

# The Willows School Academy Trust



## Complaints Policy

Reviewed: April 2026

Next Review: April 2029

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## Introduction

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At The Willows School Academy Trust, we value and encourage open communication with parents, carers, pupils, and the wider community. We take all concerns and complaints seriously and are committed to resolving them fairly, efficiently, and with respect for all parties involved.

This policy sets out our procedure for handling complaints in a way that is:

- **Fair** - we treat all parties impartially
- **Transparent** - we are clear about our processes and timescales
- **Timely** - we respond as quickly as possible
- **Confidential** - we protect the privacy of those involved

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## The Difference Between a Concern and a Complaint

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**A concern may be defined as 'an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought'.**

**A complaint may be defined as 'an expression or statement of dissatisfaction about actions taken or a lack of action'.**

It is in everyone's interest that concerns and complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to use the formal stages of the complaints procedure. The Willows School Academy Trust takes concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

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## Who Can Make a Complaint

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This complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of children that are registered at the school. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to The Willows School Academy Trust about any provision of facilities or services that we provide. However, we will only follow this formal-complaints procedure for complaints from parents/carers of current pupils at our school. For complaints from other individuals, we will respond respectfully but are not required to follow the formal stages set out below.

### **Important: Safeguarding Allegations Are NOT Complaints**

**If your concern involves an allegation that a member of staff (including the headteacher) has:**

- Behaved in a way that has harmed a child, or may have harmed a child
- Possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child
- Behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children
- Behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children

**This is NOT a complaint and will NOT be dealt with under this complaints procedure.**

If staff have a safeguarding concern or an allegation of harming or posing a risk of harm to children is made about another member of staff (including supply staff, volunteers, and contractors), then this should be referred to the headteacher. Where there is a concern/allegation about the headteacher, this should be referred to the chair of governors, chair of the management committee or proprietor of an independent school.

**These allegations are dealt with under Part 4 of Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) statutory guidance**, which sets out a completely separate process for managing allegations against staff.

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## *What To Do If You Have a Safeguarding Allegation*

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If your concern is about a staff member (not the headteacher):

- Contact Mr M. Shaw (Headteacher) immediately
- Via the school office
- Mark correspondence as "Private and Confidential - Safeguarding Allegation"
- The headteacher will follow the process set out in Part 4 of KCSIE

If your concern is about the headteacher:

- Contact B. Grant (Chair of Governors) immediately
- Via the school office
- Mark correspondence as "Private and Confidential - Safeguarding Allegation"
- The Chair of Governors will follow the process set out in Part 4 of KCSIE

**Anyone can contact the LADO directly with a safeguarding allegation about a member of staff.**

You do not have to report your concern to the school first. If you have a serious safeguarding concern about a member of staff (including the headteacher), you can contact the LADO directly.

**LADO contact details:**

Hannah Ives, Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

Email: [hives@hillingdon.gov.uk](mailto:hives@hillingdon.gov.uk)

**However, if you report your concern to the school, we will take the following action:**

The headteacher or Chair of Governors will:

1. Contact the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) immediately (if you haven't already done so)
2. Work with the LADO to plan the investigation
3. Follow the statutory process for managing allegations against staff as set out in Part 4 of KCSIE
4. Keep you informed of the process (though specific details of any staff disciplinary action cannot be shared for confidentiality reasons)

**If you have already contacted the LADO directly:**

The LADO will contact the school and work with us to manage the allegation. We will cooperate fully with the LADO's investigation and follow their guidance.

**This is a safeguarding investigation under Part 4 of KCSIE, NOT a complaint under this policy.**

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## *Child Protection Matters*

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Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our child protection and safeguarding policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance. If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).

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## *Complaints That May Require Legal or Police Involvement*

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If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police, local authority (LA) safeguarding teams or Tribunals, this may impact on our ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations. If this happens, we will inform you of a proposed new timescale.

If a complainant commences legal action against The Willows School Academy Trust in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

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## *What This Complaints Policy Does Not Cover*

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This procedure covers all complaints about any provision of community facilities or services by The Willows School Academy Trust, other than complaints that are dealt with under other statutory procedures.

The following types of complaints are **NOT** covered by this policy and must be dealt with through separate statutory procedures:

- **Admissions to the school:** Concerns about admissions should be handled through a separate process – either through the appeals process or via the local authority.
- **Exclusions:** Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion>
- **Whistleblowing:** We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors. The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for matters relating to education for whistle-blowers in education who do not want to raise matters direct with their employer.
- **Staff grievances:** Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.
- **Staff conduct/capability:** Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate. Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint. However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.

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## *How To Raise a Concern or Make a Complaint*

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A concern or complaint can be made in person, in writing or by telephone. They may also be made by a third party acting on behalf on a complainant, as long as they have appropriate consent to do so.

### **Who to Contact:**

Complaints against school staff (except the headteacher):

Should be made in the first instance, to Mr Shaw (the Headteacher) via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints that involve or are about the headteacher:

Should be addressed to Bal Grant (the Chair of Governors), via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints about the Chair of Governors, any individual governor or the whole governing body:

Should be addressed to Ms Natalie Palmer (the Clerk to the Governing Body) via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

**Important:** Complainants should not approach individual governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis and it may also prevent them from considering complaints at Stage 3 of the procedure.

If you wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the school office who will provide you with a complaint form. The form helps ensure we have all the information we need to investigate your complaint thoroughly. If you require help in completing the form, please contact the school office and we will arrange for someone to assist you. You can also ask a third-party organisation, for example like Citizens Advice, to help you. Alternatively, you may submit your complaint in writing (by letter or email) without using the form. In accordance with equality law, we will consider making reasonable adjustments if required, to enable complainants to access and complete this complaints procedure.

Under the Equality Act 2010, we will make reasonable adjustments for those who have learning difficulties or disabilities. We will also try to make the process as accessible as possible to people who speak English as an additional language.

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### *Time Limits for Raising Complaints*

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You must raise the complaint within three months of the incident or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents. We will consider complaints made outside of this time frame if exceptional circumstances apply.

We will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

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### *Anonymous Complaints*

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We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

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### *Withdrawal of a Complaint*

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If a complainant wants to withdraw their complaint, we will ask them to confirm this in writing.

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### *The Three Stages of Our Complaints Procedure*

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## **STAGE 1: Informal Resolution**

### **Aim: To resolve concerns quickly and informally**

It is to be hoped that most concerns can be expressed and resolved on an informal basis. Concerns should be raised with either the class teacher or a member of SLT.

**Process:**

1. Raise your concern with the class teacher or a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)
2. Meeting may be arranged to discuss the concern in person
3. Informal resolution sought - the staff member will try to resolve the issue
4. Written response provided within 20 school days of the concern being raised

**What happens next:**

- If you are satisfied with the response, the matter is closed
- If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint at Stage 2

**STAGE 2: Formal Investigation****Aim: To investigate the complaint thoroughly and provide a formal written response**

The investigator depends on who the complaint is about:

Complaint About	Submit Complaint To	Who Investigates
<b>Staff member (not headteacher)</b>	Mr M. Shaw (Headteacher) via school office, marked "Private and Confidential"	Headteacher (may delegate investigation to SLT member but makes final decision)
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mrs B. Grant (Chair of Governors) via school office, marked "Private and Confidential"	A suitably skilled governor with no prior involvement
<b>Chair of Governors or Individual Governor</b>	Mrs N. Palmer (Clerk) via school office, marked "Private and Confidential"	Another governor with no prior involvement
<b>Whole Governing Body or Majority of Governors</b>	Mrs N. Palmer (Clerk) via school office, marked "Private and Confidential"	Independent investigator (e.g. governor)

**Process:****1. Acknowledgement (within 5 school days):**

The Headteacher will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within 5 school days.

Within this response, the Headteacher will seek to clarify the nature of the complaint, ask what remains unresolved and what outcome the complainant would like to see. The Headteacher can consider whether a face-to-face meeting is the most appropriate way of doing this.

**2. Investigation:**

During the investigation, the Headteacher (or investigator) will:

- if necessary, interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- keep a written record of any meetings/interviews in relation to their investigation

It should be:

- Fair: the complainant and the subject of the complaint should be allowed to give their statements. Your appointed investigator shouldn't have prior knowledge of the complaint
- Full: you should make every effort to establish the validity of the complaint and look at all evidence that might be relevant

- Proportionate: consider the scope and scale of the investigation, including the need for additional resources, so it's appropriate to the nature and seriousness of the complaint
- Timely: always give the complainant a timeframe for carrying out your investigation
- Confidential: this will protect the privacy of those involved

**3. Written Response (within 20 school days):**

At the conclusion of their investigation, the Headteacher will provide a formal written response within 20 school days of the date of receipt of the complaint.

If the Headteacher 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 The Willows School Academy Trust will take to resolve the complaint.

The Headteacher will advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of Stage 2.

**What happens next:**

- If you are satisfied with the response, the matter is closed
- If you remain dissatisfied, you can escalate to Stage 3: Panel Hearing

**STAGE 3: Panel Hearing**

**Aim: To provide an independent review of the complaint**

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 2 and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to Stage 3 – a panel hearing consisting of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint with one panel member who is independent of the day-to-day management and running of the school. This is the final stage of the complaints procedure.

**How to Request a Panel Hearing:**

A request to escalate to Stage 3 must be made to the Clerk, via the school office, within 5 school days of receipt of the Stage 2 response.

Requests received outside of this time frame will only be considered if exceptional circumstances apply.

**Acknowledgement:**

The Clerk will record the date the complaint is received and acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within 5 school days.

**The Panel:**

Who sits on the panel depends on who the complaint is about:

<b>Complaint About</b>	<b>Submit Complaint To</b>
<b>Staff member or Headteacher</b>	At least 3 people: minimum 2 governors (not previously involved) and 1 independent member
<b>Individual Governor (not Chair)</b>	At least 3 people: other governors (not previously involved) and 1 independent member
<b>Chair of Governors</b>	At least 3 people: Vice-Chair and other governors (not previously involved) and 1 independent member
<b>Whole Governing Body or Majority of Governors</b>	Completely independent panel

### **Before the Panel Meeting:**

#### **At least 10 school days before the meeting, the Clerk will:**

- confirm and notify the complainant of the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that, if the complainant is invited, the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- request copies of any further written material to be submitted to the committee at least 5 school days before the meeting

#### **At least 5 school days before the meeting:**

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

#### **Important rules:**

- The committee will not normally accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.
- 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 1 of the procedure.

### **Attending the Panel Meeting:**

A complainant may bring someone along to the panel meeting to provide support. This can be a relative or friend. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the committee meeting. However, there may be occasions when legal representation is appropriate.

For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by union and/or legal representation.

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

### **Recording the meeting:**

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, or all parties give consent for the meeting to be recorded. If the meeting is online/remote a transcribe program will be used for note taking even if consent for recording is not given by all parties. 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.

### **If you don't attend:**

If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Clerk will decide when to hold the meeting. It will then proceed in the complainant's absence on the basis of written submissions from both parties.

### **After the Panel Meeting:**

#### **Within 5 school days:**

The Chair of the Committee will provide the complainant and The Willows School Academy Trust with a full explanation of their decision and the reason(s) for it, in writing, within 5 school days.

**This is the end of the school's complaints procedure.**

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*After Stage 3: Referring to the Department for Education (DfE)*

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If the complainant believes the school / 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 3.

### **How to contact the DfE:**

The complainant can refer their complaint to the DfE online at: [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus), by telephone on: 0370 000 2288 or by writing to:

### *Persistent, Unreasonable, or Vexatious Complaints*

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We are committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour from complainants.

#### **What is a persistent or unreasonable complaint?**

Once we have followed all the stages of our complaints procedure, the chair of governors can tell the complainant that the matter is closed. If the complainant tries to re-open the same issue, this can be classed as a persistent or 'serial' complaint.

#### **We may also classify a complaint as unreasonable, frivolous, or vexatious if:**

- The complainant is contacting us repeatedly making the same points
- The complaint is clearly intended to cause disruption
- The complainant is making personal attacks or threats towards staff
- The complainant's demands are unreasonable

#### **When we may stop responding:**

We will only take this decision when:

- We have taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's needs
- The complainant has been given a clear statement of our school's position and what their options are
- The complainant is contacting us repeatedly, but making the same points each time

**We will not stop responding just because a complaint is complex or demanding.**

#### **Our case to stop responding will also be stronger if:**

- The complainant's communications are abusive or aggressive, or involve making personal comments or threats towards staff members
- We have reason to believe they are continuing to contact us with the intention of causing disruption

Once we have decided it's appropriate to stop responding, we will let the complainant know in writing. This can be a hard copy letter or an email.

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### *Roles and Responsibilities*

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#### **The Complainant**

The complainant will receive a more effective response to the complaint if they:

- Explain the complaint in full as early as possible
- Co-operate with the school in seeking a solution to the complaint
- Respond promptly to requests for information or meetings
- Treat all those involved in the complaint with respect
- Refrain from publicising the details of their complaint on social media and respect confidentiality

## The School

- The Investigator will establish the facts relevant to the complaint through a fair, full, proportionate, timely and confidential investigation and will ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure and liaise with relevant staff to ensure the smooth running of the complaints procedure.
- The Clerk to the Governing Body will be the contact point for Stage 3 panel hearings and will ensure all parties are aware of their legal rights and duties, set meeting dates, collate written material, record proceedings and notify all parties of decisions.
- The Stage 3 Panel Chair will ensure the panel meeting is conducted fairly, that both parties have the opportunity to present their case, and that the panel acts independently and impartially.
- Panel Members will consider the complaint with an open mind, treat all parties with respect, and make decisions based on the evidence presented.

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## *Mediation*

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We may use mediation at any stage of the complaints process to help resolve issues and rebuild relationships.

We will use mediation:

- In the informal stage, to provide a mechanism for discussion when a concern is raised
- Following a formal investigation, to help rebuild the relationship between parties

We will not use mediation as a substitute for investigation at the formal stage. If neither we nor the complainant believe mediation will help at this point, we can move on to the next stage of the procedure.

If none of our staff has had mediation training, we will seek mediation support from our local authority.

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## *Record Keeping and Confidentiality*

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We will keep a written record of all formal complaints, including:

- Whether they were resolved at Stage 2 or progressed to a Stage 3 panel hearing
- What action the school took as a result of the complaint (regardless of whether the complaint was upheld)
- Records of the progress of the complaint, and its outcome
- Notes of meetings and phone calls
- Copies of letters or emails related to the complaint

If we use audio or video to record meetings or as evidence, we will get all parties' informed consent before we start recording.

We will store our records securely and keep them confidential. We will appoint a named person to be responsible for the records.

### **Confidentiality:**

A written record will be kept of all complaints, and of whether they are resolved at the preliminary stage or proceed to a panel hearing, along with what actions have been taken, regardless of the decision.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual 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.

We will only keep these records as long as we need to, in line with our data protection practices.

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## *Monitoring and Reviewing*

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This policy will be reviewed every three years by the governing body.

The governing body will monitor:

- The number of complaints received at each stage
- The outcomes of complaints
- Any patterns or trends in complaints
- Whether timescales are being met
- Lessons learned from complaints

This information will be used to improve our policies, procedures, and practices.

**Signed:** M. Shaw  
Headteacher

B. Grant  
Chair of Governors

**Date:** April 2026