



Elements
Diocesan Learning Trust

Flourishing together, in the love of God.

Complaints Policy

Approved October 2023



Contents

1. Vision.....	2
Our values	2
Aims	3
2. Legislation and guidance	3
3. Definitions and scope.....	4
4. Roles and responsibilities	4
5. Principles for investigation	5
6. Stages of complaint (not complaints against the trust, CEO or trustees)	6
7. Complaints about the trust, CEO or trustees	9
8. Referring complaints on completion of the school and trust procedures	10
9. Persistent complaints	10
10. Record-keeping and confidentiality	12
11. Learning lessons	12
12. Monitoring arrangements	12
13. Links with other policies	13

1. Vision

Our vision has been developed to enable the coming together of like-minded Primary Schools in Dudley – schools that are separate, discrete **elements** that choose to coalesce as a cohesive whole to speak with one shared voice in education within the Borough of Dudley. Each person in these school communities, children, and adults alike, are also **elements** in bringing to fruition education that enables their own flourishing and that of others. They are unique individuals, each with their own agency and characteristics, but who have an exponential effect when working together with a shared vision and purpose.

This is the vision in which the headteachers, governors and wider stakeholders have placed their trust and it is essential that it is upheld at every stage.

Each school, despite sharing some similarities, has its own unique context, community, culture, ethos, vision, and values. These will be honoured at all times as part of Elements Diocesan Learning Trust.

The vision is deeply rooted in, and is an outworking of, the Church of England’s Vision for Education. Elements Diocesan Learning Trust is committed in being ‘Deeply Christian: Serving the Common Good’, inspired by the particular scripture in John 10:10 where Jesus declares **‘I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full’**. These words, combined with the vision’s four main guiding **elements** - educating for Wisdom, Knowledge & Skills; Hope & Aspiration; Community & Living Well Together; and Dignity & Respect form the core vision for Elements Diocesan Learning Trust.

At times, it is expected that interpretation of what the vision means in practice will vary between individuals and that there will be differences of opinion. At such times, discussion around decisions and actions will be respectful, honouring the four strands of the vision itself and remembering the original reasons for this collaboration.

These core **elements** of the Church of England’s Vision for Education have supported the formation of our founding core values.

Our values

- **Wisdom** – The decisions we take are wise and are based on informed discussions and evidence and aimed at ensuring we achieve the best outcomes for all without forsaking our values

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- **Hope** – we have hope for a positive future and always finding positive outcomes
- **Honesty** – we are honest with all inside and outside our organisation, whilst being sensitive to how we deliver these messages
- **Community and Helpfulness** – we work in co-operation and partnership with all staff and wider stakeholders
- **Dignity and Compassion** – we treat all those within and outside our organisation with dignity, irrespective of the circumstances, and we show everyone compassion for the difficulties that they are experiencing
- **Respect** – we are respectful to all, dedicated to ensuring inclusivity and diversity with those that we work with and for others that meet, and our actions may affect.
- **Integrity** – we have strong principles rooted in our Christian mission that lead our actions and decisions

Aims

Our trust aims to meet its statutory obligations when responding to complaints from parents of pupils at the school, and others.

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
- Treat complainants with respect and courtesy
- Make sure 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 and 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 trust will aim to give the complainant the opportunity to complete the complaints procedure in full.

To support this, we will ensure we publicise the existence of this policy and make it available on our website, and on the websites of our schools.

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

2. 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 states that we must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents of pupils in our trust.

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 trust's fulfilment of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements.

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3. Definitions and scope

3.1 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”

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

- Admissions
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs (SEN)
- Safeguarding matters
- Suspension and permanent exclusion
- Whistle-blowing
- 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 trust premises or facilities should be directed to the provider concerned.

4. Roles and responsibilities

4.1 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 or trust throughout the process, and respond to deadlines and communication promptly
- Ask for assistance as needed
- Treat all those involved with respect
- Not publish details about the complaint on social media

4.2 The investigator

An 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

4.3 The complaints co-ordinator

The complaints co-ordinator can be:

- The headteacher/CEO
- The designated complaints governor

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- 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 staff members, the headteacher, chair of governors, clerk and CEO and chair of trustees.
- 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

4.4 Clerk to the local school board and trust board

The clerk will:

- Be the contact point for the complainant and the complaints committee, including circulating the relevant papers and evidence before complaints committee meetings
- Arrange the complaints hearing
- Record and circulate the minutes and outcome of the hearing

4.5 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

5. Principles for investigation

When investigating a complaint, we will try to clarify:

- What has happened
- Who was involved
- What the complainant feels would put things right

5.1 Timescales

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.

We will consider exceptions to this timeframe 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 timescales 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

5.2 Complaints about our fulfilment of early years requirements

We will investigate all written complaints relating to the trust's fulfilment of the EYFS requirements, and notify the complainant of the outcome within 28 days of receiving the complaint. Schools will keep a record of the complaint (see section 10) and make this available to Ofsted on request.

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Parents and carers can notify Ofsted if they believe that a school is not meeting EYFS requirements by:

- Calling 0300 123 4666
- Emailing enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
- Using the online contact form available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted#org-contacts>

Schools will notify parents and carers if they become aware that they are to be inspected by Ofsted. Schools will also supply a copy of the inspection report to parents and carers of children attending the setting on a regular basis.

6. Stages of complaint (not complaints against the trust, CEO or trustees)

We have adopted a 4-stage process for dealing with complaints:

- Stage 1 – informal resolution
- Stage 2 – formal investigation
- Stage 3 – local school board hearing
- Stage 4 – review by the trust board

6.1 Stage 1: informal

The trust will take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve that 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 school staff or the headteacher, either in person or by letter, telephone or email. If there is a difficulty in discussing the issue with the relevant member of staff, the complainant can be referred to another member of staff who will clarify the nature of the issue and the outcome required. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, the complainant will be referred 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 the more important aspect.

In the case of a serious concern, it may be appropriate to address this with the Headteacher directly (or to the Chair of the Local School Board, if the complaint is about the Headteacher). If the member of staff first contacted cannot resolve the matter immediately, they should make a clear note of the date, name, contact address, phone number of the complainant, and brief details of the concern/complaint. This information will be passed to the Headteacher at the earliest opportunity and recorded in the school's Complaints Log.

The headteacher or complaints coordinator will identify the appropriate policy and either conduct the investigation or nominate an appropriate colleague to do so. Complainants should be encouraged to state what they feel might resolve the problem. The Headteacher or Complaints Co-ordinator will communicate verbally with the complainant to ensure they are clear about what action or monitoring of the situation has been decided on, giving a date if appropriate.

The school will acknowledge informal complaints within **5 school days**, and investigate and provide a response, usually within **10 school days**.

If the complaint is not resolved informally, it will be escalated to a formal complaint

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6.2 Stage 2: formal

The formal stage involves the complainant putting the complaint in writing, (unless the complainant has a sufficient reason to request a reasonable adjustment be made to amend this). The Complaints form in Appendix 1 should be used to provide details of the complaint to include information such as:

- › Relevant dates and times
- › The names of witnesses of events
- › What the complainant feels would resolve the complaint

The form should be submitted alongside copies of any relevant documents.

Addressing the complaint

Complaints not involving the headteacher or a member of the local governing body should be directed to the headteacher, via the school office. This can be done by:

- › Email to the school office
- › Letter addressed to the headteacher, delivered to the school office

Complaints involving the headteacher or a member of the local school board should be directed to the chair of the school board. This can be done by:

- › Email the school office
- › Letter addressed to the chair of the local school board, delivered to the school office

Complaints involving the chair of the local school board should be directed to the chair of the trustees. This can be done by:

- › Email: enquiries@edlt.org.uk
- › Letter: Chair of Trustees, Elements Diocesan Learning Trust, 16, Lowesmoor Wharf, Lowesmoor, Worcester. WR1 2RS

If complainants need assistance raising a formal complaint, they can contact the school office.

Investigation

The complainant will receive written acknowledgement of their complaint within **5 school days**.

The headteacher or the chair of the local school board will then conduct their own investigation.

If the complaint is:

- › Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- › The entire local school board or
- › The majority of the local school board

The CEO or trust board will conduct the investigation.

The written conclusion of this investigation will be sent to the complainant within **15 school days**.

If the headteacher / chair of the local school board/ CEO / trust board is unable to meet this deadline, they will provide the complainant with an update and revised response date.

The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions to be taken to resolve the complaint.

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

6.3 Stage 3: review panel

Convening the panel

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Complaints will be escalated to the panel hearing stage if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal stage.

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

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- The entire local school board or
- The majority of the local school board

The panel will be made up of trustees and an independent panel member.

The panel will have access to the existing record of the complaint's progress (see section 10).

The complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the review panel. The clerk 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 clerk will set a date. The hearing will go ahead using written submissions from both 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 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 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

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

The school will inform those involved of the decision in writing within **5 school days**.

6.4 Stage 4: review by the trust board

Where the school-based complaints procedure has been completed, and the complainant does not feel their complaint has been addressed to their satisfaction, they may contact the trust in writing to request a review of the complaint investigation.

They can do this by:

- Email: enquiries@edlt.org.uk
- Post: Chair of Trustees, Elements Diocesan Learning Trust, 16, Lowesmoor Wharf, Lowesmoor, Worcester. WR1 2RS
- The written request should include a summary of the complaint, along with any relevant dates, times and evidence.

The trust cannot overturn decisions on complaints made during the school's complaints procedure. However, it can assess whether the school considered the complaint appropriately.

7. Complaints about the trust, CEO or trustees

7.1 Stage 1: informal

We make every effort to address any concerns or complaints early through informal measures.

The complainant should raise any concerns as soon as possible with the chief executive officer (CEO).

If the concern regards the CEO, the complainant should contact the chair of the board of trustees.

If the complainant is unsure who to contact, or needs to contact the chair of the board of trustees, they should contact the trust office Elements Diocesan Learning Trust, 16, Lowesmoor Wharf, Lowesmoor, Worcester. WR1 2RS

The process for responding to and investigating an informal complaint about the trust or central staff is the same as that set out in section 6.

7.2 Stage 2: formal

If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily at the informal stage, the complainant must submit a formal complaint in writing.

The complainant will receive written acknowledgement of their complaint within **5 school days**.

The investigating officer will then conduct an investigation, in line with the process set out in section 6 above, providing a written response to the complainant within **15 school days**.

7.3 Stage 3: panel hearing

Convening the panel

Complaints will be escalated to the panel hearing stage if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal stage.

A panel will be appointed by the trust, and will consist of 3 members of the board not involved in investigating the complaint in the formal stage.

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- The entire trust board or

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- › The majority of the trust board

The panel will be entirely made up of independent members.

The complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the review panel. The clerk 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 clerk will set a date. The hearing will go ahead using written submissions from both parties.

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

The complainant and representatives from the trust, as appropriate, will be present at the panel hearing. 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.

The board will ensure that the hearing is properly minuted.

At the meeting

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

The panel must then put together its findings and recommendations from the case. The panel will also provide a copy of 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.

The panel will inform those involved of the decision in writing within **10 school days**.

8. Referring complaints on completion of the school and trust procedures

If the complainant is unsatisfied with the outcome of the school or trust complaints procedure, they can refer their complaint to the ESFA. The ESFA will check whether the complaint has been dealt with properly. The ESFA will not overturn the school or 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 complaints procedure is found not to 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.

9. Persistent complaints

9.1 Unreasonably persistent complaints

Most complaints raised will be valid, and therefore we will treat them seriously. However, a complaint may become unreasonable if the person:

- › Has made the same complaint before, and it's already been resolved by following this complaints procedure

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- › Makes a complaint that is obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, defamatory or repetitive
- › Insists on pursuing a complaint that is unfounded, or out of scope of the complaints procedure, beyond all reason
- › Pursues a valid complaint, but in an unreasonable manner e.g. refuses to articulate the complaint, refuses to co-operate with this complaints procedure, or insists that the complaint is dealt with in ways that are incompatible with this procedure and the timeframes it sets out
- › Makes a complaint designed to cause disruption, annoyance or excessive demands on school time
- › Seeks unrealistic outcomes, or a solution that lacks any serious purpose or value

Steps the school/trust will take

The school/trust will take every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns, and give them a clear statement of the school's/trust's position and their options. The school/trust will maintain the role of an objective arbiter throughout the process, including when meetings are held with individuals. The school/trust will follow this complaints procedure as normal (as outlined above) wherever possible.

If the complainant continues to contact the school/trust in a disruptive way, communication strategies may be put in place. The school/trust 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

Stopping responding

The school/trust may stop responding to the complainant when all of these factors are met:

- › The school/trust has taken all reasonable steps to help address their concerns
- › The complainant has received a clear statement of the school's/trust's position and their options
- › The complainant contacts the school/trust repeatedly, and the school/trust believes their intention is to cause disruption or inconvenience

The school/trust will inform the individual that they intend to stop responding and explain that any new complaints will still be considered.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the school/trust will immediately inform the police and communicate these actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from the school/trust site.

9.2 Duplicate complaints

If the school/trust has resolved a complaint under this procedure and received a duplicate complaint on the same subject from a partner, family member or other individual, the school/trust will assess whether there are aspects that we hadn't previously considered, or any new information that needs to be taken into account.

If the school/trust is satisfied that there are no new aspects, it will:

- › Tell the new complainant that the issue has already been investigated and responded to, and that the local process is complete
- › Direct them to the DfE if they are dissatisfied with the original handling of the complaint

If there are new aspects, this procedure will be repeated.

9.3 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/trust may respond to these complaints by:

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

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

10. Record-keeping and confidentiality

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
- The final outcome

The records will also include copies of letters and emails, and notes related to meetings and phone calls.

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

In the case of complaints about the trust or central staff, these records will be managed by the clerk to the board of trustees and will be stored securely in the trust's offices under restricted access.

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 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 school board (or the entire trust board) in case a review panel needs to be organised at a later point.

Where the local school board 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.

11. Learning lessons

The local school board 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.

The trust board and CEO will receive regular reports on the types of complaints received in each school in order to support the development of appropriate support structures, and to inform any improvements to procedures or practice.

12. Monitoring arrangements

The local school board will monitor the effectiveness of the school complaints procedure in ensuring that complaints are handled properly.

The local governing body will track the number and nature of complaints, and review underlying issues as stated in the section entitled 'Learning lessons'.

The complaints records are logged and managed by the school's administrative procedures.

The CEO will monitor the effectiveness of the complaints procedure trust-wide.

This policy will be reviewed by CEO every 2 years.

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At each review, the policy will be approved by the trust board.

13. Links with other policies

Policies dealing with other forms of complaints include:

- Child protection and safeguarding policy and procedures
- Admissions policy
- Suspension and permanent exclusion policy
- Staff grievance procedures
- Staff disciplinary procedures
- SEN policy and information report
- Privacy notices