

Vision statement
BRIDGE is a family of schools committed to high performance. We embrace a universal culture of excellence in the learning communities we build.
Aims
To continue building a Multi Academy Trust that promotes strong values, an excellent education for all children, develops highly effective School Teams, is financially secure, and ensures effective governance.
To nurture, support and encourage aspirations by providing excellent learning opportunities, inspiring teaching environments, and a creative approach to curriculum subjects that secures engagement from all our learners resulting in high levels of academic progress and outcomes.
To develop outstanding leadership, teaching and support teams by valuing committed, reflective staff, and providing rigorous and challenging professional development for continual School Improvement.
To develop hubs as centres of learning excellence to disseminate best practice, firstly within and then beyond, the Trust.
To successfully engage and communicate with parents/carers in our local communities, supporting the children's progress, well-being and achievement.

Complaints Policy

Purpose
The Trust recognises that it needs procedures in place to handle any type of complaint which may be made against it irrespective of the nature of the complaint. It also recognises that many complaints can start with someone 'raising a concern' which can usually be dealt with simply and informally.

February 2022

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1. Aims

Our school/trust aims to meet its statutory obligations when responding to complaints from parents of pupils at the school, and other non-parental complaints.

When responding to complaints, we aim to:

- Be impartial and non-adversarial
- Facilitate a full and fair investigation by an independent person or panel, where necessary
- Address all the points at issue and provide an effective and prompt response
- Respect complainants’ desire for confidentiality
- Treat complainants with respect and courtesy
- Make sure that any decisions we make are lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate, in line with the principles of administrative law
- Keep complainants informed of the progress of the complaints process
- Consider how the complaint can feed into school/trust improvement evaluation processes

We try to resolve concerns or complaints by informal means wherever possible. Where this is not possible, formal procedures will be followed.

The school/trust will aim to give the complainant the opportunity to complete the complaints procedure in full.

To support this, we will make sure we publicise the existence of this policy and make it available on the school website.

Throughout the process, we will be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved, and make any reasonable adjustments needed to accommodate individuals.

2. Definitions and scope

2.1 Definitions

The DfE guidance explains the difference between a concern and a complaint:

- A **concern** is defined as “an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought”
- A **complaint** is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action”

It is in everyone’s interest that concerns and complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to use the formal stages of this Complaints Procedure. We take concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

If you have difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff, the Headteacher will refer you to another staff member to talk to. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, the Headteacher will also refer you to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the concern objectively and impartially is more important.

2.2 Scope

The school/trust intends to resolve complaints informally where possible, at the earliest possible stage. There may be occasions when complainants would like to raise their concerns formally. This policy outlines the procedure relating to handling such complaints.

This policy does **not** cover complaints procedures relating to:

- Admissions
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs (SEN)
- Safeguarding matters
- Exclusion
- Whistleblowing
- Staff grievances
- Staff discipline
- Withdrawal from the curriculum (parents and carers can withdraw their child from any aspect of religious education, including the daily act of collective worship. They do not have to explain why)

Please see our separate policies for procedures relating to these types of complaint.

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

Anonymous Complaints

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation. If an anonymous complaint contains quantifiable or verifiable evidence, an investigation may be carried out following this procedure. The school will not engage with anonymous complaints through intermediaries.

The school will record that an anonymous complaint has been received and the determination, i.e. it either is not quantifiable and no further action is required, or it contains quantifiable or verifiable accusations, and will be investigated.

3. Principles for investigation

When investigating a complaint, we will try to clarify:

- What has happened
- Who was involved
- What we can learn to avoid a similar situation
- How we move forward as amicably as possible

3.1 Time scales

The complainant must raise the complaint within 3 months of the incident. If the complaint is about a series of related incidents, they must raise the complaint within 3 months of the last incident. However, we would always recommend any concerns/complaints are raised as soon as possible in order to effect a speedy resolution.

We will consider exceptions to this time frame in circumstances where there were valid reasons for not making a complaint at that time and the complaint can still be investigated in a fair manner for all involved. When complaints are made out of term time, we will consider them to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

If at any point we cannot meet the time scales we have set out in this policy, we will:

- Set new time limits with the complainant
- Send the complainant details of the new deadline and explain the delay

We will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period. You should be aware that any complaints that are sent in when the school/central office is unmanned during holiday periods, might not receive an acknowledgement until new term begins.

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police, local authority (LA) safeguarding teams or Tribunals, this may affect our ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations. If this happens, we will inform you of a proposed new timescale.

If a complainant commences legal action in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether to suspend this complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

4. Stages of complaint

4.1 Each stage of the procedure must be followed prior to the complainant being able to escalate a complaint to the next stage.

4.2 Stage 1: informal

The school will take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter quickly. It may be the case that the provision or clarification of information will resolve the issue.

The complainant should raise the complaint as soon as possible with the relevant member of staff or the headteacher, either in person or by telephone, email or letter. If the complainant is unclear who to contact or how to contact them, they should contact the school office (see school website for contact details).

The school will acknowledge informal complaints in no more than 5 school days but ideally much sooner and get back to anyone raising the concern quickly. If an investigation is needed to gather more information this will take place as quickly as possible but not longer than 5 further school days.

The informal stage could involve a meeting between the complainant and the relevant member of staff or another more senior member of staff or the headteacher.

We endeavour to resolve as many complaints as possible informally but if the complaint is not resolved in this way, the complainant can escalate to a formal complaint (Stage 2).

4.3 Stage 2: formal

The formal stage involves the complainant putting the complaint in writing to the headteacher.

In exceptional circumstances, where a complainant requires support, the school will accept a concern or a complaint raised on their behalf by a third party, as long as the complainant is named and has given appropriate consent.

Complaints against school staff (except the Headteacher) should be made in the first instance, to the Headteacher via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints that involve or are about the Headteacher should be addressed to the Chair of Governors via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints about the Chair of Governors, the Executive Heads, Chief Executive or any governors or trustees should be addressed to the Clerk to the Trust Board via complaints@bridgeschools.co.uk. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

The complainant should provide as much information as possible including details such as relevant dates, times and the names of witnesses of events. The complainant should also state what they feel would resolve the complaint.

If complainants need assistance raising a formal complaint, they can contact the school office (see school website for contact details).

The headteacher will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by email or letter) within 5 school days.

The headteacher (or other person appointed by the headteacher for this purpose) will then conduct their own investigation. The written conclusion of this investigation will be sent to the complainant within 15 school days.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response and wishes to proceed to the next stage of this procedure, they should inform the Chair of Governors in writing within 10 school days.

If the complainant chooses not to escalate the complaint within 10 school days of their written response from the school, then the school will consider the complaint closed and no further action will be taken.

4.4 Stage 3: Escalation to Chair of Governors

The complainant should forward the received written conclusion from the school to the Chair of Governors by letter or email marked private and confidential.

The complainant should state why they are not happy with the written conclusion of the investigation and what they feel would resolve the complaint.

Email: complaints@bridgeschools.co.uk (F.A.O. Chair of Governors for XXX Primary)

Post: Complaints - F.A.O. Chair of Governors for XXX Primary (address can be found on school website)

The chair of governors will then follow the same process as Stage 2.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response and wishes to proceed to the final formal stage of this procedure, they should inform the Area Executive Head in writing within 10 school days.

If the complainant chooses not to escalate the complaint within 10 school days of their written response from the Chair of Governors, then the school governing body will consider the complaint closed and no further action will be taken.

4.5 Stage 4: Escalation to Area Executive Head

The complainant should forward the received written conclusion from the Chair of Governors by letter or email marked private and confidential.

The complainant should state why they are not happy with the written conclusion of the investigation and what they feel would resolve the complaint.

Email: complaints@bridgeschools.co.uk (F.A.O. Area Executive Head for XXX Primary)

Post: Complaints - F.A.O Area Executive Head for XXX Primary, Bridge Schools, 21 Callywith Gate, Bodmin PL31 2RQ

The Area Executive Head will then follow the same process as Stage 2.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response and wishes to appeal, they should inform the Trust in writing within 10 school days.

If the complainant chooses not to appeal within 10 school days of their written response from the Area Executive Head, then the complaint will be considered closed and no further action will be taken.

4.6 Stage 5: Review panel

Convening the panel

Complaints which are escalated to the trust for panel hearing stage if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the final stage of the formal process, will be acknowledged in writing within 5 school days.

The panel will be appointed by or on behalf of the Trust Board and will consist of at least 3 people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. At least 1 panel member will be independent of the management and running of the school. The panel will not be made up solely of local governing body members, as they are not independent of the management and running of the school.

The panel will have access to the existing record of the complaint's progress.

The complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the review panel. The Trust will aim to find a date within 20 school days of the request, where possible.

If the complainant rejects the offer of 3 proposed dates without good reason, the Trust will set a date. The hearing will go ahead using written submissions from all parties.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least 5 school days before the date of the meeting.

At the meeting

The meeting will be held in private. Electronic recordings of meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs require it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending will be sought before meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

At the review panel meeting, the complainant and representatives from the school, as appropriate, will be present. Each will have an opportunity to set out written or oral submissions prior to the meeting.

The complainant must be allowed to attend the panel hearing and be accompanied if they wish. We don't encourage either party to bring legal representation, but will consider it on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by their union.

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

At the meeting, each individual will have the opportunity to give statements and present their evidence, and witnesses will be called, as appropriate, to present their evidence.

The panel, the complainant and the school representative(s) will be given the chance to ask and reply to questions. Once the complainant and school representative(s) have presented their cases, they will be asked to leave, and evidence will then be considered.

The panel will then put together its findings and recommendations from the case. The panel will also provide copies of the minutes of the hearing and the findings and recommendations to the complainant and, where relevant, the individual who is the subject of the complaint, and make a copy available for inspection by the Trust Board and headteacher.

The outcome

The committee can:

- Uphold the complaint, in whole or in part
- Dismiss the complaint, in whole or in part

If the complaint is upheld, the committee will:

- Decide the appropriate action to resolve the complaint
- Where appropriate, recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future

The trust will inform those involved of the decision in writing within 10 school days – which are final.

5. Referring complaints on completion of the Trust's procedure

If the complainant is unsatisfied 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. The ESFA will not overturn a trust's decision about a complaint, but will intervene if a school or trust has:

- Breached a clause in its funding agreement
- Failed to act in line with its duties under education law
- Acted (or is proposing to act) unreasonably when exercising its functions

If the trust's complaints procedure is found to not meet regulations, the trust will be asked to correct its procedure accordingly.

For more information or to refer a complaint, see the following webpage:

<https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>

We will include this information in the outcome letter to complainants.

6. Persistent complaints

6.1 Unreasonably persistent complainants and unreasonable complainant behaviour

Bridge Schools are 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 schools. 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 school, such as, if the complainant:

- 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
- 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 or with good practice
- 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 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 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
- publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

Steps we will take

We will take every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns and give them a clear statement of our position and their options. We will maintain our role as an objective arbiter throughout the process, including when we meet with individuals. We will follow our complaints procedure as normal (as outlined above) wherever possible.

If the complainant continues to contact the school/trust in a disruptive way, we may put communications strategies in place. We may:

- Give the complainant a single point of contact via an email address
- Limit the number of times the complainant can make contact, such as a fixed number per term
- Ask the complainant to engage a third party to act on their behalf, such as Citizens Advice
- Put any other strategy in place as necessary

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school 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 Headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an '*unreasonable*' marking.

If the behaviour continues, the headteacher will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and ask them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school 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.

If at any level a complainant attempts to reopen an issue or a closely related issue that has already been dealt with under this complaints procedure, the Chair may write to the complainant to inform them that the procedure has been exhausted and the matter closed, unless they can provide further new evidence. The school will not accept new evidence from another complainant that this complainant wishes to use within their complaint. Each complainant will be considered separately and confidentially. The complainant will be offered 15 school days to provide this. Thereafter, if nothing more is forthcoming, the Chair will inform the complainant that the school will not respond to any further correspondence on this issue or a closely related issue.

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 the school.

Stopping responding

We may stop responding to the complainant when all of these factors are met:

- We believe we have taken all reasonable steps to help address their concerns
- We have provided a clear statement of our position and their options
- The complainant contacts us repeatedly, and we believe their intention is to cause disruption or inconvenience

Where we stop responding, we will inform the individual that we intend to do so. We will also explain that we will still consider any new complaints they make.

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 our school site(s).

6.2 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.

6.3 Complaint campaigns

Where the school/trust receives a large volume of complaints about the same topic or subject, especially if these come from complainants unconnected with the school, the school may respond to these complaints by:

- Publishing a single response on the school website
- Sending a template response to all of the complainants

If complainants are not satisfied with the trust's response, or wish to pursue the complaint further, the normal procedures will apply.

7. Record keeping

The school will record the progress of all complaints, including information about actions taken at all stages, the stage at which the complaint was resolved, and the final outcome. The records will also include copies of letters and emails, and notes relating to meetings and phone calls.

This material will be treated as confidential and held securely and will be viewed only by those involved in investigating the complaint or on the review panel.

This is except where the secretary of state (or someone acting on their behalf) or the complainant requests access to records of a complaint through a freedom of information (FOI) request or through a subject access request under the terms of the Data Protection Act, or where the material must be made available during a school inspection.

Records of complaints will be kept securely, only for as long as necessary and in line with data protection law, our privacy notices and record retention schedule.

The details of the complaint, including the names of individuals involved, will not be shared with the whole local governing body in case a review panel needs to be organised at a later point.

Where the local governing body is aware of the substance of the complaint before the review panel stage, the school will (where reasonably practicable) arrange for an independent panel to hear the complaint.

Complainants also have the right to request an independent panel if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings. The decision to approve this request is made by the local governing body, who will not unreasonably withhold consent.

8. Learning lessons

The senior leadership team will review any underlying issues raised by complaints with the Headteacher, 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.

9. Monitoring arrangements

The CEO will monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure in making sure that complaints are handled properly. The CEO will track the number and nature of complaints, and review underlying issues with the senior leadership team as stated in section 9.

The complaints records are logged and managed by the central team.

This policy will be reviewed by the Trust Board every 3 years. At each review, the policy will be approved by the Trust Board.

10. Legislation and guidance

This document meets the requirements set out in part 7 of the schedule to [the Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), which applies to academies and state schools that we must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents of pupils at the school.

It is also based on guidance published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on [creating a complaints procedure that complies with the above regulations](#), and refers to [good practice guidance on setting up complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE).

This policy complies with our funding agreement and articles of association.

In addition, it addresses duties set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework with regards to dealing with complaints about the school's fulfilment of Early Years Foundation Stage requirements.

11. Links with other policies

Policies dealing with other forms of complaints include:

- Child protection and safeguarding policy and procedures
- Admissions policy
- Exclusions policy
- Staff grievance procedures
- Staff disciplinary procedures
- Whistleblowing policy
- SEN policy and information report
- Privacy notices

APPENDIX 1 – ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The complainant

The complainant will get a more effective and timely response to their complaint if they:

- Follow these procedures
- Co-operate with the school/trust throughout the process
- Ask for assistance as needed
- Treat all those involved with respect
- Not publish details about the complaint on social media

The investigator

An appropriate independent individual will be appointed to look into the complaint and establish the facts. They will:

- Interview all relevant parties, keeping notes
- Consider records and any written evidence and keep these securely
- Prepare a comprehensive report to the headteacher or complaints committee which includes the facts and potential solutions These notes will not be published; they will only be shared with the head teacher/ most senior member of staff to aid a speedy resolution.

The complaints co-ordinator

The complaints co-ordinator can be:

- The headteacher or an Area Executive Head
- Any other staff member providing administrative support
- The complaints co-ordinator will:
 - Keep the complainant up to date at each stage in the procedure
 - Make sure the process runs smoothly by liaising with all
 - Be aware of issues relating to:
 - Sharing third party information
 - Additional support needed by complainants, for example interpretation support or where
- the complainant is a child or young person
- Keep records

Committee chair

The committee chair will:

- Chair the meeting, ensuring that everyone is treated with respect throughout
- Make sure all parties see the relevant information, understand the purpose of the committee, and are allowed to present their case.

APPENDIX 2 - COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

(Note: Each stage of the complaints procedure must be followed prior to next stage escalation.)

