Complaints Policy

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Changes to this Edition

DATE	VERSION	DETAILS OF CHANGES
April 2024	1.0	First Edition
July 2025	2.0	No changes

1. General Principles

This procedure applies to the St Francis Catholic Multi Academy Trust and any academy within the St Francis CMAT and applies to concerns or complaints brought by parents and carers of pupils at any Academy within the St Francis CMAT but also by members of the public about any provision or facilities or services provided.

The St Francis CMAT is committed to providing the very highest standards of education and support and places great value on its strong partnership with parents and the wider communities. However, we recognise that from time-to-time concerns or complaints may arise and it is our aim to work with all parties involved towards a satisfactory resolution.

The aim of this procedure is to enable those involved to reach a resolution of their concerns by providing a transparent and easily understood process for handling complaints. We will do this by:

- Attempting to resolve concerns through informal discussions at the earliest stage
- Providing named contacts and a timescale for a response to be made by the Academy Trust
- Focusing on resolving complaints rather than apportioning blame
- Promoting confidentiality and discretion
- Being forthright in dealing with vexatious, abusive and malicious complaints

Complaints will be managed in line with the 'Complaints Process' set out within this procedure.
The table entitled 'Complaints Procedure: Management of Stages within the Academy Trust' indicates who will be involved in the management of your complaint depending on the stage it has reached and whether the complaint is against an academy or the St Francis CMAT.

All complaints, regardless of the subject matter, will first be reviewed by the Academy/Trust Complaints Coordinator. They will ensure that you are informed of what the next steps will be in the handling of your complaint and the timescales involved. If after reviewing the complaint it is decided that an alternative statutory procedure applies then you will be informed. Separate procedures apply for exclusions, admission appeals or decisions your local authority has made about an Education, Health and Care Plan. Issues related to employees such as disciplinary action, grievances, capability or whistleblowing also have separate specific procedures.

Complaints need to be considered and resolved as quickly and efficiently as possible. Therefore, all complaints must be lodged within 12 months after an incident arises. However, for complaints received after that, St Francis CMAT will take into account exceptional circumstances before deciding whether to accept or progress the complaint.

We will consider complaints made out of term time to be received on the first school day after the holiday period.

Anonymous complaints will not normally be investigated. However, the head teacher or Chair of the Local Academy Committee, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

Complaint campaigns against the Academy or St Francis CMAT, defined as a large volume of complaints all based on the same subject or from complainants unconnected with the Academy/CMAT will not be managed under the procedure. Instead, they will receive a standardised response or be a single response on the school/CMAT website.

A written record will be kept of all complaints, whether they are resolved following a formal procedure, or proceed to a panel hearing and the action taken by the academy as a result of those complaints. 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 Education 2008 Act requests access to them.

2. Expectations under this Procedure

When you bring a complaint to us under this procedure, you may expect the Academy Trust to:

- Take your complaint seriously;
- Treat you with courtesy and respect;
- Deal with it with discretion and confidentiality (if the matter relates to the safety and wellbeing of a child then we reserve the right to share details with other agencies);
- Offer you the opportunity to be accompanied at meetings, including Stage 3 panels. Additionally, in the event of a language barrier a translator may attend and in the event that you suffer from a disability requiring reasonable adjustments a person may attend to assist with any physical or mental impairment. Please note that this procedure does not allow for legal representatives to be present at meetings including the Stage 3 panel;
- Meet the timescales set unless there are good reasons to extend these – in which case you will be informed;
- Seek and offer resolution at all stages;
- Inform you of the action taken to resolve your complaint and of any measures to ensure that a similar complaint does not arise in the future.

In turn, we expect that:

- Our staff will be treated with respect;
- You will be mindful of the need to keep information relating to children confidential in the interests of all our students;
- That you will enter into the procedure in the spirit of seeking resolution;
- If the academy or Academy Trust considers that disciplinary action may be necessary against an employee, then this will be dealt with under the Academy Trust disciplinary procedures and will be managed in confidence without this being disclosed to the complainant.

All complaints must be considered fully at the informal (Stage 1) and formal investigation (Stage 2)

stages before they can be progressed to a formal complaint panel (Stage 3) unless it is agreed with the complainant that it would be more appropriate for the complaint to proceed directly to Stage 2.

In order to facilitate a resolution, complainants wishing to progress their complaint to Stages 2 and 3 are required to complete fully and submit the Stage 2 and Stage 3 'Complainant Forms' before their request can be considered.

If, after completing the complaints process the complainant continues to raise the same issue, it is reasonable for the Academy Trust to inform them in writing that the procedure has been exhausted and that the matter is now closed.

2.1 Vexatious Complaints

The Academy Trust has a duty of care not only to its pupils and communities but also to the staff it serves and has a responsibility to protect the health and well-being of all of the staff across the Trust.

In the unlikely event that anyone bringing a complaint is considered by the academy or Academy Trust to be acting unreasonably or that the complaint is malicious or vexatious, then prompt action will be taken and appropriate restrictions may be imposed.

This may include investigating the complaint without including the complainant in the investigatory process or closing down the complaint. It may also include taking legal action against the complainant. Further information on what may be considered to be malicious or vexatious behaviour is attached at Annex D.

The use of social media to make disparaging or disrespectful comments about individuals, the academy or the Trust may be considered to be malicious or vexatious behaviour.

3. How to Report a Concern or a Complaint

3.1 Informal Concerns

Concerns are defined as follows:

'An expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought'.

Concerns will arise periodically that you will wish to discuss with the Academy or Trust. Such concerns can be raised verbally with relevant staff in order that they can respond and provide answers and reassurances to allay the concerns. Such conversations and interactions are informal and do not require formally recording. However, should you feel that you wish to escalate your concern to a complaint, please follow the process below.

3.1.1 Stage 1 - Informal Complaints

Complaints are defined as follows:
'*An expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action*'.

Complaints should initially be discussed informally with the relevant Academy Trust employee or representative (for example the class teacher, the subject teacher or form tutor), with a view to resolving the issue. In order to raise an informal complaint, you should complete the Stage 1 – Complainant Form (Annex A) and submit it to the Complaints Coordinator. Resolution discussions are expected to take place within 10 school days of the school being notified of the concern/complaint.

If the complaint has already been discussed with the relevant Academy Trust employee, or that would be inappropriate, a senior leader will discuss the complaint again with you with a view to seeking to resolve the matter informally.

We would expect the vast majority of concerns or complaints to be resolved at this early stage.

In the unusual event that your complaint remains unresolved after these discussions then you may progress your complaint to Stage 2.

3.1.2 Stage 2 – Formal Complaint Investigation

If your complaint cannot be resolved informally, then you will be given the opportunity to put it formally in writing by completing the Stage 2 – Complainant Form (Annex B). You will need to send this to the Complaints Coordinator within 10 school days of the conclusion of Stage 1.

Following this, an appropriate person (the Investigating Officer) will be appointed to investigate your complaint further who will:

- Acknowledge your complaint within 5 school days.
- Investigate the complaint and then decide how best to resolve it within a further 10 school days.
- Provide a written response to you outlining how the investigation was conducted and the outcome of the complaint. This will normally be within 5 school days of completing the investigation.

- Advise you on the next steps if after this review your complaint has not been resolved which will be covered under Stage 3.

3.1.3 Stage 3 - Formal Complaint Panel

If your complaint has not been resolved at Stage 2 then you may write within 10 school days of the notification of the Stage 2 outcome to the Complaints Co-ordinator requesting a Formal Complaints Panel and explaining why you feel that your complaint has not been fully addressed at Stage 2. You should do this by completing the Stage 3 - Complainant Form (Annex C).

Your request will be acknowledged within 5 school days and you will be informed of the arrangements for the Formal Complaint Panel.

A meeting of the Panel will be convened normally within 20 school days of your request.

The Panel will consist of a minimum of three people who have not been directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint and may include at least one person who is independent of the leadership and management of the academy (i.e. not a governor at the academy or a Director of the Academy Trust but this may be a governor at another academy within the St Francis CMAT).

The Panel will consider the following:
- any appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
- whether to dismiss the complaint in whole or in part;
- whether to uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
- whether changes to academy or Academy Trust procedures in the future may be necessary.

The Panel will take into account whether the complaint has been handled properly and reasonably in accordance with this procedure and whether the Stage 2 outcome was reasonable and appropriate.

You will be informed of the outcome in writing within 7 school days. You, and where relevant the person complained about, will receive a copy of the findings and recommendations made by the panel and a copy of the minutes of the meeting (subject to any appropriate redactions required to ensure that they are compliant with the Data Protection Act and GDPR), and that these will be retained at the academy and will be made available for inspection on the academy premises by the proprietor and the head teacher and the academy will record the action it takes as a result of the complaint regardless of whether the complaint is upheld.

The decision of this Panel is Final

4. Taking Your Complaint Further

Although the decision of the Panel is final under this procedure, if you consider that the academy or Academy Trust or their representatives did not handle your complaint in line with the published complaints procedure or they are proposing to act unreasonably, or have failed to carry out their statutory duties then you may refer your complaint to the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) online at www.education.gov.uk/contactus, by telephone on: 0370 000 2288 or by writing to:

Academy Complaints and Customer Insight Unit
Education and Skills Funding Agency
Cheylesmore House
5 Quinton Road
Coventry
CV1 2WT

The ESFA will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by the Academy/CMAT but they will consider whether the Academy/CMAT 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.

4.1 Complaints Process: Management of Stages

4.1.1 Complaints Against Academy

Complaint relates to:	Stage 1: Informal Complaint	Stage 2: Formal Complaint	Stage 3: Complaints Panel
Pupils, Parents or Staff (other than the Headteacher)	The Headteacher or another Senior Leader.	A member of the Local Academy Committee	Panel appointed by the Trust. This panel may include a Trust Executive Team member.
The Headteacher	The Headteacher	The LAC Chair	Panel appointed by the Trust. This panel may include a Trust Executive Team member.
A Local Academy Committee governor.	The Chair of the LAC.	A member of a different LAC within the Trust.	Panel appointed by the Trust and including at least 1 Board Director. This panel may include a Trust Executive Team member and/or the Diocesan Schools Commissioner.

The Chair of the LAC	A LAC Chair from a different school within the Trust	A Trust Director	Panel appointed by the Trust and including at least 1 Board Director. This panel may include a Trust Executive Team member and/or the Diocesan Schools Commissioner.

4.1.2 Complaints Against the Academy Trust or Academy Trust Officers

Complaint relates to:	Stage 1: Informal Complaint	Stage 2: Formal Complaint	Stage 3: Complaints Panel
Academy Trust Officer (other than the Chief Executive Officer)	Academy Trust Officer	A member of the Executive Team.	Panel appointed by the Trust. This panel may include a Trust Executive Team member.
CEO	CEO	A member of the Trust Board	Panel appointed by the Trust and including at least 1 Board Director and the Diocesan Schools Commissioner.
Trust Director	Trust Director	A member of the Trust Board	Panel appointed by the Trust Board including the Diocesan Schools' Commissioner and an independent person.
Chair of the Trust	Chair of the Trust	Diocesan Schools' Commissioner	Panel appointed by the Diocese. Panel members must all be independent to the Trust.

Annex A

4.1.3 Stage 1 – Complainant Form

Please complete this form and return to the Complaints Coordinator at the Academy who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your Name:	
Student Name:	
Your relationship to the student:	
Who is the complaint against?	
Address: Postcode: Telephone Number: Email:	
Please give a summary of your complaint	
What action, if any, have you already taken to resolve your complaint?	
What solution are you seeking to this complaint?	
Are you providing any supporting evidence? If so, please provide details.	
Signature: Date:	

Annex B

4.1.4 Stage 2 – Complainant Form

Please complete this form and return to the Complaints Coordinator at the Academy who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your Name:	
Student Name:	
Your relationship to the student:	
Who is the complaint against?	
Address: Postcode: Telephone Number: Email:	
Please confirm that you wish to progress your complaint to Stage 2.	
Please provide details of why you were dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 1 resolution.	
What actions do you feel would resolve the complaint at this stage?	
Are you providing any supporting evidence? If so, please provide details.	
Signature: Date:	

Annex C

4.1.5 Stage 3 – Complainant Form

Please complete this form and return to the Complaints Coordinator at the Academy who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your Name:	
Student Name:	
Your relationship to the student:	
Who is the complaint against?	
Address: Postcode: Telephone Number: Email:	
Please confirm that you wish to progress your complaint to Stage 3.	
Please provide details of why you were dissatisfied with the outcome of the Stage 2 resolution.	
What actions do you feel would resolve the complaint at this stage?	
Are you providing any supporting evidence? If so, please provide details.	
Signature: Date:	

5.0 Complaints Process

Stage 1 - Informal Complaint Discussion with relevant staff member which takes place within 10 days of receipt of the complaint. **Either** the complaint is **resolved** and closed **OR** the complainant moves to **Stage 2**. Formal complaint must be submitted within 10 days of the outcome of Stage 1 discussions.
Stage 2 - Formal Complaint Investigation Report completed within 20 school days of the receipt of the Stage 2 complaint. **Either** the complaint is **resolved** and closed **OR** the complainant moves to **Stage 3**. Formal complaint must be submitted within 10 days of the outcome of Stage 2 outcome.
Stage 3 - Formal Complaint Panel Formal Complaint Panel considers the complaint within 20 school days of the receipt of the complaint. Panel decision is communicated within 7 days of the panel hearing. **This decision is final.**

Annex D

5.1 Procedure for Dealing with Unreasonably Persistent (Vexatious) Complainants

The majority of people with complaints or concerns about the academy/Academy Trust behave reasonably in pursuing their complaint. This means that they:

- treat all Academy Trust staff with courtesy and respect;
- respect the needs of pupils and staff within the academy/Academy Trust;
- avoid the use of violence (including threats of violence) towards people and property;
- recognise the time constraints under which members of staff work and allow the academy/Academy Trust a reasonable time to respond to a complaint;
- recognise that resolving a specific problem can sometimes take some time;
- follow the complaints process.

However, sometimes academies/Academy Trusts have to deal with complainants that are unreasonably persistent. An "unreasonably persistent complainant" is defined as follows:

'An unreasonably persistent complainant is a person who complains about issues, either formally or informally, or frequently raises issues that he/she considers to be within the remit of the academy/Academy Trust and whose behaviour is unreasonable. Such behaviour may be characterised by: • actions which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, repetitious; and/or

- prolific correspondence or excessive e-mail or telephone contact about a concern or complaint; and/or • an insistence upon pursuing invalid or unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic or unreasonable outcomes; and/or
- an insistence upon pursuing valid or meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner.'

"Harassment" is defined as follows:

Harassment is the unreasonable pursuit of the actions listed above in (3) in such a way that they:

- appear to be targeted over a significant period of time on one or more members of academy/Academy Trust staff; and/or
- cause ongoing distress to individual member(s) of academy/Academy Trust staff; and/or
- have a significant adverse effect on the whole/parts of the academy/Academy Trust community; and/or
- are pursued aggressively

5.2 Deciding Whether a Complainant Should Be Deemed an Unreasonably Persistent Complainant

The Headteacher [with the agreement of the Chair of Governors] or Chief Executive Officer [with the agreement of the Chair of Directors], may deem a complainant to be an unreasonably persistent complainant.

The Headteacher/Chief Executive Officer will ensure that there is sufficient evidence available to justify the decision. They will take legal advice to confirm that the evidence is sufficient.

5.3 Action That Can Be Taken Where a Complainant Is Deemed to be Unreasonably Persistent

Where the complaints procedure has been exhausted but the complainant remains dissatisfied and continues correspondence making substantially the same points or where they attempt to re-open the same issue, the academy/Academy Trust may write to them informing them that the matter is now closed.

If they continue to correspond on the same issue the academy/Academy Trust could go further and take the decision to cease responding. This decision must be based on the understanding that the academy/Academy Trust has taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's needs and they have been given a clear statement of the academy/Academy Trust's position.

If an individual is persistently raising complaints and this is disruptive, the academy/Academy Trust may impose restrictions on communications with them. The academy/Academy Trust will write to the complainant to explain the decision and the way that future complaints will be dealt with. Any restrictions imposed will be appropriate and proportionate but may include, depending on the particular circumstances of the case:

- insisting that no member of staff should meet the complainant on his/her own;
- restricting telephone calls from the complainant to specified days, times and possibly a set number of contacts per term;
- requiring that all future contacts with the academy are in writing, except in emergencies; this includes contacts with members of the governing body or Directors of the Trust, who should only be contacted at the academy/Academy Trust address;
- merely acknowledging correspondence from the complainant that raises issues that have already been dealt with;

5.4 Dealing with Cases of Harassment of School Staff

Where a complainant persists to the point that the academy/Academy Trust considers it to constitute harassment of an employee, swift and decisive action will be undertaken. Legal advice will be sought at the earliest opportunity. Action may include an injunction or other court order being issued to complainants because of their behaviour.

5.5 Barring from School Premises

Whilst academies/Academy Trusts fulfill a public function they are private places and the public have no automatic right of entry. Academies/academy trusts must ensure they remain a safe place for pupils, staff and other members of their community. If an individual's behaviour is a cause for concern the academy may ask them to leave academy premises.

In serious cases such as where the behaviour is causing distress to others the academy/Academy Trust may also consider barring the individual from academy premises.

5.6 New Complaints from Unreasonably Persistent Complainants

Regardless of whether there is a correspondence or contact restriction in place against an individual any new and substantive issues raised by the complainant will be treated on their merits and considered by the academy/Academy Trust.

6.0 Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed on an annual basis by the Trust. The next scheduled review date for this policy is September 2026.

All changes to this policy will be communicated to all relevant stakeholders.