



SOUTH DOWNS
— LEARNING TRUST —

Dealing with Concerns & Complaints Policy

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Status	Statutory Policy
Lead Author	Executive Headteacher

OUR VISION

A community of Primary and Secondary academies that are the first choice for students and families in Sussex, with an outstanding reputation for high aspiration and high achievement.

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COVERING NOTE

This policy is based on the Department for Education (DfE) model complaints procedure (July 2023) and has been adapted to reflect the specific context of South Downs Learning Trust and its Academies. It has been reviewed for compliance with current legislation including the Equality Act 2010 and UK GDPR/Data Protection Act 2018.

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy applies to complaints made to South Downs Learning Trust ("the Trust") and its Academies by parents, students, staff or members of the public regarding the provision of facilities or services. It is published on Academy websites for transparency and accessibility.

The policy aims to:

- Provide a clear, accessible framework for handling complaints;
- Encourage early, informal resolution wherever possible;
- Ensure complaints are addressed fairly, consistently and in a timely manner;
- Comply with all relevant legal and regulatory requirements.

Definitions:

- **Concern:** An expression of worry or doubt for which reassurances are sought.
- **Complaint:** An expression of dissatisfaction about actions taken or not taken.

We believe most concerns can be resolved quickly and informally by engaging with the relevant member of staff. This approach promotes strong relationships and ensures issues are addressed constructively before escalating. If informal steps do not resolve the issue, a formal complaint process is available.

2. SCOPE

This policy covers complaints including, but not limited to:

- Pupil progress, curriculum delivery or SEND provision;
- Pastoral care including behaviour and wellbeing;
- Provision of services or facilities;
- Conduct of staff, contractors or volunteers.

Exclusions (dealt with under separate policies):

- Admissions
- Staff grievances (see Staff Grievance Policy)
- Staff disciplinary matters
- Exclusions
- Safeguarding/child protection
- SEN statutory assessments or EHCPs
- National curriculum content

- Whistleblowing

Complaints regarding the Executive Headteacher, Trustees or Governors should be referred to the Clerk to the Trustees.

Complaints about contractors or service providers will be investigated in consultation with the relevant provider.

3. PRINCIPLES

The Trust will:

- Handle complaints impartially and with transparency;
- Maintain confidentiality in line with data protection law;
- Keep complainants informed of progress and outcomes;
- Resolve complaints swiftly, usually within published timeframes;
- Support staff in managing complaints;
- Ensure accessibility of the process for all users.

If complainants require alternative arrangements due to disability, learning difficulties or limited English, reasonable adjustments will be made upon request.

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated unless deemed appropriate by the Executive Headteacher.

4. COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

Stage 1: Informal Resolution

- Raise concerns directly with a relevant staff member (e.g. class teacher, tutor, SENCO or senior leader).
- The staff member will clarify the issue, discuss possible outcomes and attempt resolution.
- A third party may act on the complainant's behalf with written consent.
- Notes from discussions may be recorded and shared as needed.
- If the concern relates to the Headteacher, contact the Executive Headteacher.
- Aim for resolution within 15 school days.

Stage 2: Formal Complaint

- If unresolved, submit a written complaint to the Headteacher or, if the complaint concerns them, to the Executive Headteacher.
- Use the Complaint Form (Appendix C) and include: the issue, prior steps taken, relevant dates, individuals involved and desired outcome.
- Acknowledge receipt within 5 school days.
- An investigation will begin, possibly involving statements, evidence and meetings.
- Staff named in the complaint will have a chance to respond.
- Mediation may be offered where appropriate.
- If needed, updated timelines will be communicated.
- A written outcome will be provided, summarising findings and any actions taken.
- The response will explain how to escalate to Stage 3 if dissatisfied.

Stage 3: Complaints Panel Hearing

- If still dissatisfied, write to the Clerk to the Local Governing Committee within 10 school days of the Stage 2 response.
- Include all documents and grounds for appeal.
- The Clerk will acknowledge within 5 school days and arrange a hearing (usually within 15 school days).
- The Panel will include at least three members, one of whom is independent.
- Parties will receive at least 5 school days' notice of the hearing and documentation.
- The complainant may bring a companion or interpreter.
- Covert recordings are not accepted.
- The Panel will not consider new issues or evidence unrelated to the original complaint.
- The Panel may uphold or dismiss the complaint and recommend actions.
- A written outcome will be issued within 5 school days.
- Panel findings will be shared with the Executive Headteacher, Trustees and Local Governing Committee as appropriate.

Note: There is no further right of appeal after Stage 3.

5. RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

At each stage, resolution may include:

- An apology;
- An explanation or clarification;
- Acknowledgement that handling could have been better;

- Reassurance the issue will not recur;
- An outline of corrective actions or reviews of policy.

Acknowledging issues does not equate to an admission of liability.

6. TIMEFRAMES

- Complaints should be raised within **3 months** of the incident (or last in a series).
- Complaints outside this period will only be considered in **exceptional circumstances**.
- The complaint will be deemed closed unless the complainant responds within **20 working days** of the last communication.
- Complaints received during school holidays are treated as received on the next school day.
- Parallel investigations (e.g. police or safeguarding) may delay or suspend complaint handling.
- If legal proceedings begin, the complaints process may be suspended.

All communication will use clear, agreed timelines, with flexibility explained if delays occur.

7. SERIAL OR UNREASONABLE COMPLAINTS

The Trust is committed to respectful and constructive communication. Unreasonable behaviours include:

- Refusing to clarify the complaint despite support;
- Repeatedly raising irrelevant or trivial issues;
- Changing the nature of the complaint during investigation;
- Harassing or intimidating staff;
- Seeking unrealistic outcomes;
- Using abusive language or threats;
- Publishing unacceptable content online.

Before designating a complaint as unreasonable, the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher will attempt to resolve concerns informally. Persistent behaviour may lead to restricted contact methods or other communication controls.

Serious aggression or violence may result in police involvement and banning from premises.

8. COMPLAINT CAMPAIGNS

Where the Trust receives multiple complaints on the same issue from unconnected individuals:

- A template response may be issued;
- The complaints may be grouped and addressed through a single investigation;
- If escalated to Stage 3, a joint written consideration may occur without a hearing.

9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Complaints data will be reviewed regularly by senior leaders and Trustees to inform improvement. Any deviations from this policy will be recorded with justifications.

10. RECORD KEEPING AND REPORTING

- Written records will be kept at Stages 2 and 3.
- Complaints and outcomes will be summarised to the Board of Trustees.
- All records will be handled according to the Trust's Data Protection and Records Management policies.
- Documents are confidential unless disclosure is legally required (e.g. by the Secretary of State or OFSTED).

11. NO FURTHER RIGHT OF APPEAL

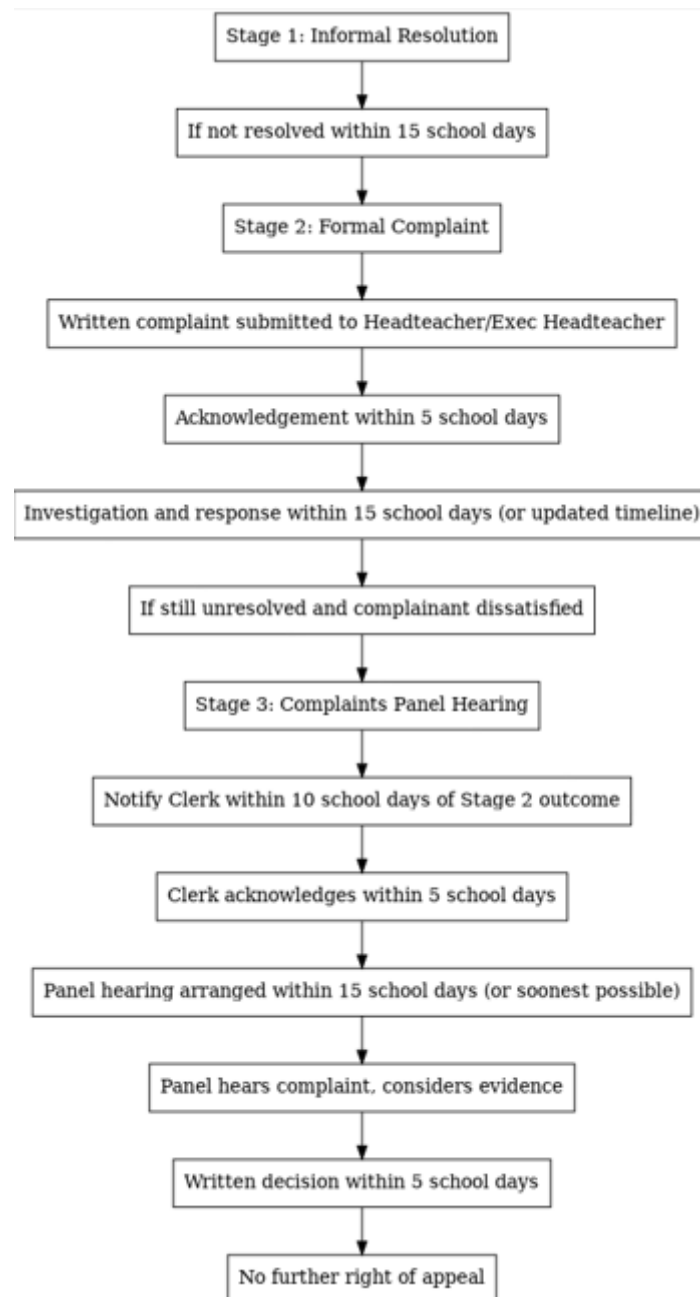
Once the Complaints Panel has made its decision, there is no further right of appeal within the Trust. If a complainant remains dissatisfied, they may contact the Department for Education or other external bodies.

Appendix A: Key Contacts

Role	Name/Position	Contact Details
Clerk to the Local Governing Committee	Mrs Davis	ldavis@ratton.co.uk
Headteacher – Ratton School	Mr Peevers	gpeevers@ratton.co.uk
Headteacher – Ocklynge Junior School	Mr Reilly	preilly@ocklynge.co.uk
Executive Headteacher	Mr Murphy	pmurphy@sdl.org.uk
Chair of Trustees	Mrs Conroy	rconroy@sdl.org.uk

Complainants are encouraged to follow the process beginning with relevant staff before escalating to senior leaders or the Governing Committee.

Appendix B – Complaints Process



Appendix C – Complaint Form

Please complete this form with as much detail as possible. Attach supporting documents as needed.

Field	Details
Your name:	
Student’s name (if applicable):	
Your relationship to the student:	
Address:	
Telephone number:	
Email address:	
Details of your complaint:	
What steps have you taken to resolve the issue so far? (Include names/dates)	
What actions do you feel might resolve the problem?	
Signature:	Date:

For official use only:

- Date acknowledged:
- Acknowledged by:
- Referred to:
- Date: