



Complaints Policy

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1 Statement of Policy

The Constellation Trust must be clear about the difference between a concern and a complaint. Taking informal concerns seriously at the earliest stage will reduce the numbers that develop into formal complaints.

Concerns should be handled, if at all possible, without the need for formal procedures. The requirement to have a complaints procedure need not in any way undermine efforts to resolve the concern informally. In most cases the class teacher or the individual delivering the service, in the case of extended school provision, will receive the first approach. It would be helpful if staff were able to resolve issues on the spot, including apologising where necessary or within 5 working days.

2 Dealing with Complaints: Formal Procedures

Formal procedures will need to be invoked when initial attempts to resolve the issue are unsuccessful and the person raising the concern remains dissatisfied and wishes to take the matter further. Such complaints should be made in writing to the Head of School.

3 Aim

The aim of this policy is to enable constructive feedback to be made to the Trust and any issues or incidents to be dealt with effectively and efficiently.

4 Framework of Principles

4.1 An effective Complaints Procedure will:

- encourage resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible
- be easily accessible and publicised
- be simple to understand and use
- be impartial
- be non-adversarial
- allow swift handling with established time limits for action and keeping people informed of the progress
- ensure a full and fair investigation by an independent person where necessary
- respect people's desire for confidentiality
- address all the points at issue and provide an effective response and appropriate redress, where necessary
- provide information to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) so that services can be improved

4.2 Investigating Complaints

At each stage, the person investigating the complaint, the nominated person, should ensure that they:

- establish what has happened so far, and who has been involved
- clarify the nature of the complaint, through a written statement, and what remains unresolved
- meet with the complainant or contact them (if unsure or further information is necessary)
- clarify what the complainant feels would put things right
- interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, with a colleague present or parent/carer in the case of a student
- conduct the interview with an open mind and be prepared to persist in the questioning
- keep notes of the interview, indicating whether they were resolved at preliminary stage or whether they proceeded to panel hearing

4.3 Resolving Complaints

At each stage in the procedure the individual school/academy within the Trust will consider ways to resolve a complaint. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- an apology
- an explanation
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur
- an explanation of the steps staff has taken to ensure that it will not happen again
- an undertaking to review Trust policies in light of the complaint

Complainants should be encouraged to state what actions they feel might resolve the problem at any stage. An admission that the school/academy could have handled the situation better is not the same as an admission of negligence. It is important to clarify any misunderstanding that might have occurred in order to create a positive atmosphere in which to discuss any outstanding issues.

Vexatious complaints will not be investigated.

4.4 Time Limits

Complaints will be considered, and resolved, as quickly and efficiently as possible. Realistic time limits for each action within each stage must be set and communicated to the complainant. However, where further investigations are necessary, new time limits can be set and the complainant sent details of the new deadline and an explanation for the delay.

- 4.4.1 At each stage, clarification of exactly who will be involved, what will happen, and how long it will take must be communicated. There may, on occasion, be the need for some flexibility; for example, the possibility of further meetings between the complainant and the member of staff directly involved and further investigations may be required by the Head of School after a meeting with the complainant.

The following stages are likely to be sufficient:

Stage 1 – Informal

Complaint heard by member of staff concerned, recorded and a response given within 5 working days.

Stage 2 – Formal

If the complaint is not resolved at the informal stage, or the complainant feels the concerns are more serious in nature, than the complaint should be put in writing and passed on to the Head of School (or the Clerk to the Local Governing Body (LGB) for the attention of the Chair of the LGB if the complaint is about the Head of School). Resolution within 10 working days or complaint is escalated to next stage.

Stage 3 – Panel Hearing

Complaint heard by the Complaints Committee (2 members of the LGB who have not been involved in the complaint plus 1 representative who is independent of the management and running of the school/academy). This will usually take place within 10 days of the receipt of the written complaint. The complainant will be informed in writing of the outcome within 5 days of the panel hearing and the matter will then be closed.

If the complainant feels that the LGB has acted illegally or arbitrarily in the handling of the complaint, then the complainant should refer to Education Funding Agency for procedures dealing with complaints about Academies.

4.5 **Managing and Recording Complaints**

A complaint may be made in person, by telephone, or in writing. At the end of a meeting or telephone call, the member of staff should ensure that the complainant and the school/academy have the same understanding of what was discussed and agreed. A brief note of meetings and telephone calls should be kept and a copy of any written response added to the record. The Complaints Coordinator should be responsible for the records and hold them centrally. All correspondence, statements and records of complaint must be kept confidential but may be shown to HMI Inspectors if requested.

5 **Board of Directors Review**

The Board of Directors will monitor the level and nature of complaints and review the outcomes on a regular basis to ensure the effectiveness of the procedure and make changes where necessary. Preferably, complaints information shared with the whole Board of Directors will not name individuals. The process of listening to and resolving complaints will contribute to Trust improvement. When individual complaints are heard, underlying issues that need to be addressed may arise. The monitoring and review of complaints by the school/academy and the Board of Directors can be a useful tool in evaluating the Trust's performance.

Stage 1 - Informal

Complaint heard by member of staff/school/academy involved

It is in the interests of everyone that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. The experience of the first contact between the complainant and the school/academy can be crucial in determining whether the complaint will escalate. To that end, if staff are made aware of the procedure, they know what to do when they receive a complaint.

It would assist the procedure if the school/academy respected the views of a complainant who indicates that he/she would have difficulty discussing a complaint with a particular member of staff. In these cases, the relevant member of SLT can refer the complainant to another staff member. Where the complaint concerns the Head of School, the relevant member of SLT can refer the complainant to the Executive Principal/CEO or the Chair of the LGB.

Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels too compromised to deal with a complaint, the relevant member of SLT may consider referring the complainant to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the complaint objectively and impartially is crucial.

Where the first approach is made to a Governor, the next step would be to refer the complainant to the appropriate person and advise them about the procedure. Governors are advised to refer any complaints they receive to the Chair of the LGB.

Stage 2 Formal

Complaint heard by the Head of School

At this point, the complainant may be dissatisfied with the way the complaint was handled at stage one as well as pursuing their initial complaint. In this case, the complaint will be heard by the Head of School or Deputy Head of School.

The complainant should put their concerns in writing to the Head of School. This should include details which might assist the investigation and an indication of what actions the complainant feels would resolve the complaint.

The Head of School should ensure that an investigation is carried out thoroughly and responsibly. It is the responsibility of the Head of School to select an appropriate person to carry out any investigation.

Once the information from the investigation has been reviewed, the Head of School should meet with the complainant to attempt to resolve the issue and to write to the complainant to inform them of the outcome.

Stage 3:

Complaint heard by Complaints Panel of the Local Governing Body

The complainant should write to the Chair of the LGB giving details of the complaint. The Chair, or a nominated Governor, will convene a complaints panel, none of whose members will have been directly involved in previous consideration of the complaint and one member who will be independent of the school/academy (i.e. a representative who is independent of the management and running of the school/academy).

The Complaints Panel hearing is the last school/academy based stage of the complaints process, and is not convened to merely rubber-stamp previous decisions.

Individual complaints would not be heard by the whole LGB or Board of Directors at any stage, as this could compromise the impartiality of any panel set up for a disciplinary hearing against a member of staff following a serious complaint.

The LGB or Board of Directors may nominate a number of members with delegated powers to hear complaints at that stage, and set out its terms of reference. These can include:

- drawing up its procedures
- hearing individual appeals
- making recommendations on policy as a result of complaints

The procedure adopted by the panel for hearing appeals would normally be part of the Trust's complaints procedure. The panel can be drawn from the nominated members and will consist of at least three people. The panel may choose their own chair.

The Remit of the Complaints Panel

The panel can:

- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part
- uphold the complaint in whole or in part
- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
- recommend changes to the school/academy's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur

There are several points a Governor or Director sitting on a complaints panel needs to remember:

- It is important that the appeal hearing is independent and impartial and that it is seen to be so. No Governor or Director may sit on the panel if they have had a prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it. In deciding the make-up of the panel, Governors/Directors need to try and ensure that it is a cross-section of the categories of Director and sensitive to the issues of race, gender and religious affiliation
- The aim of the hearing, which needs to be held in private, is to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the school/academy and the complainant. However, it has to be recognised the complainant might not be satisfied with the outcome if the hearing does not find in their favour. It may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations which will satisfy the complainant that his or her complaint has been taken seriously
- An effective panel will acknowledge that many complainants feel nervous and inhibited in a formal setting. Parents/carers often feel emotional when discussing an issue that affects their child, and may choose to be accompanied. The panel Chair will ensure that the proceedings are as welcoming as possible. The layout of the room will set the tone and care is needed to ensure the setting is informal and not adversarial
- Extra care needs to be taken when the complainant is a child. Careful consideration of the atmosphere and proceedings will ensure that the child does not feel intimidated. The panel needs to be aware of the views of the child and give them equal consideration to those of adults. Where the child's parent/carer is the complainant, it would be helpful to give the parent/carer the opportunity to say which parts of the hearing, if any, the child needs to attend
- The Governors or Directors sitting on the panel need to be aware of the complaints procedure

6 Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 The Role of the Clerk

Any panel or group of Governors/Directors considering complaints should be clerked. The Clerk would be the contact point for the complainant and be required to:

- set the date, time and venue of the hearing, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- collate any written material and send it to the parties in advance of the hearing
- meet and welcome the parties as they arrive at the hearing
- record the proceedings
- notify all parties of the panel's decision

6.2 The Role of the Chair of Governors or the nominated Director

The nominated Director role:

- Check that the correct procedure has been followed
- If a hearing is appropriate, notify the Clerk to arrange the panel

6.3 The Role of the Chair of the Panel

The Chair of the Panel has a key role, ensuring that:

- the remit of the panel is explained to the parties and each party has the opportunity of putting their case without undue interruption
- the issues are addressed
- key findings of fact are made
- parents and others who may not be used to speaking at such a hearing are put at ease
- the hearing is conducted in an informal manner with each party treating the other with respect and courtesy
- the panel is open minded and acting independently
- no member of the panel has a vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure
- each side is given the opportunity to state their case and ask questions
- written material is seen by all parties. If a new issue arises it would be useful to give all parties, the opportunity to consider and comment on it

6.4 **Notification of the panel's decision**

The Chair of the Panel needs to ensure that the complainant is notified of the panel's decision, in writing within 5 working day. The letter needs to explain if there are any further rights of appeal and, if so, to whom they need to be addressed. The Executive Principal/CEO and where relevant, the person complained about will also be notified of the panel's decision.

Checklist for a Panel Hearing

The panel needs to take the following points into account:

- the hearing is as informal as possible
- witnesses are only required to attend for the part of the hearing in which they give their evidence
- after introductions, the complainant is invited to explain their complaint, and be followed by their witnesses
- the Head of School or nominated representative may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each has spoken
- the Head of School or nominated representative is then invited to explain the school/academy's actions and be followed by the Trust's witnesses
- the complainant may question both the Head of School or nominated representative and the witnesses after each has spoken
- the panel may ask questions at any point
- the complainant is the invited to sum up their complaint
- the Head of School or nominated representative is then invited to sum up the Trust's actions and response to the complaint
- both parties leave together while the panel decides on the issues
- the Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale

Appendix 1

The Constellation Trust Complaints Procedure (Stage 3)

The Complaints Committee will consist of 2 members of the LGB or Interim Management Board and 1 representative who is independent of the management and running of the school/academy

- 1.1 Introduction by the Chair of the Complaints Committee and a reminder to attendees present of:
 - the Complaints Procedure under which the meeting has been called;
 - the meeting will be as informal as possible;
 - the manner/format of the meeting as detailed below;
 - the degree of confidentiality;
 - those present and the purpose of the meeting;
 - the supporting evidence
- 1.2 Complainant is invited to explain their complaint and share any evidence, and be followed by witnesses (if applicable). When witnesses have given evidence and answered all questions put to them, they should leave the room.
- 1.3 The Head of School or nominated representative may question both the complainant and the witnesses after each have spoken.
- 1.4 The Head of School or nominated representative is then invited to explain the academy's actions and be followed by the Trust's witnesses (if applicable).
- 1.5 The panel may ask any questions at any point.
- 1.6 The complainant is then invited to sum up their complaint.
- 1.7 The Head of School or nominated representative is then invited to sum up the school/academy's actions and response to the complaint.
- 1.8 The Chair explains that both parties will hear from the panel within a set time scale.
- 1.9 Both parties leave together while the panel deliberates.

- 1.10 The panel, in the presence of the Clerk, will consider all the information presented by both parties; any mitigating circumstances, and any decision must be reasonable and fair. In the event that further information is needed from any of the persons who have left the meeting then all such persons should return to the meeting when such information is being obtained. An opportunity should be given to each party to question or comment upon this additional information.
- 1.11 Confirmation of the decision of the panel should be sent in writing to all parties concerned by the Clerk to the Complaints Committee (within 5 days of the panel hearing and the matter will be closed).
- 1.12 The Chair of the Committee should clearly inform the complainant of the decision.
- 1.13 If the complainant feels that the LGB or Interim Management Board have acted illegally or arbitrarily in the handling of the complaint, then the complainant should refer to the Education Funding Skills Agency for procedures dealing with complaints about Academies.