearing details, including on social media.

Electronic recording of the hearing will not normally be permitted unless approved in advance as a reasonable adjustment or in other exceptional circumstances.

9.13 Panel Deliberations

Following the hearing, the Panel will meet in private.

The Panel may:

- Uphold the complaint in full
- Uphold the complaint in part
- Dismiss the complaint; or
- Make recommendations for improvement.

Recommendations may relate to:

- Policies and procedures
- Communication practices
- Staff training
- Governance arrangements
- Future monitoring or review.

9.14 Notification of the Decision

The complainant will normally receive the Panel's findings and recommendations within **five school days** of the hearing.

The decision letter will:

- Summarise the Panel's conclusions
- Confirm whether the complaint was upheld, partially upheld or not upheld
- Identify any recommendations made
- Explain any actions to be taken by the Trust and
- Confirm that the Trust's complaints procedure has been concluded.

Copies of the findings and recommendations will also be provided to:

- The complainant;
- The Headteacher(where relevant);
- The Chief Executive Officer;
- The Board of Trustees; and
- Any person complained about, where appropriate.

9.15 Completion of the Trust's Procedure

The Review Panel represents the final stage of the Trust's internal complaints process.

Once the Panel has issued its findings and recommendations, the complaint will be considered closed. If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they may refer concerns regarding the handling of the complaint to the Department for Education in accordance with Section 19 of this policy.

9.0 Complaints About Particular Individuals

10.1 Headteacher or Principal

Complaints should be addressed to the CEO.

10.2 CEO

Complaints should be addressed to the Chair of the Trustees through the Governance Professional to the Board.

10.3 Chair of Trustees

Complaints should be addressed to the Trust Members through the Governance Professional to the Board.

10.4 Local Governing Committee

Complaints should be addressed to the Chair of the Local Governing Committee (LGC) or the Governance Professional to the LGC.

Investigations will be undertaken by suitably independent individuals.

10.0 Matters Outside this Procedure

The following are usually dealt with under separate procedures:

- Admissions
- Suspensions and exclusions
- Safeguarding and child protection
- Staff grievances
- Staff disciplinary matters
- Whistleblowing
- Data protection complaints
- Freedom of information requests
- SEND Tribunal matters
- Employment matters
- Third party contractors and service providers.

Where a complaint is received under the wrong procedure, we will signpost the complainant to the correct route (policy or statutory process) wherever possible.

11.0 SEND Related Concerns

The Trust is responsible for:

- High quality teaching
- SEN Support arrangements
- Reasonable adjustments

- Monitoring progress and support plans

The Local Authority is responsible for:

- EHCP assessments
- Issuing and maintaining EHCPs
- Provision specified within EHCPs that fall under the Local Authority responsibility

What an EHCP sets out:

- An EHCP describes your child's needs
- The provision required to meet those needs and who must deliver it
- Schools must implement the parts of the plan that fall within their control
- The Local Authority must provide the provision it is responsible for

Where concerns relate to statutory SEN decisions, complainants may need to contact the Local Authority or SEND Tribunal.

12.0 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI tools such as Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT and Gemini may help complainants organise their thoughts.

However:

- AI can generate inaccurate information
- AI may cite incorrect legislation
- AI is not confidential
- Personal data should not be uploaded to public AI systems.

Complainants remain responsible for the accuracy of their submissions. If unclear AI-generated material is received the Trust may request clarification before continuing the process.

If a complaint appears to have been wholly or substantially generated using artificial intelligence (AI) and further clarification or confirmation is required from the complainant, the complaint handling timescales outlined in this Policy will be paused until a satisfactory response is received. The complainant will be notified when the timescales have been suspended and when they resume.

Guidance on using AI tools to raise concerns or complaints is available in Appendix D.

13.0 Record Keeping and Confidentiality

The Trust will maintain records of

- Formal complaints
- Investigations
- Panel Hearings
- Actions arising from complaints

Records will be retained securely and managed in accordance with data protection legislation and Trust retention schedules.

Complaint information will remain confidential except where:

- Disclosure is required by law
- Inspection bodies require access
- The Secretary of State requests records
- Disclosure is necessary for complaint investigations

14.0 Data Protection

The Trust will process personal data relating to complaints in accordance with UK data protection legislation, including the UK General Data Protection Regulations (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

14.1 Use of Personal Information

When investigating a complaint, the Trust may collect, use, store and share personal information where necessary to:

- Understand and investigate the complaint
- Establish relevant facts
- Seek accounts from staff, pupils, parents or other witnesses
- Consider what action, if any, should be taken
- Maintain complaint records and
- Comply with legal and regulatory obligations

The Trust will only process information that is relevant and necessary for handling the complaint.

14.2 Sharing Information

In order to investigate and resolve complaints, relevant information may be shared with:

- Member of staffs
- Trustee and governors involved in the complaint process
- Independent panel members
- Professional advisors acting on behalf of the Trust
- Regulators, inspectors or the Department of Education where required and
- Other organisations where there is a lawful basis for doing so.

The Trust will not normally disclose personal information about third parties unless there is a lawful reason to do so.

14.3 Confidentiality

Complaint investigations often involve personal information about children, parents, staff and other individuals.

The Trust will:

- Treat complaint information confidentially
- Share information only on a need-to-know basis
- Redact personal information where appropriate
- Comply with its safeguarding and legal duties
- Balance transparency with the privacy rights of those involved.

Complainants should also respect the confidentiality of the process and avoid sharing complaint documentation, witness statements or correspondence publicly, including on social media, whilst the complaint is being considered.

14.4 Subject Access Rights

A complaint and a Subject Access Request (SAR) are separate processes.

Individuals have the right to request access to their personal data under data protection legislation. Such requests will be handled in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection Policy and Subject Access Request procedures.

The existence of a complaint does not automatically entitle a complainant to receive information relating to other individuals.

14.5 Data Protection Complaints

Concerns about how the Trust has processed personal data should normally be raised with the Trust's Data Protection Officer in the first instance.

Such concerns will usually be dealt with under the Trust's Data Protection Policy rather than through this Complaints Policy.

Individuals also have the right to raise concerns with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO):

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

Website: <https://www.ico.org.uk>

Helpline: 0303 123 1113

However, individuals are encouraged to allow the Trust an opportunity to resolve concerns before contacting the ICO.

14.6 Retention of Complaint Records

Complaint records and supporting documentation will be retained in accordance with the Trust's Records Retention Schedule and Data Protection Policy.

Records will be stored securely and access restricted to authorised individuals only. When retention periods expire, records will be securely destroyed or deleted.

15.0 Complaint Campaigns

Where multiple complaints are received regarding the same issue, the Trust may:

- Send a single response to all complainants or
- Publish a generic response.

Parents retain the right to request a Review Panel where permitted in this policy.

16.0 Serial, Persistent or Unreasonable Complaints

The Trust may take action where complainants:

- Repeatedly raise the same issue
- Raise matters designed to cause disruption or annoyance
- Refuse to cooperate with the Trust's investigation
- Refuse to accept reasonable outcomes
- Make excessive or unreasonable demands
- Use abusive, offensive or threatening language
- Harass staff or governors
- Posting about their concern or complaint on social media or other public forums

Possible actions include:

- Communication plans
- Restricting methods of contact
- Written warnings
- Declining to consider further correspondence
- Referring the complainant to the DfE after exhausting internal procedures.

The DfE Best Practice Guidance for Academy Complaints Procedures will be taken into account in reaching any decision to stop responding. Specifically, the following criteria will usually be met:

- the Trust will have taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns;
- the complainant will have been given a clear statement of the Trust's position and their options; and
- the complainant contacts the Trust repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time.

The case to stop responding will be stronger if one or more of the following applies:

- the complainant's letters, emails, or telephone calls are often or always abusive or aggressive;
- the complainant makes insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff;
- the Trust has reason to believe the individual is contacting them with the intention of causing disruption or inconvenience.

17.0 Legal Proceedings

If a complainant threatens or commences legal action against the Trust (including the issuing of a letter before claim) in relation to the complaint, we will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure in relation to their complaint until those legal proceedings have concluded.

18.0 Withdrawal of Complaints

Complaints may be withdrawn at any stage by notifying the Trust in writing.

19.0 Complaints to the Department for Education

After completion of the Trust's complaints procedure, complainants may refer concerns regarding complaint handling to:

Department for Education

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/about/complaints-procedure#complain-about-a-school-or-an-academy>

The DfE does not normally reinvestigate the complaint itself but may consider whether the Trust followed its published complaints procedure appropriately.

20.0 Annual Reporting – Governance Oversight

An annual report will be provided to the Trust Board summarising:

- Number of complaints received
- Complaint themes and trends
- Panel hearings convened
- Learning and improvements arising from complaints
- Any policy or procedural changes implemented.

Individual complainants will not be identified in these reports

Appendix A – Formal Complaint Form (Stage 2)

Your Name	
Pupil/Student Name	
Pupil/Student Date of Birth	
Your relationship to the pupil/student	
Address and Postcode	
Daytime phone number	
Evening phone number	
Email	
What are you concerned about? Include the names of any people involved and the dates and times of relevant events.	
Who have you spoken to at school or Trust about your concerns?	
What can we do to help put things right?	
Signature	
Date	

Please send completed form via email to the school office or hand in to the school office in a sealed envelope. Alternative forms can be submitted directly to the Trust Central Office at <mailto:governance@esteemmat.co.uk>

Appendix B - Request for Complaints Review Panel (Stage 3)

Your Name	
Pupil/Student Name	
School/Academy Attended	
Date of Stage 2 Response	
Reason for dissatisfaction	
Outcome requested	
Additional evidence	
Signature	
Date	

Please send completed form via email to the Governance and Compliance Team, EMAT Central Office using <mailto:governance@esteemmat.co.uk>

Appendix C – Parent Guide to Complaint Panels (Stage 3)

Parent's guide: Panel hearings

We encourage parents to talk to us informally about any concerns to begin with. If we can't agree on a way forward you can then raise a formal written complaint and we will give you a written response. If we still can't agree, you can ask for a panel hearing.

This summary gives you more information about what you can expect at a hearing as part of our complaints policy.

Meet with a review panel

If you don't agree with our written response from step two, you can ask for a formal meeting to discuss your concerns. This is called a panel hearing.

To ask for a panel hearing contact the person dealing with your complaint and given them a brief explanation of why you are not happy and what you would like us to do to resolve your concern. This should normally be within four weeks of our reply, unless there are special circumstances. This helps ensure events are fresh in everyone's minds and we can put things right quickly.

The panel hearing will look again at your original complaint and any concerns you have about how we have handled it. It won't consider any new complaints.

What to expect next

You don't have to attend the panel if you don't want to. If you do want to attend, we will do our best to agree a time and date with you for the meeting, usually within 20 school days of you asking. The meeting will usually be in person, but it can be held online if that is more convenient for everyone.

Please let us know if you need help to attend, like an accessible meeting room or an interpreter. Around a week before the meeting we will provide you and the panel members copies of letters and other relevant information.

Who will be at the meeting

The panel will have at least three people not directly involved in the complaint, including one person who is independent of the management and running of the school. The panel will be assisted by a member of staff who will take notes and provide advice on procedures.

People involved in the complaint may also attend, or they may give their views in writing. We will not normally ask pupils to attend.

You can bring someone, like a friend or relative, to the meeting to help you. If your complaint is about a member of staff, they may bring a friend or colleague to support them.

The meeting is confidential and is not open to the public or the media.

What will happen at the meeting

The meeting will be led by one of the panel members. If you choose to attend, they will ask you to outline your concerns. They and the other panel members may ask you questions. They may also talk to other people involved in the complaint.

The meeting is not a legal hearing and you don't need to bring legal representation. There is no 'cross examination' of witnesses and you will not be able to ask other people questions directly.

Before the hearing ends, you will have another chance to share your views.

In most cases the panel will not give an instant decision. Instead they will meet again separately to discuss your concerns and what they have heard from other people, and write to you later with their recommendations.

After the meeting

After the meeting, the panel will send their recommendations to you and to anyone you have complained about. The headteacher and the school trust will also get a copy.

A panel hearing is the end of the trust's complaints procedure. If you are still not happy, you can complain to the Department for Education using the complaint form on [their website](#). The Department can look at whether we have handled your complaint properly, but it won't investigate the details of any underlying complaint.

Appendix D – Guidance on Using AI Tools to Raise Concerns or Complaints

Introduction

AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini and similar large language model applications) can help you organise your thoughts, structure your concern or complaint clearly, and express yourself effectively. However, these tools have significant limitations and must be used with care. This Annex provides practical guidance on how to use AI tools effectively when raising a concern or complaint under this procedure, and what to avoid.

If you are unsure about how to use AI tools when raising a concern or complaint, or if you would like help preparing your concern or complaint, please contact the Central Team and we will arrange for a member of staff to assist you.

How AI tools can help you

AI tools can be useful for:

- Organising your thoughts and structuring your concern or complaint in a clear and logical way;
- Helping you express what happened in plain, clear language if you find writing difficult;
- Summarising a timeline of events based on information you provide;
- Suggesting what outcome you might want to ask for; and
- Checking your draft for clarity, tone and spelling before you submit it.

Important limitations and risks

You should be aware of the following limitations and risks when using AI tools:

- A. AI tools do not know what happened – they can only work with the information you give them, and they may fill gaps with invented details that sound convincing but are untrue (this is sometimes called 'hallucination')
- B. AI tools may generate references to laws, regulations, policies or legal rights that do not exist, are out of date, or do not apply to your situation
- C. AI tools may produce language that is overly formal, legalistic or aggressive, which may not reflect your genuine concern and may make it harder for us to resolve the matter constructively
- D. any personal data (including names, dates of birth, or other identifying information about your child, other children, staff or other individuals) that you enter into an AI tool may be stored, processed or used by the AI provider in ways that are outside your control and may breach data protection law
- E. AI-generated complaints that do not accurately reflect your experience may cause delays in resolving your concern, as we may need to spend time clarifying what actually happened

and

- F. AI tools work by predicting the most likely answer based on the information they have been trained on. They do not check whether their output is accurate or relevant to your particular situation, and the most likely-sounding answer is not always the correct one. AI tools are also designed to make you feel helped and understood, which means they may agree with your point of view, use an overly sympathetic tone, or present your complaint in a one-sided way rather than giving a balanced account of what happened. This can wrongly reinforce your point of view and make you more fixed in your position, which may make it harder for us to work together to resolve the matter.

What to do and what to avoid

Do	Don't
Write down the key facts yourself first (what happened, when, who was involved, and what you would like us to do) before using an AI tool.	Copy and paste AI-generated text without reading and checking it thoroughly.
Use AI to help you structure and clarify what you have already written, rather than to generate the complaint from scratch.	Submit a complaint that contains facts, events or details that you have not personally verified as accurate.
Read everything the AI produces carefully and remove or correct anything that is inaccurate, exaggerated or that you did not experience.	Rely on any legal advice, references to legislation or statements about your rights generated by an AI tool without checking them independently.
Use your own words where possible – your complaint should sound like you.	Enter the names or personal data of your child, other children, staff members or any other individuals into an AI tool.
Remove all personal data (names, dates of birth and other identifying information about individuals) before entering any information into an AI tool – you can use placeholders such as 'my child', 'the class teacher' or 'Teacher A' instead.	Use AI to generate multiple or repetitive complaints about the same issue.

Example prompts for using AI tools effectively

The following example prompts illustrate how AI tools can be used effectively to help you prepare a concern or complaint.

In each case, you should replace the descriptions in square brackets with your own details, taking care not to include any personal data or names.

Example 1 Organising your thoughts:

"I want to raise a concern with my child's school about [describe the issue in general terms, e.g. 'how a bullying incident was handled']. The key things that happened are: [list the main events in the order they happened, using descriptions such as 'my child', 'the class teacher' etc. instead of names]. Can you help me organise these into a clear, chronological summary that I can use when speaking to the school?"

Why this helps: Before writing a formal complaint, it can be difficult to know where to start, particularly if a number of things have happened over a period of time. This prompt helps you to present the key

events in a logical order, making it easier for us to understand your concern and for you to feel confident that nothing important has been left out.

Example 2 – Structuring a written complaint:

"I need to write a formal complaint to my child's school. The issue is [describe the issue]. I have already tried to resolve this informally by [describe what you did]. The key facts are [list the facts]. The outcome I am looking for is [describe what you want to happen]. Can you help me structure this into a clear letter, using plain language and a respectful tone? Do not add any facts or details that I have not provided."

Why this helps: A well-structured complaint is more likely to be understood and dealt with effectively. This prompt helps you to set out the issue, the steps you have already taken, the relevant facts, and the outcome you are seeking in a clear and logical way, without the AI tool adding anything you have not told it.

Example 3 – Checking tone and clarity:

"I have drafted the following complaint to my child's school: [paste your draft, with names removed]. Can you suggest how I could make this clearer and more constructive in tone, without changing the facts or adding anything new?"

Why this helps: When raising a concern or complaint, it is natural to feel frustrated or upset. This prompt allows you to check that your draft communicates your concern clearly and constructively, which is more likely to lead to a productive response, without altering the substance of what you have written.

Example 4 – Identifying what outcome to request:

"I am raising a complaint with my child's school about [describe the issue]. I am not sure what outcome to ask for. Based on the facts I have described, can you suggest some realistic outcomes I could request? Please do not suggest legal remedies or refer to specific laws."

Why this helps: It is not always easy to know what to ask for when raising a complaint. This prompt can help you to think through realistic and proportionate outcomes, whilst ensuring that the AI tool does not stray into providing legal advice, which it is not equipped to give.