WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A COMPLAINT ABOUT SAPIENTIA EDUCATION TRUST

Document Control:

Document Author:	COO		
Approval Body:	JCC	**Date:** 03/03/2022	
	Board of Trustees	**Date:** 01/04/2022	
Version Number:	7		
Version Issue Date:	24/09/2026	**Effective Date:**	24/09/2026
Review Frequency:	Annually by the Board of Trustees		
Method of Dissemination:	Electronic publication to membership		
For Use By:	Membership and all staff where applicable		

Version History:

Version	Date	Author	Reason
V1	March 2022	COO	To originate document
V2	August 2022	Governance Professional	Email addresses changed to xx@setrust.co.uk format
V3	April 2023	Governance Professional	Page 3. Clause inserted regarding confidentiality of documentation and access restrictions.
V4	December 2024	Governance Professional	Annual review carried out by Trustees, with no changes made.
V5	May 2025	Governance Professional	Removal of references to ESFA following its merger into the Department for Education (DfE) on 1st April 2025.
V6	June 2026	Governance Professional	Page 2 - paragraph added regarding use of AI.
V7	September 2026	Governance Professional	Paragraph added regarding use of AI. Updated links on Page 7. Updated records management and retention arrangements.

			Review to document structure, escalation route, response from complainants.

Introduction

Each school within Sapientia Education Trust ('the Trust') will have its own local complaints policy. If your complaint is about a specific school, then it should be addressed to that school following their complaints procedure.

This process applies to complaints about the actions, decisions, services or conduct of the Trust. Complaints about an individual academy should normally be raised under that academy's published complaints procedure. The Trust will not normally consider complaints that have already exhausted an individual school complaints procedure. However, it may consider a separate complaint about the actions of the Trust.

Where a complaint concerns both an academy and the Trust, the Trust will determine the most appropriate procedure and will explain this to the complainant.

This complaints procedure applies to complaints from parents and carers of pupils at Trust schools concerning their child. We will also deal respectfully and appropriately with concerns raised by other members of the public, although the Trust is not required to follow this procedure in those cases. Complaints which fall within another statutory procedure, including admissions and suspensions or permanent exclusions, will be dealt with under that procedure.

Most complaints can be dealt with quickly and informally by a telephone call, an e-mail, or a quick word with the member of staff concerned.

We recognise that AI tools can be helpful in consolidating and presenting concerns. To enable us to consider and respond to all aspects of a complaint effectively, complaints should be concise and clearly identify the specific concerns and the outcome sought. Where clarification is needed, we will contact the complainant to confirm the matters to be considered.

Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaints procedure. Complainants will be advised that the complaint will be investigated as far as possible under this complaints procedure, while any employment or disciplinary action arising from it will be dealt with separately and remain confidential.

Records relating to complaints, including correspondence, investigation notes, evidence considered, decisions and outcomes, will be retained in accordance with the Trust's Records Retention Schedule and the Information and Records Management Society (IRMS) guidance for schools and academies. Complaint records will normally be retained for ten years after the complaint has been closed,

after which they will be securely disposed of unless there is a lawful reason for longer retention.

This policy has been developed with reference to the Department for Education's Best Practice Guidance for Academies Complaints Procedures (March 2021). The school complies with the requirements of Part 7 of Schedule 1 to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. The remainder of the DfE guidance is followed as best practice.

Scope of Complaints

Matters relating to the following will be addressed under other statutory procedures:

- Admissions
- Child protection matters
- Exclusions
- Complaints about third party providers
- Staff grievances
- Staff conduct
- Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs (SEN)
- Whistleblowing

COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

If you have spoken to a member of the Trust central team and are not satisfied with the outcome of an informal approach, you should raise your concern formally at Stage One.

Stage One

Complaints should usually be raised within 3 months of the event concerned but may consider a complaint outside of this timeframe where there are exceptional circumstances. You should contact the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the Trust at coo@setrust.co.uk setting out the details of your complaint and making it clear that you are invoking the Complaints Procedure.

The COO will acknowledge receipt of your complaint within 5 school days and provide a full written response within 15 school days. If this is not possible an update explaining the reason will be provided, along with a revised date.

If your complaint is about the CEO, you should write to the Chair of the Board of Trustees via the clerk to the Trust or other appropriate individual, dependent on the circumstances (the Governance Professional) at clerk@setrust.co.uk.

Stage Two

If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of your complaint at Stage One, you may write to the CEO. This should be addressed to the Trust CEO at ea@setrust.co.uk. The CEO will acknowledge receipt of your complaint within 5 school days. The CEO, or another suitably skilled and impartial appointee will endeavour to review and investigate the complaint within 20 school days. The review may consider whether the investigation and response at Stage One was sufficiently thorough, whether relevant evidence was considered, whether the conclusions were reasonable and whether appropriate action or remedy was offered.

To ensure complaints are progressed in a timely manner, complainants are expected to respond to reasonable requests for information, clarification, evidence or confirmation of availability.
Where a complainant does not respond to such requests within 10 school days, despite reasonable attempts to make contact, and unless there are exceptional circumstances that warrant additional time, the Trust may either:

- proceed to determine the complaint on the basis of the information already available; or
- determine that the complaint has been withdrawn and close the matter.

The complainant will be informed in writing if either decision is taken.

The CEO may uphold, partially uphold or dismiss the complaint, require further investigation, or propose further action. A full written response will be provided within 15 school days. If this is not possible an update explaining the reason will be provided, along with a revised date.

If your complaint is about the CEO, you should write to the Chair of the Board of Trustees via the Governance Professional at clerk@setrust.co.uk.

Stage Three

If you are still dissatisfied, or if your complaint is of a very serious nature, you may complain to the Chair of the Board of Trustees via the Governance Professional at clerk@setrust.co.uk. A request to escalate to Stage Three must be made within 15 school days of receipt of the Stage Two response. Requests received outside of this timeframe will only be considered if exceptional circumstances apply.
Your complaint should be in writing; it should clearly explain the reason(s) as to why you were not satisfied with the response at Stage Two and be accompanied by any appropriate documentation. (Please use template on page 5 Appendix A below.) Please make it clear that you are invoking Stage Three of the Complaints Procedure. Complaints about a decision of the CEO or the CEO's actions in response to a complaint must reach the Governance Professional within 20 school days of the CEO's decision or the response to the complaint.

Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaints procedure. Complainants will be advised that the complaint will be investigated as

far as possible under this complaints procedure, while any employment or disciplinary action arising from it will be dealt with separately and remain confidential.

The Board of Trustees will acknowledge receipt of your letter within 5 school days and inform you of the arrangements that have been made for your complaint to be considered. A Panel hearing consisting of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint with at least one panel member who is independent of the management and running of the academy and Trust body.

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Where a complainant does not respond to such requests within 10 school days, despite reasonable attempts to make contact, and unless there are exceptional circumstances that warrant additional time, the Trust may either:

- proceed to determine the complaint on the basis of the information already available; or
- determine that the complaint has been withdrawn and close the matter.

The complainant will be informed in writing if either decision is taken.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least 5 school days before the date of the hearing. If a recording made without consent is submitted as evidence, the panel will decide whether it is relevant, lawful and fair to consider it, taking account of privacy, safeguarding and data-protection requirements.

The committee will also not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New complaints must be dealt with from Stage One of the procedure.

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

- uphold the complaint in whole or in part
- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part.

You are entitled to be accompanied by a friend or other advisor at such a meeting. If you require reasonable adjustments to be made, please advise the Governance Professional at clerk@setrust.co.uk.

Records will be managed and disposed of in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection Policy, Records Retention Schedule and applicable data protection legislation except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the 2008 Act requests access to them or when access is required due to other legal processes or to enable Trustees and the Trust's executive team to undertake their statutory responsibilities.

The clerk will provide you with a letter with the panel's findings and recommendations, together with a clear explanation electronically or otherwise within 15 school days (a copy will also be sent to the person complained about unless disclosure is precluded by other regulations or protocols). The letter will include details of how to contact the Department for Education if the complainant is dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled.

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 the Board of Trustees will take to resolve the complaint.

Vexatious Complaints and Unreasonable Complainant Behaviour

Where a complainant raises an issue that has already been dealt with via the Trust's complaints procedure, and that procedure has been exhausted, the Trust will not reinvestigate the complaint.

If a complainant persists in raising the same issue, the CEO will write to them explaining that the matter has been dealt with fully in line with the Trust's complaints procedure, and therefore the case is now closed. The complainant will be provided with the contact details for the Department for Education if they wish to take the matter further.

The Trust is committed to ensuring the wellbeing, dignity and safety of staff involved in the complaints process.

Complainants should communicate respectfully and understand that staff will normally respond during published working hours. The Trust does not expect staff to respond to correspondence outside normal working hours, during periods of leave or at weekends.

Excessive, aggressive, repetitive or unreasonable contact may be managed in accordance with this policy and may result in restrictions being placed on methods or frequency of communication where this is considered necessary to safeguard staff welfare and ensure the effective administration of the complaints process.

Unreasonable complaints include the following scenarios:

- The complainant refuses to co-operate with the Trust's relevant procedures
- The complainant changes the basis of the complaint as the complaint progresses
- The complainant seeks an unrealistic outcome
- Excessive demands are made on the time of staff and Trustees and is clearly meant to aggravate
- The complainant acts in a way that is abusive or offensive

Further Action

The decision of the Board of Trustees is final. The Board will not consider any subsequent complaint that is materially the same as a complaint that has already been considered at Stage Three nor will it enter into any further correspondence with a complainant in these circumstances save to bring to their attention the right to complain to the Department for Education (DfE).

If the complainant believes the Trust did not handle their complaint in accordance with the published complaints procedure or they acted unlawfully or unreasonably in the exercise of their duties under education law, they can contact the DfE after they have completed Stage Three.

The DfE will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by the Trust. They will consider whether the Trust has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint and whether they have followed Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

Complaints should now be raised through the Customer Help Portal to the Department for Education using this link: Home - Customer Help Portal

Appendix A

Complaint Form

Please complete and return to clerk@setrust.co.uk who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your name:
Address: **Postcode:** **Day time telephone number:** **Evening telephone number:** **Email address:**
Please give details of your complaint, including whether you have spoken to anybody at the Trust about it.
Please explain what steps you have taken to try and resolve this informally.
What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?

Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.
Signature: **Date:**
Official use
Date acknowledgement sent:
By who:
Complaint referred to:
Action taken:
Date: