

SOUTH LINCOLNSHIRE ACADEMIES TRUST (SLAT)

CONCERNS & COMPLAINTS POLICY

Aspire - Challenge – Achieve

Owner	Approved	By Whom	Review
SLAT Personnel Manager	September 23	CEO	Annually

INTRODUCTION

The South Lincolnshire Academies Trust (SLAT) are committed to meeting the needs of students, parents and others within the school community.

We believe that feedback is an important ingredient in self-improvement and raising standards.

Parents who have concerns, difficulties, or complaints about their SLAT school should feel that these can be voiced and be confident that they will be considered seriously in a sympathetic, efficient manner and at the appropriate level.

This policy provides guidelines for handling concerns and complaints by parents and others and is drafted in accordance with the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and takes account of the school's equality duty under the Equality Act 2010.

If you are concerned about the safety of your child, you should immediately notify the person you believe is best placed to take urgent action and confirm this in writing to the CEO.

In addition, please refer to our Safeguarding Policy. This policy complies with our funding agreement and articles of association.

SCOPE AND PUBLICATION

This policy applies to all sections of our schools and provides guidelines for handling concerns and complaints raised by current parents or legal guardians and others. It may, at the Trust's discretion, apply to a parent whose child has recently left the Trust.

Separate procedures apply in the event of a child protection issue or in relation to admissions or exclusions.

Staff wishing to raise a complaint should refer to the Grievance procedure.

Complaints about services provided by other providers who use Trust premises or facilities should be directed to the provider concerned.

Complaints about the Trust's support from parents of children with SEN are within the scope of this policy. Such complaints should first be made to the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). Where parents have specific complaints about the Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) procedures, or about the content of their child's EHCP, the Local Authority should be contacted directly.

This Concerns and Complaints Policy distinguishes between a concern or difficulty, which can usually be resolved informally, and a formal complaint which will require further investigation. The policy is available on the Trust school's websites and can be made available in large print or other accessible formats if required.

Complainants should not approach individual governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis and it may also prevent them from considering complaints at Stage 2 of the procedure.

PROCEDURES

The procedures set out below may be adapted as appropriate to meet the policy aims and circumstances of each case. Please let us know if you are dissatisfied, or have any cause for concern, as soon as possible. We recognise that a difficulty which is not resolved quickly and fairly can soon become a cause of resentment, which would be damaging to our Trust culture.

FOUR STAGES

The Trust's concerns and complaints procedure comprises four stages:

- Stage 1:** Concerns and difficulties, dealt with informally;
- Stage 2:** Complaints formally investigated by the CEO (or designate);
- Stage 3:** Complaints formally reviewed by the Chair of the Local Advisory Board (LAB) (or designate);
- Stage 4:** Complaint Panel Hearing.

TIMESCALES

The Trust aims to resolve any concerns, difficulties and complaints in a timely manner. The timescales for each stage of the procedure are set out below under the relevant section. When this policy refers to school days, we mean Monday to Friday, when the school is open to children during term time.

Some of the procedures may take longer during the holidays when personnel are likely to be on leave. The dates of each term are published on the Trust school's websites. We will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

Although every effort will be made to comply with the time limits specified under each stage of the procedure, it may not always be possible to do so, for example due to the complexity or quantity of matters raised, or due to the unavailability of the complainant to attend a meeting, if offered. In all cases, where a time limit cannot be complied with, the Trust will write to the complainant within the specified time limit, setting out the reasons why the time limit cannot be complied with, and confirming the new time limit which will apply.

COMPLAINTS Roles and Responsibilities

This can be the CEO / Head of School / designated complaints governor / Clerk to Governors or other designated staff, including any staff member providing administrative support.

The Complainant will:

- explain the complaint in full as early as possible
- co-operate with the school in seeking a solution to the complaint
- respond promptly to requests for information or meetings or in agreeing the details of the complaint
- ask for assistance as needed
- treat all those involved in the complaint with respect
- refrain from publicising the details of their complaint on social media and respect confidentiality.

The Investigator

The investigator's role is to establish the facts relevant to the complaint by:

- providing a comprehensive, open, transparent and fair consideration of the complaint through:
- sensitive and thorough interviewing of the complainant to establish what has happened and who has been involved
- interviewing staff and children/young people and other people relevant to the complaint
- consideration of records and other relevant information
- analysing information
- liaising with the complainant and the complaints co-ordinator as appropriate to clarify what the complainant feels would put things right.

The investigator should:

- conduct interviews with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
- keep notes of interviews or arrange for an independent note taker to record minutes of the meeting
- ensure that any papers produced during the investigation are kept securely pending any appeal
- be mindful of the timescales to respond
- prepare a comprehensive report for the headteacher or complaints committee that sets out the facts, identifies solutions and recommends courses of action to resolve problems.

The Complaints Coordinator will:

- keep records of each complaint and how matters proceed (including noting at which stage each complaint is resolved);
- coordinate the complaints procedure across the Trust;
- arrange additional assistance for those raising a concern, difficulty or complaint when required;

- maintain an ongoing training programme for all Trust staff regarding the complaints procedures and this policy;
- monitor the level and type of complaints as well as the keeping, confidentiality and storage of records in relation to complaints, reporting to the CEO on a termly basis;
- keep the Executive Head teacher and Clerk to Governors informed of any complaints being dealt with by the school at Stage 2 to 4.

Clerk to the Governing Body

The Clerk is the contact point for the complainant and the committee and should:

- ensure that all people involved in the complaint procedure are aware of their legal rights and duties, including any under legislation relating to school complaints, education law, the Equality Act 2010, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)
- set the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties (if they are invited to attend) and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- collate any written material relevant to the complaint (for example; stage 1 paperwork, school and complainant submissions) and send it to the parties in advance of the meeting within an agreed timescale
- record the proceedings
- circulate the minutes of the meeting
- notify all parties of the committee's decision.

STAGE 1:

Concerns and difficulties, dealt with informally

The Trust expects that most concerns or difficulties can be resolved informally.

Examples might include: dissatisfaction with an aspect of teaching provided, a class/group allocation, allocation of responsibilities or privileges, a timetable clash, a problem with the school's equipment or provision, or an admin error.

Certain serious complaints such as discrimination, harassment or victimisation are taken very seriously and may need to be dealt with at Stage 2 without action at Stage 1.

Complaints regarding the CEO should be dealt with at Stage 3.

Notification

The complainant should raise the concern or difficulty as soon as possible with the relevant member of the staff as appropriate, either in person or by letter, telephone or email.

If the complainant is unclear who to contact or how to contact them, they should contact the relevant school office. If a concern or difficulty is raised with a member of staff who feels that it raises serious issues which should be dealt with as a formal complaint immediately, the member of staff will tell the complainant that they should put their complaint in writing to the CEO under Stage 2 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Unresolved concerns and difficulties

The Trust will aim to resolve a concern or difficulty within **15 school days** of the date that it was raised.

Where a concern or difficulty has not been resolved by informal means within this time limit, the complainant can submit the matters raised as a formal complaint under Stage 2 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy. If the Trust are unable to meet this deadline, they will provide the complainant with an update and revised response date.

Record of concerns and difficulties

The member of staff dealing with a concern or difficulty will create a written record of the issues raised, the action taken and, if applicable, the resolution reached, which will be retained in a central record.

STAGE 2:

Complaints formally investigated by the CEO / Head of School (or designate)

Notification

A concern or difficulty raised under Stage 1 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy which remains unresolved after **15 school days**, or a serious matter which requires formal investigation from the outset, should be set out in writing and sent to the CEO.

Should a formal written complaint be received by another member of the staff, it will immediately be passed on to the CEO.

The complainant should clearly set out the matters in dispute, the relevant dates, the full names of the persons involved and what the complainant believes the school should do to resolve the complaint.

A template form is attached to this policy at **Appendix 1** to provide guidance on content of the formal written complaint.

Any documentation relied upon by the complainant should be attached to the formal complaint.

If the complainant requires assistance with writing the formal complaint, because of, for example, a disability, he/she should contact the school office.

Acknowledgement

The formal complaint will be acknowledged in writing within **five school days** of receipt.

The acknowledgement will confirm the date that the formal complaint was received, the action to be taken and the specified time limit.

Investigation

The CEO will be provided with the records of the Stage 1 informal procedure (if applicable) and will then proceed to investigate the complaint.

This will involve obtaining and considering all documentation held by the Trust which is relevant to the complaint. If additional information is required from the complainant, and others involved, this may be requested from them over the telephone or in writing.

If the CEO considers it to be appropriate the complainant will be offered a meeting to discuss the issues raised. This may take place at the beginning of the investigation to clarify any matters which are unclear, or after the investigation has taken place with the aim of reaching an amicable resolution.

Outcome

The CEO / Head of School will write to the complainant confirming the outcome of the investigation within **20 school days** from the date the complaint was received.

The letter will set out the individual matters raised by the complainant, the findings made by the CEO during the investigation, and the conclusion reached.

The letter will inform the complainant that, if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 2 investigation, they should write to the Chair of the LAB within **five school days** of receipt of the letter asking for their complaint and the Stage 2 investigation to be reviewed by the Chair of the LAB under Stage 3 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Where the complaint was received during a school holiday or within 20 days from the end of a term or half term, the CEO will endeavour to expedite the investigation wherever possible.

Note: Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaints procedure. Complainants will be advised that any staff conduct complaints will be considered under staff disciplinary procedures, if appropriate, but outcomes will not be shared with them.

Delegation

The CEO may ask a senior member of the staff to act as Investigator and may involve one or more members of the LAB (but not all the Local Governors).

STAGE 3:

Complaints formally reviewed by the Chair of the LAB (or designate)

Notification

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaint under Stage 2 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy, the complainant may write to the Chair of the LAB within **five school days** of receiving the letter confirming the outcome following Stage 2.

The complainant should not repeat the matters raised in their original letter or attach documentation already provided but should clearly set out how and why the complainant does not accept the findings made under Stage 2. If the complaint is regarding the CEO, the complainant should also write to the Chair of the LAB. The complainant should clearly set out the matters in dispute, the relevant dates, the full names of the persons involved and what the complainant believes the Trust should do to resolve the complaint.

A template form is attached to this policy at **Appendix 1** to provide guidance on content of the formal written complaint. Any documentation relied upon by the complainant should be attached to the formal complaint.

Acknowledgement

The complainant's letter will be acknowledged within **five school days** of receipt.

The acknowledgement letter will confirm the date that the formal complaint was received, the action to be taken, and the specified time limit.

Action by the Chair

The Chair of the LAB will review all the documentation received and consider the matters raised in the complaint and the investigation carried out under Stage 2 (if applicable).

If the Chair considers it to be appropriate the complainant will be offered a meeting to discuss the issues raised. The meeting will usually take place after the review has been completed with the aim of reaching a mutually acceptable resolution.

Outcome

The Chair of the LAB will write to the complainant confirming the outcome of the review within **20 school days** from the date that the request for a review was received.

The letter will set out whether the Chair agrees with the findings and conclusion under Stage 2, and give reasons, as well as responding to any criticisms of the Stage 2 investigation.

Where the request for a review was received during a school holiday, or within 20 days from the end of a term or half term, the Chair will endeavour to expedite the review wherever possible.

The letter will inform the complainant that, if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 3 review, they should write to the Complaints Coordinator within **five school days** of receipt of the letter requesting a Complaint Panel Hearing under Stage 4 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Delegation

In certain cases, the Chair of the LAB may delegate the review to another member of the LAB to deal with in accordance with the procedure outlined above.

STAGE 4:

Complaint Panel Hearing

Overview

A Complaint Panel Hearing is a review of the decisions taken by the CEO and, where relevant, the Chair of the LAB.

The Panel will not consider any new areas of complaint which have not been previously raised as part of the complaints procedure.

Notification

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the review under Stage 3, or the CEO's decision under Stage 2, and does not wish to invoke Stage 3, the complaint may be referred to the Panel Hearing by writing to the Complaints Coordinator within **five school days** of receiving the Chair's or CEO's decision.

The request will usually only be considered if the complainant has completed the procedures at Stages 1 and 2, and where appropriate, Stage 3.

The complainant should not repeat the matters raised in their original letter or attach documentation already provided but should clearly set out how and why the complainant does not accept the findings made under Stages 2 and/or 3.

Acknowledgement

The Trust will write to the complainant within **five school days** acknowledging receipt of their request.

Composition of the Panel

The Complaints Coordinator will be responsible for convening the Panel as soon as reasonably practicable.

The Panel will normally consist of a minimum of three individuals who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint.

Where there is a panel hearing of a complaint, one panel member is independent of the management and running of the school.

Convening the Complaint Panel Hearing

The Complaints Coordinator will liaise with the Panel, the complainant and the Trust's representative to agree a mutually convenient date for the Panel Hearing, which will usually take place within **20 school days** of receipt of the complainant's request, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The Panel will not normally sit during half term or the school holidays.

The Complaints Coordinator will write to the complainant confirming the date, time and place of the Panel Hearing within **five school days** of the date that the acknowledgement letter was sent, together with brief details of the Panel members who will be present.

If the Panel Hearing will not take place within **20 school days** of receipt of the complainant's request, the letter will set out the exceptional circumstances involved.

The Panel reserves the right to convene at their convenience rather than that of the complainant.

Attendance

The complainant will be allowed to attend the Hearing and be accompanied if he/she wishes.

For the avoidance of doubt, the complainant's companion will be present for moral support only and will not play any part in the proceedings, unless invited to do so by the Panel.

The Panel Hearing is **not** a legal hearing and it is not appropriate for either the complainant or the Trust to be legally represented.

The Trust will be represented at the Panel Hearing by the person who dealt with the complaint under Stage 3, which will usually be the Chair of the LAB, supported by the CEO where appropriate.

The Role of the Panel

The Panel's task is to establish the facts surrounding the complaints that have been made by considering the documents provided by both parties and any representations made by the complainant, the CEO or the Chair of the LAB.

If, after establishing the facts, the Panel consider that the complaint is valid, they will uphold the complaint.

If the Panel decide that the complaint is not made out, they will dismiss the complaint.

They will make these decisions on the balance of probabilities.

Hearing

The Hearing will be chaired by one member of the Panel (chosen by themselves) and will be conducted in an informal manner.

The Hearing will be conducted in such a way as to ensure that all those present have the opportunity of asking questions and making comments in an appropriate manner.

The Hearing is not a legal proceeding and all statements made at the Hearing will be unsworn.

Any person who is dissatisfied with any aspect of the way the Hearing is conducted must say so before the proceedings go any further and his/her comments will be recorded.

Conduct

All those attending the Hearing are expected to be polite and show courtesy, restraint and good manners or after due warning, the Hearing may be adjourned or terminated at the discretion of the chair of the Panel.

If terminated on the grounds of poor conduct, the previous decision regarding the complaint will stand.

Adjournment

The Chair of the Panel may, at his/her discretion, adjourn the Hearing for further investigation of any relevant issue. This may include an adjournment to take legal advice.

Notes

All present will be entitled to make their own notes for reference purposes if they so wish.

A handwritten minute of the proceedings will be taken during the Hearing.

Private proceeding

The Hearing is a private proceeding. No notes or other records, or oral statement, about any matter discussed in or arising from the Hearing shall be made available directly or indirectly to the press or other media.

Decision

After due consideration of the matters discussed at the Hearing, the Panel shall reach a decision unless there is an agreed position.

The Panel's decision, findings and any recommendations will be notified to the complainant within **10 school days** of the Hearing, as well as to the Trust representative, the CEO and where relevant, any person about whom the complaint has been made.

The decision of the Panel will be final.

REFERRAL TO THE ESFA

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the Trust's complaints procedure, they can refer their complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA will check whether the complaint has been dealt with properly by the Trust. The ESFA will not overturn a Trust's decision about a complaint, however, it will look into:

- whether there was undue delay, or the Trust did not comply with its own complaints procedure;
- whether the Trust was in breach of its funding agreement with the secretary of state;
- whether the Trust has failed to comply with any other legal obligation.

For more information or to refer a complaint, see <http://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>

If the complainant believes the school did not handle their complaint in accordance with the published complaints procedure or they acted unlawfully or unreasonably in the exercise of their duties under education law, they can contact the Department for Education after they have completed Stage 2. The Department for Education will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by [the Trust](#). They will consider whether [the Trust](#) has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint.

The complainant can refer their complaint to the Department for Education online at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus, by telephone on: 0370 000 2288 or by writing to:

Department for Education
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State (or someone acting on his or her behalf) requests access to them and except to the extent required by law.

THE SOUTH LINCOLNSHIRE ACADEMIES TRUST

The Trust will ensure that the CEO and the Clerk to Governors is informed of any complaints at Stage 2 to 4 without delay and is kept informed as to all stages of the complaint thereafter.

RECORD KEEPING

A written record will be made about each concern and complaint received by the Trust and at which stage of the procedure each was resolved, the action taken by the Trust (whether or not the complaints were upheld), and the final outcome.

For further information, please refer to our Retaining Records in Schools Policy.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE CHAIR OF THE LOCAL ADVISORY BOARD

If a complaint is about the conduct of the Chair of the Local Advisory Board, the Chair of Governors or Deputy Chair of Governors, who are Trustees will consider the complaint under Stage 2 or Stage 3 of this Concerns and Complaints Policy.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE SLAT CEO OR HEAD OF SCHOOL

If a complaint is about the conduct of the SLAT CEO or Head of School, this should be reported through the Whistleblowing Policy.

LATE COMPLAINTS

Where a complaint is submitted more than three months after the incident or event (or where the complaint relates to a series of incidents or events, more than three months from the date of the latest incident or event), the Trust reserves the right to refuse to investigate the complaint under this Concerns and Complaints Policy if it appears reasonable and fair to do so, having regard to the circumstances surrounding the complaint.

Where the Trust decides that a complaint which was submitted late will not be investigated, the Trust will write to the complainant notifying them of the decision within **five school days** of the complaint being received.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision not to investigate a complaint which was submitted late, the complainant may write to the Chair of the LAB asking for the decision to be reviewed.

The Chair will be provided with all documentation relating to the complaint, together with the letter from the Trust to the complainant and will review the decision not to investigate the complaint. The Chair will **not** investigate the complaint itself during this review.

The Chair will write to the complainant with the outcome of the review within **10 school days** of the date that the letter from the complainant seeking the review was received and provide the Trust with a copy of the letter.

If the Chair quashes the decision not to investigate the complaint, it will be referred to the Trust to be dealt with under this Concerns and Complaints Policy in the usual way.

If the Chair upholds the decision not to investigate the complaint, the complainant may refer the concern or complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

ANONYMOUS COMPLAINTS

The Trust will not investigate anonymous complaints under the procedure in this Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Anonymous complaints will be referred to the CEO who will decide what, if any, action should be taken.

PERSISTENT OR REPTITIVE COMPLAINTS

South Lincolnshire Academies 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 our 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 Trust defines unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the Trust, such as, if the complainant:

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of the complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance;
- refuses to co-operate with the complaints investigation process;
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure;
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure;
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on;
- raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales;
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced;
- changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds;
- repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed);
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the Trust's 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 the Trust's time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with;
- uses threats to intimidate;
- uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence;
- knowingly provides falsified information;
- published unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the Trust that relates to their complaint, while the 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 CEO or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an '*unreasonable*' marking.

If the behaviour continues, the CEO will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unacceptable and ask 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 be reviewed after six months.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from any Trust premises.

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

DUPLICATE COMPLAINTS

If we have resolved a complaint under this procedure and receive a duplicate complaint on the same subject from a partner, family member or other individual, we will assess whether there are aspects that we hadn't previously considered, or any new information we need to take into account.

If we are satisfied that there are no new aspects, we will:

- Tell the new complainant that we have already investigated and responded to this issue, and that the local process is complete

If there are new aspects, we will follow this procedure again.

LEARNING LESSONS

The Trust Governing board will review any underlying issues raised by complaints with the CEO where appropriate, and respecting confidentiality, to determine whether there are any improvements that the school can make to its procedures or practice to help prevent similar events in the future.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A summary of complaints received will be included in the CEO's annual report to the Board of Trustees, with advice on any implications for policy.

This policy will be reviewed every year.

APPENDIX 1

FORMAL COMPLAINT FORM

Please complete and return to the school who will acknowledge receipt and contact you to explain what action will be taken. Please return this form to: clerktogovernors@slat.org.uk.

Your Name:	Student's Name:
Your Relationship to Student:	Student's Year / Form:
Address & Postcode:	Daytime Telephone Number:
	Evening Telephone Number:
Full Details of Complaint (including the names of persons involved & the dates of incidents referred to):	
What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint (for example, who did you speak to and what was their response)?	
What actions did you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?	
Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.	
Signature:	Date:

For Official Use:		
Date Acknowledgement Sent:		
Name of Person Complaint Referred To:		
Signature:		Date: