Reviewed: March 2026
Next Review: February to April 2027

Cornerstone Multi Academy Trust

Concerns and Complaints Policy

CORNERSTONE ACADEMY TRUST
CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS POLICY

This policy and all other documents relating to this policy are available in other formats on request.

1. Scope of this policy

1.1. This policy sets out the Trust's procedures for dealing with concerns and complaints relating to the services provided by the Trust.

1.2. This policy may be used by anyone who has a concern or complaint about any aspect of the Trust. This includes parents and carers of pupils, neighbours of any of the schools or any other members of the local communities.

1.3. It does not apply to concerns and complaints relating to the following, which are dealt with under separate policies:

- Staff grievances or disciplinary procedures
- Admissions
- Exclusions
- Issues related to child protection or criminal investigations
- Any community facilities or services provided by the Trust
- Data protection

1.4. There may be occasions where a concern or complaint gives rise to disciplinary procedures against a staff member which put the procedures detailed in this policy on hold. If and when this occurs, the individual who has a concern or complaint will be informed. Any non-disciplinary aspects of the staff concern or complaint will continue to be dealt with under this policy.

2. Aims and objectives

2.1 The Trust strives to provide an outstanding education for all our children. Everyone within the Trust, the Trust Board, the Senior Leadership Team and all other staff work hard to build positive relationships with all children, parents/carers and the wider community.

2.2 We always welcome positive feedback about the Trust, its staff and its pupils. However, we recognise that there may be times when an individual may be unhappy with the services provided by the Trust, has a concern relating to the Trust or may want to make a suggestion about how we can improve.

2.3 The Trust aims to:

- Be receptive to genuine expressions of dissatisfaction
- Encourage the resolution of problems by informal means wherever possible
- Deal with complaints quickly, proportionately and fairly and within clearly defined time limits
- Take action as a result of concerns or complaints that helps to improve the quality of the education and training provided by the Trust
- Take account of the Trust's duty to promote equality and diversity
- Maintain good working relationships between all people involved with the Trust

3. Managing Concerns and Complaints

3.1 The Trust strives to resolve all concerns and complaints informally and all matters of concern and complaint should first be raised under Stage 1 of this policy. Only if this informal procedure fails to resolve the matter should a formal complaint be made.

3.2 Any individual with a concern or complaint may be accompanied or represented by a friend or relative at discussions and meetings about the concern or complaint and/or submit formal complaints which have been written by another individual on their behalf.

3.3 At each stage, where a concern or complaint is upheld, in part or in full, it may be appropriate for the Trust 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 issue complained of will not recur
- an explanation of the steps that have been or will be taken to ensure that the issue will not happen again
- an undertaking to review the Trust's policies in light of the concern or complaint

3.4 At each stage, if all or part of a concern or complaint is not upheld or the matter is not resolved to an individual's satisfaction, the individual may either choose to take no further action or to take their concern or complaint to the next stage.

3.5 In general, the time limits and deadlines contained within this policy should be adhered to. If it becomes necessary to alter the time limits and deadlines set out within this policy, the individual with the concern or complaint will be told and given an explanation as to why this has been the case.

3.6 At all stages of the complaints procedure, the following information should be recorded by the Trust in writing:

- The name of the individual with the complaint or concern
- The date and time when the concern or complaint was raised
- The details of the complaint
- The desired outcome of the individual
- How the concern or complaint is investigated (including written records of interviews held)
- Results and conclusions of investigations
- Any action taken
- The individual's response (satisfaction or further pursuit of complaint)

3.7 Records of concerns and complaints should be retained in the administrative office of the Trust for the periods specified in the Trust's policy on record retention and be used by the Trust to improve the Trust's services.

3.8 If, at any stage, the CEO or Chair of Trustees feels that the concern or complaint is vexatious, is persistently raising the same complaints, has insufficient grounds, has already been considered in full or has been closed, the CEO or Chair of Trustees may write to the individual to refuse to consider their concern or complaint under this policy and the reasons why they are refusing to do so. In this eventuality, the individual with the concern or complaint may proceed directly to Stage 5 of this policy.

3.9 An individual with a concern or complaint, perhaps where there may have been upsetting or distressing circumstances leading to the complaint being made, may act out of character. However, where an individual acts in a manner which is angry, demanding or persistent this may result in unreasonable demands being placed on those involved and/or unacceptable behaviour towards staff. In such circumstances, the Trust retains the right to specify how an individual complaint will be handled and how future contact from the individual will be permitted. This may, in serious cases, include choosing not to respond on a complaint. Should that decision be made, the individual will be notified in writing.

4. Stage 1: Informal procedure for dealing with concerns and complaints

4.1 An individual can raise informal concerns and complaints with administrative staff, teaching staff, senior teaching staff, Trustees or the CEO. If a parent/carer has concerns relating to their child, these should, in the first instance, be discussed with their child's class teacher.

4.2 The member of staff approached about the concern or complaint may share the details of the matter with others to seek further information or to decide on the appropriate action to be taken.

4.3 The matter will be considered and dealt with as quickly and effectively as possible. If requested, the individual who raised the concern or complaint should be informed of any action to be taken to resolve the issue.

4.4 Where an individual feels that a situation has not been resolved, or their concern or complaint is of a sufficiently serious nature, they should make an appointment to discuss the matter informally with the Head of Schools.

4.5 The Head of Schools will meet with the individual as soon as possible to discuss their concern or complaint. If it is possible, an informal resolution should be reached and the individual who raised the issue should be informed of any action to be taken to resolve the issue.

4.6 Should an individual have a concern about the Head of Schools or CEO, the steps under 4.4 and 4.5 should, instead, be dealt with by the Chair of Trustees.

5. Stage 2: Formal complaint to the Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO

5.1 Only if Stage 1 fails to resolve the matter should a formal complaint be made to the Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO. The Trust is not obliged to consider a formal complaint if the Stage 1 informal procedure has not been followed.

5.2 The complainant must submit their complaint to the Deputy Head of Schools and Head of Schools, or in the event of a concern relating to the Deputy Head of Schools, Head of Schools or a more senior member of staff to the Deputy CEO and CEO in writing, stating the nature of the complaint and details of how the matter has been dealt with so far. The written submission should enclose copies of all supporting documentation.

For details of the relevant contact for your school please refer to the About Us, Leadership Team section of the Trust website here: Leadership - The Cornerstone Academy Trust

5.3 The Deputy Head of School, Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO (as applicable) should formally acknowledge the complaint within five school days of receipt.

5.4 The Deputy Head of School, Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO will investigate the complaint and review any relevant documentation and information. If necessary, the Deputy Head of School, Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO will interview witnesses and take written statements from those involved. When pupils are interviewed, another member of staff should always attend. The Deputy Head of School, Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO may delegate the task of collating information relating to the complaint to another member of staff but not the decision on the action to be taken.

5.5 The Deputy Head of School, Head of Schools, Deputy CEO or CEO will provide the complainant with a full written response within ten school days of acknowledging the complaint. This response will determine whether or not the complaint has been upheld, the reasons why and what action (if any) will be taken. The response should state that if the complainant is dissatisfied with the response and would like to take their complaint further, they should consult this policy.

5.6 Should an individual have a concern or complaint about the CEO, Stage 2 should, instead, be dealt with by the Chair of Trustees. For relevant details please refer to the About Us, Governance, and Board of Trustees section of the Trust website here: Board of Trustees - The Cornerstone Academy Trust

5.7 If you would prefer to submit your complaint via post, please send to Chair of Trustees, Cornerstone Academy Trust, c/o Broadclyst Community Primary School, School Lane, Broadclyst, Exeter, EX5 3JG.

6. Stage 3: Formal complaint to the Chair of Trustees

6.1 Only if Stages 1 and 2 fail to resolve the matter should a formal complaint be made to the Chair of Trustees (see 6.6. below for the possible exception to this).

6.2 The complainant must submit their complaint to the Chair of Trustees (via email / in writing addressed to the Trust, stating the nature of the complaint and details of how the matter has been dealt with so far. The email / letter should enclose copies of all supporting documentation.

6.3 The Chair of Trustees (or Clerk) should formally acknowledge the complaint within five school days of receipt.

6.4 The Chair of Trustees will investigate the complaint and review any relevant documentation and information. If necessary, the Chair of Trustees will interview witnesses and take written statements from those involved. When pupils are interviewed, another member of staff should always attend.

6.5 The Chair of Trustees will provide the complainant with a full written response within ten school days of acknowledging the complaint. This response will determine whether or not the complaint has been upheld, the reasons why and what action (if any) will be taken. The letter should state that if the complainant is dissatisfied with the response and would like to take their complaint further, they should consult this policy.

6.6 Should the complaint be about the Chair of Trustees or be about the CEO and the Chair of Trustees was involved with Stages 1 or 2 of this policy, the letter of complaint should be addressed to the Clerk to the Trustees at the Trust's address (Cornerstone Academy Trust, c/o Broadclyst Community Primary School, School Lane, Broadclyst, Exeter, EX5 3JG), who will arrange for another Trustee to manage this stage of the complaint in the place of the Chair of Trustees.

7. Stage 4: Review by the Complaints Committee

7.1 If the complainant wishes to appeal against a decision made under Stage 3, they should make a written request for a review by the Complaints Committee. This email / letter should be sent to the Trust, addressed to the Chair of Trustees, within fifteen school days of receipt of the decision letter from the Chair of Trustees under Stage 3. The email / letter should enclose copies of all supporting documentation and give details (including names and addresses) of any witnesses the complainant intends to call.

7.2 The review will be heard by a Complaints Committee consisting of:

- between one and three Trustees who have had no prior involvement in the complaint or the circumstances surrounding it
- an Independent Member, being a person who is independent of the Trust and who does not have any connection with the Trust or with any person employed by the Trust of a kind which might reasonably be taken to raise doubts about their ability to act impartially

7.3 The Clerk will acknowledge receipt of the appeal letter within five school days of receiving it. This letter will inform the complainant that their complaint will be heard by a Complaints Committee.

7.4 Within fifteen school days of the written compliant being received, the Clerk to Trustees should formally write to the complainant, the Head of Schools or CEO and any other relevant staff or witnesses and inform them:

- of the date, time and venue of the review
- the aims and objectives of the review and how it will be conducted
- the names of the Complaints Committee members
- the names of any witnesses that will be attending
- that any documentation they wish the Complaints Committee to consider, including signed and dated witness statements, must be returned to the Clerk to Trustees no later than five school days before the review
- that copies of any documentation, including signed and dated witness statements, will be provided to the other party no later than three school days before the review
- of the right for any party to be represented or accompanied if they wish
- how and when the Complaints Committee will reach their decision

7.5 Subject to the need to deal with complaints quickly, proportionately and fairly, the Clerk to Trustees will use all reasonable endeavours to ensure that the dates and times for the review are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible.

7.6 Notes will be taken of the meeting by the Clerk to the Trustees or another appropriate third party who has no prior involvement in the complaint or the circumstances surrounding it.

7.7 The review should allow each party involved to explain their understanding or interpretation of events and for other parties to question them. The review will, usually operate according to the following format:

- A lead (Chair) for the meeting will have been identified from the Committee Complaints Panel and they will introduce all parties to one another and explain the principles, objectives and format of the review
- The complainant will be given the opportunity to explain their complaint
- The Complaints Committee will be allowed to ask the complainant questions
- If in attendance the CEO will be given an opportunity to explain the Trust's official response, interpretation or view about the complaint

- The complainant and Complaints Committee will be allowed to question the CEO if in attendance
- Every party will be given the opportunity to call witnesses and question witnesses called by other parties
- The CEO if in attendance and the complainant will both be given the chance to make final statements

7.8 After hearing all the evidence, the Complaints Committee will consider their decision and inform both parties of their decision in writing within five school days. Information from the panel will be available to the complainant.

7.9 Copies of the findings and recommendations will be made available for inspection on the school premises by the CEO.

7.10 The Complaints Committee can:

- Request further information from the complainant or the CEO to assist them in making their decision
- 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 Trust's systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not reoccur

7.11 Should the complaint be about the Chair of Trustees or be about the CEO and the Chair of Trustees was involved with Stages 1, 2 or 3 of this policy, the email / letter of complaint should be addressed to the Clerk to the Trustees, who will arrange for another Trustee to manage this stage of the complaint in the place of the Chair of Trustees.

8. Stage 5: Referral to the Department for Education

8.1 If the complainant is not satisfied with the review under Stage 4, they are entitled to refer their complaint to the Department for Education who will consider the complaint. They will consider whether the Trust has adhered to education legislation and any statutory polices 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

For further information regarding the Department for Education's handling of complaints please refer to Annex A below.

9. Records

9.1 Written records of complaints will be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the 2008 Act requests access to them.

9.2 Written records will be kept of all complaints including whether they are resolved following a formal procedure, or proceed to a panel hearing and any action taken by the school as a result of those complaints.

9.3 Complaints will form part of the pupil's records which will remain in place for as long as the pupil record remains active; however for those complaints handled by the Trustee board these will be retained from the date of the resolution of the complaint plus a minimum of 6 years. At this juncture the complaint will be reviewed and considered for further retention in case of contentious disputes.

ANNEX A

[How DfE handles complaints about academies - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)]

1. DfE's remit in relation to academy complaints

Before escalating an academy complaint to us, you should first complain to the academy. You should follow the academy's complaints procedure.

We cannot change an academy's decision about a complaint. Our role is to make sure the academy handles your complaint properly.

We will only be able to consider your complaint if you can provide evidence that the academy:

- does not have a complaints procedure
- did not provide a copy of its complaints procedure when requested
- does not have a procedure that complies with statutory regulations
- has not followed its published complaints procedure
- has not allowed its complaints procedure to be completed

We are not able to:

- overturn the governing body's decision
- re-investigate your original complaint
- review the accuracy of minutes taken or documents provided
- order the academy to pay you compensation
- direct the academy to discipline / exclude pupils
- force the academy to discipline / dismiss staff
- instruct the academy to apologise to you

2. Responsibilities of academies

Academies must have a written complaints procedure that tells you how you can make a complaint and how the academy will handle it. This should be available on request to parents. We also recommend that academies publish their complaints procedure online.

An academy's complaints procedure must:

- give clear timescales for the management of complaints
- provide opportunity to make and resolve the complaint on an informal basis
- set out a formal procedure for the complaint to be made in writing when you are not satisfied with initial informal outcomes
- allow for a panel hearing to be set up by the academy trust when the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the written complaint. The panel must include at least 3 people who are not involved in matters detailed in the complaint. One member of the panel must be independent of the management and running of the school.
- allow parents to be accompanied if they wish to attend the panel hearing
- allow for the panel to make findings and recommendations with a copy of the outcome information provided to the complainant and, if relevant, the person complained about. The outcome information must be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the head teacher.
- require written records of all complaints including details of how they are resolved, and action taken by the academy as a result of the complaint

- require records relating to individual complaints remain confidential except under certain circumstances including Secretary of State request and inspection.

3. Complaints not in DfE's remit

We are not able to help with:

- a child or young person's statement of special educational need
- child protection. You should raise concerns with your local authority designated officer (LADO) and/or the Director of Children's Services using the report child abuse to local council GOV.UK page)
- a child or young person's education, health and care plan (EHCP). You may find speaking with your local information, advice and support service helpful. This body is independent of the local authority and can provide impartial advice about the law on SEND, local SEND arrangements and support for your child's needs. More information about SEND is available on the First-tier Tribunal (Special Educational Needs and Disability) webpage.
- the quality of education or leadership, or concerns affecting the school as a whole, which OFSTED addresses through inspections (see the schools inspection guide for parents)
- academy employment matters. You will need to raise these through the academy's grievance procedure or an employment tribunal.
- teacher misconduct. You should refer the matter to the Teaching Regulation Agency
- discrimination. You can raise complaints about this with Equality Advisory Support Service
- data protection. You can raise complaints about this with Information Commissioner's Office
- exam malpractice or maladministration. You should raise any complaints with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) or the relevant awarding body
- criminal cases. Please report these to the police

We have separate guidance about academy independent admission appeal panel complaints.

4. Complaints about academy exclusions

We can only consider complaints about exclusions where the academy has not complied with the exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England statutory guidance.

We cannot comment on the fairness of an exclusion, but only on whether an academy has followed the process correctly. In the case of permanent exclusions, we cannot overturn the decision of an independent review panel (IRP) but only investigate allegations of maladministration of the panel.

We are not able to consider:

- complaints about the decision to exclude, or overturn the decision
- complaints where the academy has not attempted to complete the exclusion review process
- complaints about a managed move to another educational setting because parents / carers must agree these with all parties involved. If you wish to complain about a managed move, you should follow the academy's complaints procedure.
- general complaints where you do not want to challenge the exclusion. If you wish to complain about the way the academy handled the exclusion, you would need to follow the academy's complaint procedure.

5. How DfE assesses complaints

Our role in handling your complaint is to consider whether the academy followed the correct process. We will not investigate the substance of the complaint or the academy's decision.

We will not normally consider complaints received more than 12 months after a decision or the academy's last action.

We reserve the right not to consider complaints that:

- are, or have been, subject to legal action
- are malicious (that is, they are without sufficient grounds and serve only to cause annoyance)
- use obscene, racist or homophobic language
- threaten or contain personally offensive remarks about members of our staff
- are repeatedly submitted with only minor differences after we have fully addressed the complaint

5.1 Information DfE need (complaints)

So that we can tell you quickly whether we are able to consider your case, we need:

1. a brief summary of what your complaint to the academy was about

2. copies of any emails / letters sent and received as part of the academy's complaints procedure. For the panel hearing stage, we will also need the names of the panel members, along with the minutes (if provided) and the outcome letter

3. a timeline of events including:

    - when the incident(s) you are complaining about occurred
    - dates when you raised an informal complaint and when the academy responded
    - dates when you submitted a formal complaint and the academy responded and when any meeting(s) occurred
    - dates when you escalated the complaint to a panel hearing, when the academy acknowledged this and the date of the panel hearing
    - where appropriate, the date, acknowledgement and response to any additional stage in the academy's complaints process

If the academy has prevented you from completing the complaints policy, we need:

1. a brief summary of what your complaint to the academy was about

2. a timeline of events including:

    - when the incident(s) you are complaining about occurred
    - what stage of the complaints procedure you have reached
    - what attempts you have made to progress your complaint and what (if any) responses you have received

If you do not supply the above information when you contact us, we may reject your case and ask you to contact us again with the evidence needed.

5.2 Information we need (exclusions)

So that we can tell you quickly whether we are able to consider your case, we need:

- the reasons given for the exclusion
- any correspondence that you have had with the academy about the matter
- information provided to you by the academy about how to make representations about the exclusion
- confirmation of the stage in the exclusion process you have reached
- minutes of meetings with the academy/trustees and dates that the meetings took place
- confirmation that your case involves your local authority and it has contacted you about your child being out of education
- for a managed move evidence that this was not agreed to by you
- for a fixed period exclusion the start and end dates
- for a fixed permanent exclusion confirmation that the exclusion is permanent

If the academy has prevented you from completing the exclusions review process, or you feel the academy has failed to follow statutory guidance or legislation, we need:

1. a brief summary of any breaches that have occurred

2. a timeline of events including:

    - when the incident(s) you are complaining about occurred
    - what stage of the exclusion review process you have reached
    - what attempts you have made to progress your complaint and what (if any) responses you have received

If you do not supply the above information when you contact us, we may reject your case and ask you to contact us again with the evidence we need.

5.3 First steps

When we receive a complaint, we will send you an acknowledgement within 3 working days. If it is clear that your complaint does not fall within our remit, we will let you know at this point.

We will then pass your case to a named case officer, who will review the information you have supplied. If the information indicates that the complaint is not within our remit, we will reject your case and let you know why. This may be because:

- you have not followed the complaints procedure
- you have not completed the complaints procedure and are not able to provide evidence that the academy prevented you from doing so
- you want us to investigate the original complaint
- the complaint is the responsibility of another organisation

If we cannot determine whether your complaint falls within our remit, we will close your case and ask you to provide further information.

If the information provided indicates that the case does fall within our remit, we will write to you to confirm this and to tell you how we will handle your case. If aspects of your complaint fall outside of our remit, we may provide you with details of organisations that could provide further advice and guidance.

5.4 Next steps

Where there is evidence that the academy may not have handled your complaint correctly, we will:

- provide the academy with a summary of your complaint and invite them to provide us with evidence of how they handled your complaint.
- continue to make enquiries with you and the academy until we have understood what happened, and can tell you and the academy what needs to happen next.

The length of time it takes to investigate a complaint varies. We aim to complete all enquiries as quickly as possible. The number and complexity of queries on a case, as well as factors such as school holiday periods, affect how long it will take to complete our investigation into your complaint.

We will keep you up to date with our progress throughout our investigation.

If you do not respond to our enquiries by the date provided, we will send you a reminder. If you do not respond after that, we will close your case. If you contact us after we have closed your case, we may ask you to submit a new contact us form and open a new case.

5.5 Outcome of cases

We will write to you with the outcome of our investigation. The academy will also receive a copy of our findings and your case we will then close your case.

If we uphold your complaint, we may do one or more of the following:

- ask the academy to change its complaints procedure so that it complies with legal requirements
- ask the academy to reconsider your complaint from an appropriate stage in their procedure
- remind the academy of their requirements to comply with their complaints policy
- remind the academy of their requirements to comply with the legislation and statutory guidance (complaints about exclusions)
- monitor future exclusions at the academy (complaints about exclusions)

If the academy does not comply with the recommended actions, we may seek to take action on behalf of the Secretary of State under the terms of the funding agreement (the contract that the Secretary of State holds with an academy).

If we become aware, through a complaint made to us, that an academy is in breach of its funding agreement we will address this directly with the academy. We do not routinely inform complainants of actions taken directly with academies.

6. Further reading

An academy's complaints procedure must comply with part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

Academy trusts must adhere to the exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England statutory guidance (annex C is a guide for parents / carers).

7. Contacting ESFA

If after reading this guide you think we should consider your complaint, please contact us using our online enquiry form a and tick the box that says complaint.

Using the enquiry form is the quickest way to contact but we can accept hard copy documents sent to:

Department for Education
School complaints compliance unit
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

We ask that you do not submit original documents and what you do send relates solely to the complaint you have asked us to consider. Please be aware that we are not able to return the document you send to us.