



Unity Schools Trust

'Excellence through collaboration'

Complaints Policy

Policy Reviewed:	November 2019
Next Review:	November 2022
Approved by Trust	December 2019

Introduction

The Unity Schools Trust endeavours to provide the best education possible for all of its students in an open and transparent environment. We welcome any feedback that we receive from parents, students and third parties, and we accept that not all of this will be positive. Where concerns are raised the Trust intends for these to be dealt with:

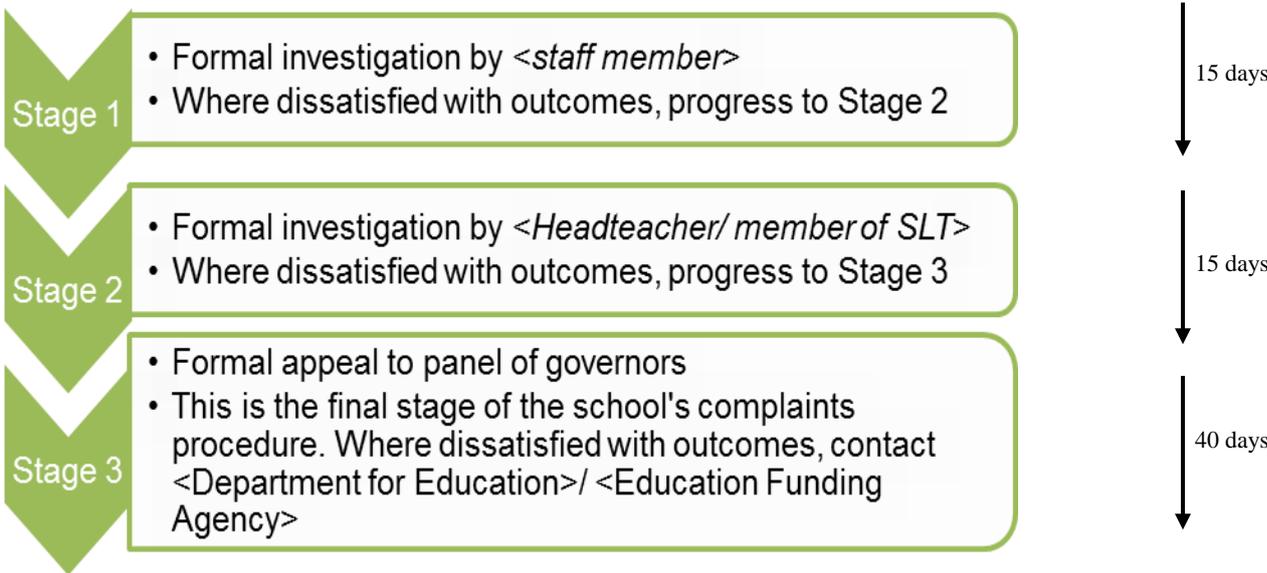
- Fairly
- Openly
- Promptly
- Without Prejudice

Procedure

The Unity Schools Trust operates a three stage formal complaints procedure, outlined below. For more information please refer to the Complaints Procedure document at Appendix 1.

If you need to raise an issue in the first instance, please do so with the relevant member of staff who will be happy to talk to you and seek to establish a solution. If you are not satisfied with this response and believe the issue has not been resolved, please use the following procedure as detailed below. **All timescales refer to school working days ie excluding weekends, school holidays etc.**

Timeline for Formal Complaints



Appendix 1

Complaints Procedure

Introduction

The Unity Schools Trust has approved the following procedure which explains what you should do if you have any concerns about the schools in the Trust, or the Trust itself. All members of staff will be familiar with the procedure and will be able to assist you.

Raising Concerns

The majority of concerns can be dealt with without resorting to the procedure. Where you have a concern about any aspect of the school or Trust, or your child's education or wellbeing, raise this with your child's form tutor/head of year/relevant subject leader via telephone, email or in person. They may be able to address your concerns straight away, or arrange a meeting with you to discuss the issue.

All concerns will be dealt with confidentially, although the staff member may need to take notes if they feel that the matter may need to be taken further or it may arise again in the future. Any such notes will be kept in accordance with the principles of the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. However, such notes may be used as evidence if further investigation is required, or if the concern becomes a formal complaint.

Which Procedure Do I Need?

Sometimes, when concerns are more specific, there are alternative and more appropriate policies for dealing with them. The following list details specific topics of complaints, and the correct policy to refer to. You can access these policies on the school website or ask for a copy from the school office.

- Child protection/safeguarding; Surrey Safeguarding Children Board procedures apply (<http://www.surreyscb.org.uk>). For further information contact the Surrey County Council (SCC) Contact Centre on 0300 470 9100 or 01483 517898 (out of hours emergency team). If at any time a child protection concern becomes apparent, the child protection process takes precedence over the complaints process, which will be halted until the child protection matter is resolved.
- Pupil admissions; please see the individual school's Admissions Policy
- Pupil exclusions; please see the individual school's Behaviour Policy or Department for Education (DfE) guidance on exclusions (www.gov.uk)
- Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND); refer to the Surrey Local Offer website (www.surreylocaloffer.org.uk) or contact the Local Authority where you live.
- Staff grievance, capability or disciplinary; these are covered by the Trust's grievance, capability, disciplinary and whistleblowing policies.
- Where the complaint concerns a third party used by the Trust, or a third party which uses any school premises; please complain directly to the third party themselves.
- Subject Access Requests and Freedom of Information Requests; please see the Trust's Data Protection Policy.

- Complaints regarding discrimination and harassment based on protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010; the complaints procedure applies but the complainant has a further right of appeal to SENDIST (Special Educational Needs and Disability First Tier Tribunal) for complaints about disability discrimination or to the County Court for all other unresolved disputes regarding protected characteristics.

Anonymous complaints will be investigated as far as possible.

Safeguarding

Wherever a complaint indicates that a child's wellbeing or safety is at risk, the school concerned is under a duty to report this immediately to the Local Authority. Any action taken will be in accordance with the school's safeguarding policy that can be found on the school website.

Social Media

In order for complaints to be resolved as quickly and fairly as possible, the Unity Schools Trust requests that complainants do not discuss complaints publicly 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.

Complaints that Result in Staff Capability or Disciplinary

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 of school and/or the individual's line manager. The complainant is entitled to be informed that the matter is being dealt with appropriately, but they are not entitled to participate in the proceedings and will not receive any detail about them or the outcome.

Procedure

If you need to raise an issue in the first instance, please do so with the relevant member of staff who will be happy to talk to you and seek to establish a resolution. If you are not satisfied with this response and believe the issue has not been resolved, please use the following procedure as detailed below.

Timeframes

The Unity Schools Trust will endeavour to abide by timeframes stated under each stage as detailed in this policy 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 an individual's availability to deal with the complaint. 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.

The Unity Schools 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 as to why the complainant has been unable to raise the complaint before this time. The Trust will review the situation and decide whether or not to enact the complaints procedure.

Who should I approach?

Educational matters: Subject teacher/subject leader/line manager

Pastoral care: Form tutor/pastoral leader

Disciplinary matters: The staff member who initiated the sanction

Financial/administrative matters: Business Director

Complaint about a staff member's conduct: direct approach to the staff member themselves, or where this is thought inappropriate/does not resolve the situation, their line manager should be approached.

Complaints about the Head of School or the Governors

Where a complaint concerns the head of school, the complainant should first directly approach the head of school in an attempt to resolve the issue informally. If the complainant is not satisfied with this outcome, or if they have good reason to feel it is inappropriate to approach the head of school in the first instance, they should notify the clerk to the Trust (see contact details at Appendix 3). The Stage 2 process will then commence, but with the Chair of the Trust or another nominated governor as the individual responsible for the investigation rather than the head of school/member of the SLT.

Where a complaint concerns a governor the complainant should contact the clerk to the Trust. Informal resolution will be sought, but where this fails, the complaints procedure at Stage 2 will take immediate effect with the Chair of the Trust or another nominated governor undertaking the investigation. Where a complaint concerns the Chair of the Trust, the investigation will be carried out by the Vice Chair or another nominated trustee.

In exceptional circumstances the Trust may appoint an independent investigator to look into the concerns.

If the complaint is not resolved then the complainant should write to the clerk to the Trust, requesting that the complaint is considered by a Complaints Appeal Panel.

Formal Stages of the Complaint Procedure

Stage 1 – Investigation by a staff member/subject leader/pastoral leader

Where, as a result of raising a concern, the complainant still feels that the issue has not been resolved, or where the outcome has been that the complaint needs further investigation, they may progress by making a formal complaint. In doing so, the following steps will be followed:

1. Complainant contacts the relevant staff member.
2. The complainant must explain in writing

- an overview of the complaint so far
 - who has been involved
 - why the complaint remains unresolved
 - action they would like to be taken to put things right.
3. The staff member will acknowledge receipt within five days of having received the written complaint, and explain what action they intend to take.
 4. The staff member will provide the complainant and head of school with written confirmation of the outcome of their investigation within fifteen days of receipt of the written complaint. Where the complaint is about a member of staff an informal mediation meeting may be offered to see if a resolution can be reached. Where the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome, they may progress the complaint to stage 2 of the complaints process.
 5. The staff member will make and retain a record of the concern and the outcomes of the investigation.

Stage 2 – Investigation by head of school/member of the senior leadership team (SLT)

1. The complainant may submit a Stage 2 complaints form to the head of school/member of the SLT. Contact details for staff can be found on the school website. A copy of the form can be found as Appendix 2.
2. The head of school/SLT member will respond in writing within five days of the date of receipt of the complaint to acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken, giving clear timeframes.
3. A log of all correspondence in relation to the complaint will be kept in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.
4. In most cases the head of school/SLT member should offer to have a meeting with the complainant at the outset of the process.
5. The head of school/SLT member will consider all relevant evidence; this may include but is not limited to:
 - evidence and outcome from Stage 1 investigation
 - a statement from the complainant,
 - where relevant a meeting with/ statement from an individual who is the subject of the complaint
 - any previous correspondence regarding the complaint
 - any supporting documents from all parties
 - interview with anyone related to the complaint.
6. After considering the available evidence, the head of school/SLT member can:
 - uphold the complaint and direct that certain action be taken to resolve it

- not uphold the complaint and provide the complainant with details of the stage three appeals process
 - uphold the complaint in part: in other words, the head of school/SLT member may find one aspect of the complaint to be valid, but not another aspect. They may direct for certain action to be taken to resolve the aspect that they find in favour of the complainant.
7. The head of school/SLT member should inform the complainant of their decision in writing within fifteen days of receipt of the complaint. They should explain clearly why they have come to the decision that they made. They should detail any agreed actions as a result of the complaint. Finally, they should provide the complainant with details of how to progress the complaint to stage three if they are not satisfied, providing them with the contact details of the clerk to the Trust (Appendix 3). In addition to making the response in writing, the head of school/member of SLT may also wish to meet the complainant to discuss/resolve the matter directly. Should the complaint not be resolved mediation may be helpful.

Stage 3 –Complaint Appeal Panel of the Trust

If the complainant wishes to appeal a decision by the head of school/SLT member at stage 2 of the procedure, the complainant is able to do so. The complainant must request an appeal panel within ten days of receiving the head of school/SLT member decision or it will not be considered, except in exceptional circumstances. They should briefly outline the content of the complaint and request that a complaints appeal panel is convened.

The clerk will fulfil the role of organising the time and date of the appeal hearing, inviting all the attendees, collating all the relevant documentation and distributing this five days in advance of the meeting, recording the proceedings in the form of minutes, and circulating these and the outcome of the meeting. The minutes are a summary of the discussion at the hearing and the decision of the panel following the hearing, but will not include the deliberations of the panel. The minutes are the property of the Trust.

The following steps will be followed:

1. The clerk will write to the complainant within five days to confirm receipt of the appeal request and detail further action to be taken.
2. The clerk will convene a panel of two school governors/academy trustees and one independent member

All three panel members will have no prior knowledge of the content of the complaint. Complainants have the right to request an independent panel, if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. The school will consider the request but ultimately the decision is made by the Trust.

3. The appeal hearing will take place within thirty days of receipt of the request for the Stage 3 appeal. If the first identified date is not convenient for the

complainant, up to two further dates should be offered. If these all fail to be suitable then the meeting may be conducted in private by the Complaint Appeal Panel.

4. In addition to the panel, the following parties will be invited, where applicable:
 - the complainant
 - the head of school/SLT member who dealt with the complaint at Stage 2
 - relevant witnesses

The complainant can bring a companion with them to the hearing for support if they wish. They should advise the clerk of the name of this supportive companion prior to the hearing. The supportive companion is not there as a witness, so does not address the panel except with the prior agreement of the chair.

Neither party is able to bring legal representation with them.

If the attendance of any students is required at the hearing, parental permission will be sought if they are under the age of 18. Extra care will be taken to consider the vulnerability of children where they are present at a complaints hearing.

5. The panel can make the following decisions:
 - 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 Trust's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur.
6. All parties who attended the meeting will be informed in writing of the outcome of the appeal within ten days.

This is the final stage at which the Trust will consider the complaint. If the complainant remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the complaint further, please see the contact details at Appendix 3.

Retention

The complaint investigator/the Chair of the Complaint Appeal Panel should ensure that a copy of all relevant information relating to the complaint is kept at the Trust office in a secure, confidential file, separate from staff and pupil records. This information should be retained for six years from the date of the complaint, in line with guidance from the Information and Records Management Society (www.irms.org.uk) and in accordance with the principles of the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. The complainant should be informed that this will be done.

Unreasonable, Frivolous or Vexatious Complaints

The Unity Schools Trust is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high quality service to those who complain. We will not

normally limit the contact complainants have with the Trust. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

The Unity Schools Trust follows the guidance of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator by defining a “frivolous” or “vexatious” complaint as one which is obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, repetitious, insistent upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason, insistence upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner or complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance or contain demands for redress that lack any serious purpose or value.

A complaint may be regarded as unreasonable when the person making the complaint:-

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance;
- refuses to co-operate with the complaints investigation process while still wishing their complaint to be resolved;
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaints procedure;
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the adopted complaints procedure or with good practice;
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales;
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced;
- changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds;
- repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed);
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school’s complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education;
- seeks an unrealistic outcome;
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with.

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the person making the complaint does so either face-to-face, by telephone or in writing or electronically:-

- maliciously;
- aggressively;
- using threats, intimidation or violence;
- using abusive, offensive or discriminatory language;
- knowing it to be false;
- using falsified information;

- publishing unacceptable information in a variety of media such as in social media websites and newspapers.

Complainants should limit the numbers of communications with the Trust while a complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent (either by letter, phone, email or text) as it could delay the outcome being reached.

Whenever possible, the Trust will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' judgement.

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

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

Barring from the Trust Premises

Although fulfilling a public function, schools are private places. The public has no automatic right of entry. The Trust has a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of students and staff, and will therefore act to ensure that schools remain a safe place.

If a parent's behaviour is a cause for concern, the Trust can ask them to leave school premises. In serious cases, the Trust can notify them in writing that their implied permission to be on school premises has been temporarily revoked subject to any representations that the parent may wish to make. The Trust will always give the parent the opportunity to formally express their views on the decision to bar in writing.

The decision to bar should then be reviewed, taking into account any representations made by the parent, and either confirmed or lifted. If the decision is confirmed the parent should be notified in writing, explaining how long the bar will be in place. Anyone wishing to complain about being barred can do so, by letter or email, to the Trust. However, complaints about barring cannot be escalated to the Department of Education. Once the Trust's own complaints procedure has been completed, the only remaining avenue of appeal is through the Courts; independent legal advice must therefore be sought.

Contact Details for External Organisations if not Satisfied with the Outcome of the Complaints Procedure in Full

- If you have any queries regarding any aspect of the complaints procedure, please direct these to the clerk to the Trust (see Appendix 3).
- If the complainant feels that the Trust acted unreasonably in the handling of the complaint, they can complain to the Education Funding Agency after the complaints procedure has been exhausted. Please note that unreasonable is used in a legal sense and means acting in a way that no reasonable school or authority would act in the same circumstances.

Education Funding Agency Complaints
Chief Executive's Office
53-55 Butts Road
Earlsdon Park
Coventry CV1 3BH

- Ofsted will also consider complaints about schools. Complainants can contact Ofsted if they think a school isn't run properly and needs inspecting. Ofsted will not look into problems with individual students. This course of action is only available if the school's complaints procedure has already been followed.
<https://contact.ofsted.gov.uk/onlinecomplaints>

Relevant Legislation and Guidance

The Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

The GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018

<https://gdpr-info.eu/>

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents>

The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/3283/contents/made>

Education Act 2002 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents>

The Department for Education *Best Practice advice for school complaints procedures*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-complaints-procedures>

Appendix 2

The Unity Schools Trust Formal Complaints Form (Stage 2)

Name	
Name of pupil, year group and your relationship to them (where applicable)	
Contact address	
Contact telephone day	
Contact telephone mobile	
Contact email address	
Details of the complaint	
Action taken so far (including staff member who has dealt with it so far) or solutions offered	
The reason that this was not a satisfactory resolution for you	
What action would you like to be taken to resolve the problem?	

Signed:

Dated:

Official Use:	
Date Received	Signed

Appendix 3

Trust Contact Details

The Unity Schools Trust
Thorpe Road
Staines-upon-Thames
Surrey TW18 3HJ

Tel: 01784 454320

Correspondence for the Clerk to the Trust should be sent via the Trust office.