The Rivers C.of E. Academy Trust

Complaints Policy

North Worcester Primary Academy

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1. Roles and Responsibilities

Complainant: The person holding a concern or complaint against the school or The Rivers CofE Academy Trust.

Investigator: The nominated person in the school or in The Rivers CofE Academy Trust's executive or leadership team for investigating the concern or complaint who is charged with establishing and presenting the relevant facts.

Complaints coordinator: The nominated person in the school or the trust's central team for coordinating responses and keeping the complainant informed and updated with the process.

Governance lead: The person responsible for coordinating the administration for the stage 3 complaint panel hearing for complaints about a trust school and the trust and the contact point for stage 2 complaints about the trust.

Complaints panel chair: The individual nominated in advance of the complaint meeting, who will ensure that the meeting is conducted in an informal manner, is not adversarial and that if all parties are invited to attend, everyone is treated with respect and courtesy.

Complaints panel member: No member of the panel will have prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it.

2. Policy Aims and Principles

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust is committed to dealing effectively with any complaints you have about The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and its schools. This policy relates to concerns and complaints about the Rivers CofE Academy Trust and its schools. The Trust recognises that concerns and complaints can sometimes place a strain on relationships between families and schools. Wherever possible, the complaints process aims not only to resolve the issues raised fairly and transparently but also to rebuild constructive relationships, maintain trust and support positive working partnerships in the best interests of the child.

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust is committed to listening and will manage all concerns and complaints seriously and in a positive way. No one will be penalised or treated unfairly as a result of making a complaint. We aim to put things right when they go wrong and to review our systems and procedures when we need to.

Where possible, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and our schools believe it is best to deal with issues immediately, rather than trying to resolve them later. If there is a concern, please raise it with the relevant member of staff and they will try to resolve it informally immediately. Where lessons can be learned from addressing the concern, the member of staff will ensure they inform a member of the trust or the school's senior management team.

Before using this procedure, complainants are encouraged to read the Parent Guide to School Complaints published by Parentkind, the Department for Education and Ofsted.

The school and The Rivers CofE Academy Trust will try to find reasonable resolutions.

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust is committed to dealing effectively with any concerns or complaints about the provision of facilities and/or services the trust and/or our schools provide. Exceptions to this may be where complaints are dealt with under separate statutory procedures (such as appeals relating to exclusions or admissions). Unless complaints fall into any excluded categories, this complaints policy and procedure will be used.

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and our schools will make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and the trust's equality and diversity information and objectives.

This policy is consistent with all other policies adopted by The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and its schools and is written in line with current legislation and guidance.

2.1 The difference between a concern and a complaint

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 Rivers CofE Academy Trust takes concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible:

- 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 of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action*'.

2.2 How to raise a concern or make a complaint

We seek to resolve complaints informally in the first instance.

If your complaint has not been able to be resolved informally, then stage 1 of our complaints process is initiated. For ease of use, a template complaint form is provided at the end of this policy in appendix 2.

If there is a difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff, we will respect your views. In these cases, the school's complaints coordinator Catherine Guild will refer you to another staff member. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, the headteacher will refer the concern to another staff member. The member of staff may be more senior but does not have to be. The ability to consider the concern objectively and impartially is more important.

Complaints against school staff (except the headteacher) should be made in the first instance to Miss Mclean at the school via the school office or by email. Please mark as private and confidential.

Complaints that involve or are about the headteacher should be addressed to the relevant **Hub Director** via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to Hub Director, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ. Please mark as private and confidential.

Complaints about the trust central team should be addressed to the CEO via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to CEO, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ. Please mark as private and confidential.

Complaints about the chief executive officer (CEO) or a trustee of the trust should be addressed to the chair of trustees via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to Chair of Trustees, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ.

Complaints about the chair of trustees should be addressed to the vice-chair of trustees via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to Vice-Chair of Trustees, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ.

If you require help in completing the complaint form, please contact the school office. You can also ask a third-party organisation, for example, Citizens Advice, to help you.

In accordance with equality law, we will consider making reasonable adjustments if required, to enable complainants to access and complete this complaints procedure. For instance, providing information in alternative formats, assisting complainants in raising a formal complaint or holding meetings in accessible locations.

2.3 Anonymous complaints

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints under this policy. However, the headteacher, CEO or chair of trustees, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation.

2.4 Timescale for making a complaint

The Trust encourages concerns and complaints to be raised as soon as possible after an incident occurs. Early resolution supports accurate investigation, availability of evidence and witness recollection, and increases the likelihood of achieving a timely and constructive outcome for all parties.

Complaints should normally be raised within **6 weeks** of the incident occurring (not including school holidays) or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within 6 school weeks of the last of these incidents. Complaints raised outside this timeframe will not normally be considered unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The timescales set out in this policy may be paused where additional information or clarification is reasonably required from the complainant, where multiple complaints relating to the same or connected issues are being considered together, or where there are other exceptional circumstances that make it impracticable to meet the published timescales. Where this occurs, the complainant will be informed of the reason for the delay and provided with a revised timescale wherever possible.

2.5 Complaints received out of term time

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and its schools will consider complaints made outside of term time to have been received on the first school day after the holiday period.

2.6 Scope of this complaints policy

This policy covers all complaints about the trust and any of its schools. However, some complaints are covered by other statutory procedures or trust policies, including those listed below.

- Admissions to schools
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs

- Matters relating to child protection
- Exclusions
- Whistleblowing
- Staff grievances
- Staff conduct - complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint (due to confidentiality and employment law). However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.

For further information of who should be contacted where a complaint relates to any of these matters, please see the table in appendix 1.

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 Rivers CofE Academy Trust or one of its schools in relation to their complaint, the trust will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure in relation to their complaint until those legal proceedings have concluded.

2.7 Resolving complaints

At each stage in the procedure, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and our schools want to resolve the complaint. At any stage, the Trust may seek to resolve concerns through informal discussion, facilitated meetings or mediation where appropriate. Where appropriate, we will seek to restore positive and constructive relationships between those involved, recognising that continued partnership between families and the school is often in the best interests of the child. If appropriate, we will acknowledge that the complaint is upheld in whole or in part. In addition, we may offer one or more of the following:

- an explanation
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- an assurance that we will try to ensure the matter relating to the complaint will not recur
- an explanation of the steps that have been or will be taken to help ensure that it will not happen again and an indication of the timescales within which any changes will be made
- an undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint
- an apology

Where the Trust receives multiple concerns or complaints from different individuals relating to the same or substantially similar issue, it may manage these collectively where appropriate. This may include issuing a single response to all complainants or publishing a general response where this is considered to be a fair, proportionate and efficient way of addressing the matter. Individual complainants will retain the right to pursue their own complaint through the formal stages of this procedure where appropriate.

2.8 Withdrawal of a complaint

If a complainant wants to withdraw their complaint, we will ask them to confirm this in writing. We reserve the right to move forward with an investigation even after a complaint has been withdrawn.

2.9 Complaints The Rivers CofE Academy Trust cannot normally consider

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust cannot normally consider complaints in the following circumstances:

- If the complaint is received more than three months after the incident occurred (see section 2.4).
- If the complaint has been made previously to The Rivers CofE Academy Trust or the school about the same issue which has been fully investigated and/or resolved.
- Where the complaint is anonymous. However, the headteacher, the chair of trustees or the CEO (if appropriate), will determine whether an anonymous complaint warrants further investigation.
- Where complaints are frivolous, vexatious, abusive or malicious.
- Serial and unreasonable complaints (see below).
- Suspensions and permanent exclusions (with reference to statutory process)
- Attendance penalty notices
- Admissions appeals
- Data protection complaints must be made in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection Policy
- Where a complaint is made by a third party on behalf of another person without their authority.
- Where the complaint is about a pupil's education, health and care plan (EHCP).
- Matters that are the subject of legal action.
- If the complaint is about a third-party provider of a service that is organised or facilitated by us – complaints of this nature should be directed to the service provider.*
- Where complaints are about things that are out of scope of this policy (see sections 2.6 and section 4 for details of where these complaints should be directed).*

Although these complaints cannot be formally investigated, they should be brought to the attention of the school or trust as we may be able to resolve the complaint or provide additional information/support. Complaints about SEND provision that do not relate to statutory assessment processes or the content of an EHCP may be considered under this complaints procedure.

2.10 Serial and unreasonable complaints

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. We will not normally limit the contact complainants have with our schools. However, we do not expect our staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening.

The Rivers CofE Academy Trust defines unreasonable behaviour as that which hinders our consideration of complaints because of the frequency or nature of the complainant's contact with the school, such as, if the complainant:

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance
- refuses to co-operate with the complaints investigation process
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on

- raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues and seeks to have them replaced
- changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed)
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with
- uses threats to intimidate
- uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence
- knowingly provides falsified information
- Using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to draft complaints or to cite laws, regulations or guidance, where the AI-generated content is inaccurate, misleading or makes the complaint more complex than necessary.
- To support a fair, thorough and confidential investigation, complainants are asked not to discuss the details of their complaint publicly, including on social media, while it is being considered under this procedure. This helps to protect the privacy of all individuals involved and the integrity of the complaints process. Nothing in this paragraph prevents a complainant from seeking private advice or support from a family member, friend, advocate or professional adviser.
- Where a complainant publishes details of an ongoing complaint on social media or other public forums while it is being investigated, the Trust may ask that the content is removed to help protect the privacy of those involved and the integrity of the complaints process. If the content is not removed, or where its continued publication is likely to prejudice the fair consideration of the complaint, the Trust reserves the right to pause the complaints procedure until the matter has been appropriately addressed. The complainant will be informed of the reasons for any such decision.

Complainants should try to limit their communication with the school that relates to their complaint, while the complaint is being progressed. It is not helpful if repeated correspondence is sent (either by letter, phone, email or text) as it could delay the outcome being reached.

The headteacher and a member of the executive team will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an '*unreasonable*' marking.

If the behaviour continues, the headteacher will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and ask them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will be reviewed after six months.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, we will immediately inform the police and communicate our actions in writing. This may include barring an individual from the school.

Record keeping

Staff members are encouraged to log all informal concerns on the school's management information system or CPOMs (for safeguarding concerns) and inform the Headteacher of any serious concerns.

We keep a record of all complaints that reach the formal complaint or complaints committee/review stages. This includes how and when the complaint was resolved, and any action we took as a result.

We keep records in line with our data retention policy and data protection law. We keep all complaint details confidential, except where:

- The Secretary of State asks to see them;
- They are needed for an academy inspection;
- An individual has a legal right to see their own personal information in the records; or
- The law requires us to share them.

The findings and recommendations from any complaints committee decision will be shared with the Trust and other relevant staff at the discretion of the Executive Team.

Electronic recordings of any meetings or the complaints committee hearing will not be permitted unless there are very good reasons to do so and all parties to the meeting or hearing give their written consent.

3. Making a Complaint

At the informal stage or stage 1, complaints can be made in person, by telephone or in writing. For ease of use a template complaint form is provided at the end of this policy.

3.1 Who should I contact to make a complaint?

School complaints School complaints coordinator	Name: Catherine Guild Email: northworcesterprimary@riverscofe.co.uk
Trust complaints Trust contact	Email: complaints@riverscofe.co.uk

	Jenny Lind Building Farrier Street Worcester WR1 3BZ

3.2 Records

Every complaint notified to a member of staff must be recorded, detailing the action taken. A written record of this will be kept in a complaint file which includes all of the evidence considered.

The complaint file will remain confidential except where;

- access is requested by the Secretary of State;
- disclosure is required in the course of an academy inspection;
- an individual has a legal right to access their own personal data contained within such documentation; or
- under other legal authority

Any requests for disclosure of any or all sections of the file will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and in line with data protection principles. The trust will keep all complaints records for the duration of the pupil's time at school. Complaint records will be retained in accordance with the trust's Records Retention Schedule and applicable data protection legislation. Personal data collected through the complaints process will be processed in accordance with UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the trust's Data Protection Policy.

We keep a record of all complaints that reach the formal complaint or complaints committee/review stages. This includes how and when the complaint was resolved, and any action we took as a result.

Electronic recordings of any meetings or the complaints committee hearing will not be permitted unless there are very good reasons to do so and all parties to the meeting or hearing give their written consent.

3.3 Complaints procedure

Most concerns can be expressed and resolved on an informal basis. Concerns should be raised with the class teacher or headteacher/senior leader in the first instance.

Formal complaints will normally follow the stages outlined below. The Rivers CofE Academy Trust has a three-stage formal process when dealing with complaints. Each stage is followed until the complaint is resolved. If a complaint is resolved at stage one, for example, stage two will not commence and the matter is closed.

1. Stage 1: Investigation by the headteacher - where attempts at informal resolution have failed or if the complaint is of a serious nature.
2. Stage 2: Review by the executive team - where the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of stage 1 or where the complaint is in relation to the headteacher.
3. Stage 3: Complaint panel hearing - where the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome at stages 1 and/or 2.

If you choose to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools (such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini or similar) to help you draft or structure your concern or complaint, please read the guidance set out in Appendix 6 of this procedure before doing so. AI tools can be helpful in organising your thoughts and presenting your concern or complaint clearly, but they must be used carefully. You are responsible for the accuracy and content of anything you submit to us, regardless of whether AI was used to help prepare it.

3.4 Complaints about a trust school

If your concern or complaint has not had a resolution informally, our formal process initiates.

3.4.1 Stage 1: Referral to headteacher

Stage 1 involves the complainant making the complaint in person, by telephone or in writing (using the formal complaint form in appendix 2) to the headteacher (unless the complaint is about the headteacher).

All complaints at this stage must normally be received in writing within three months of the incident as outlined in section 2.4.

- The complaint will be investigated by the headteacher or suitable person appointed by the headteacher.
- If the complaint is about the headteacher, the complaint will be reviewed centrally by a member of the trust's executive team and the complaint may be escalated to stage 2.
- The date the complaint is received will be recorded and an acknowledgement of the complaint will be sent to the complainant within 5 school days.
- The acknowledgement will confirm the arrangements for investigating the complaint and the timescales.
- The investigator may delegate the task of collating the information to another staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken.
- During the investigation, the head teacher (or investigator) will meet with the complainant/s and others involved in the matter, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish, and keep a written record of any meetings/interviews in relation to their investigation.
- 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 school 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 1.
- Complaints about the headteacher or member of the governing body must be made to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk .
- If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the complaint under stage 1 of this complaints policy, the complainant may write to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk asking for the complaint to be reviewed by the trust's executive team under stage 2 of this policy. The request, detailing the reasons why the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome, should be made in writing (if not already completed, the complainant **must** complete the formal complaint form –

see appendix 2) within 5 school days of receiving the letter confirming the outcome of stage 1. The complainant should not repeat matters raised in their original complaint letter or attach documentation already provided. Furthermore, the complainant should not introduce any new complaint or include evidence unrelated to the initial complaint.

3.4.2 Stage 2: Review by a trust executive

- The trust will acknowledge receipt of the request for the complaint to be considered under stage 2 of the complaints policy within 5 school days.
- A trust executive or delegated trust leader will be appointed and will be provided with all documentation relating to the complaint within 10 school days of receipt of the request for a review under stage 2, including the record of the mediation (if applicable), the original letter of complaint (or complaint form), any documentation provided by the complainant with their complaint, all investigation records under stage 1 and the outcome under stage 1.
- The trust executive or delegated trust leader will review all of the documentation received and consider the matters raised in the complaint and the investigation carried out under stage 1. The executive or delegated trust leader will only speak to the persons involved in the matters raised where it is deemed necessary. Where the executive or delegated trust leader does speak to a pupil or a member of staff whose conduct is in issue, they will be accompanied as set out in the safeguarding and HR policies. The complainant will be offered a meeting with a representative of the executive team or delegated trust leader, who will listen to the complainant and understand what they may deem to be an acceptable resolution.
- All meetings held at stage 2 will be minuted by a trust representative.
- The trust's executive or delegated trust leader will write to the complainant confirming the outcome of the review within 20 school days from the date that the request for a review was received, where possible. If the trust's executive or delegated trust leader is unable to meet this deadline, they will provide the complainant with an update and revised response date.
- The letter will set out whether the executive or delegated trust leader agrees/does not agree with the findings and conclusion under stage 1 and give reasons, as well as responding to any feedback/comments/issues arising from the stage 1 investigation.
- The letter will inform the complainant that, if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of the stage 2 review, they should write to the executive or delegated trust leader named on the decision letter via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 10 school days of receipt of the letter requesting a complaint panel hearing under stage 3 of this complaints policy and detailing why they are not satisfied with the outcome at stage 2. The complainant should not repeat matters raised in their original complaint letter or attach documentation already provided. Furthermore, the complainant should not introduce any new complaint or include evidence unrelated to the initial complaint.

3.4.3 Stage 3: Panel hearing

Stage 3 is the final stage of the complaints process where the complainant can request a complaints panel.

The panel is independent and impartial. No member of the panel will have prior involvement in the complaint or in the circumstances surrounding it. The complaints panel will be chaired by a trustee or a senior executive from The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and a clerk will attend to oversee the running of the panel and to take minutes. Electronic recordings of the panel hearing will not normally be permitted and, in any event, would require the consent of all those present.

The panel will be held in private and its aim is to resolve the complaint and achieve reconciliation between the academy and the complainant. However, it is recognised that this might not always be possible and it may only be possible to establish the facts and make recommendations.

The trust will normally agree to no more than one request to rearrange a panel hearing date. Where a complainant is unable to attend the rearranged hearing, the panel may proceed in their absence and determine the complaint on the basis of the written evidence submitted, unless exceptional circumstances apply.

Legal representatives will not normally be permitted to attend complaint meetings or panel hearings. However, the chair may exercise discretion to permit legal representation in exceptional circumstances where it is considered necessary to ensure fairness or to comply with legal obligations.

Attendance at the panel hearing

The complainant may be accompanied by **one friend, relative, advocate or representative**. The complainant must notify the clerk of the name and role of the accompanying person no later than 5 school days before the hearing.

The accompanying person may provide support to the complainant but may not normally address the panel or answer questions on the complainant's behalf unless agreed in advance by the chair of the panel.

The chair of the panel reserves the right to refuse attendance by any individual where their presence may compromise the impartiality, confidentiality, effective conduct or non-adversarial nature of the hearing.

Requests for additional attendees must be made in advance and will be considered by the chair of the panel. The chair reserves the right to limit attendance where this is necessary to ensure the hearing remains proportionate, informal and non-adversarial.

- The administration for stage 3 complaint panel hearings will be handled by the governance lead, hereinafter referred to as "clerk".
- The clerk will acknowledge receipt of a request to escalate to stage 3 within 5 school days.
- The panel will be arranged by the clerk at a location and time convenient to all parties. This meeting will normally take place no longer than 20 school days from the date the panel was requested. Any delay in timescales will be communicated to the complainant as soon as possible in writing. If the offer of three proposed meeting dates is rejected without good reason, the clerk will coordinate with the panel to decide when to hold the meeting. It will then proceed in the absence of the complainant on the basis of written submissions from both parties.
- The clerk will inform the complainant of the names of the complaint panel members as soon as this has been arranged.
- The panel will consist of three people including one person who is independent of the management and running of the trust/school. The composition of the panel will include:
  - a trustee from The Rivers CofE Academy Trust Board of Trustees
  - a senior executive from The Rivers CofE Academy Trust
  - an independent panel member
- The panel will not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint. New complaints must be dealt with from stage one of the procedure.

The panel can take the following action:

- dismiss the complaint whole or in part, or;
- uphold the complaint in whole or in part

If the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, the panel will:

- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint
- recommend changes to systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not recur

The outcome of the complaints panel, including the findings and recommendations, will be communicated to all parties i.e. the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about, on the day or a letter will be sent (by email or otherwise) confirming the outcome within 10 school days.

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.

The letter to the complainant will include details of how to contact the Department for Education if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled.

3.5 Complaints about The Rivers CofE Academy Trust

All complaints about The Rivers CofE Academy Trust must normally be received in writing within 6 school weeks of the incident as outlined in section 2.4.

There may be a time when a complaint is received regarding the actions of The Rivers CofE Academy Trust and/or a central team staff member. In these instances, the procedures for dealing with such complaints differ from those regarding schools.

The process for complaining about The Rivers CofE Academy Trust follows three stages. Before the formal process commences, informal concerns can be made over the telephone, by email or post. Concerns should be raised directly with the staff member involved. If your concerns are not able to be resolved directly with the staff member involved, the process detailed below should be followed.

3.5.1 Stage 1 – Referral to CEO, chair of trustees or vice-chair of trustees

- A formal complaint should be made in writing to The Rivers CofE Academy Trust's CEO. If it is a minor complaint, then this will be managed by the line manager of the person who the complaint involves. Where the complaint cannot be resolved immediately, a full response will be provided by the CEO within 20 school days. The CEO may delegate fact finding to a member of the executive team or delegated trust leader.
- If the complaint is considered to be complex or falls under one of the categories detailing where complaints can be escalated, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust's CEO will acknowledge the complaint within 5 school days, confirming that the complaint will be dealt with at stage 2 of the procedure.
- If the complaint is about the CEO, the complaint should be addressed to the chair of trustees. The complaint will be reviewed by the chair of trustees and may be escalated to stage 2.
- If a formal complaint form is received about the chair, the complaint will be referred to the vice-chair for investigation. A full response will be provided within 20 school days.

3.5.2 Stage 2 – Review by a trust executive

Stage 2 of the procedure is for the complaint to be reviewed by a member of the executive team unless relating to the CEO. It is the responsibility of the complainant to request a review.

- To request a review, the complainant should write to The Rivers CofE Academy Trust's governance lead within 5 school days of being notified of the outcome of stage 1, detailing why they remain unhappy with the stage 1 response.
- This request will be acknowledged by the governance lead within 5 school days.
- The governance lead will pass the request on to a member of the executive team for review and will remain the main point of contact at this stage.
- The task of collating the information may be delegated to another staff member but not the decision on the action to be taken.
- The executive member reviewing the complaint may take the decision to meet with the complainant and/or any relevant people named within the complaint.
- A full and final response to the complaint will be communicated in writing within 20 school days of the complaint being allocated to a member of the executive team. Any delays will be communicated to the complainant in writing. The letter will inform the complainant that, if they are unsatisfied with the outcome of the stage 2 review, they should write to the trust's governance lead within 5 school days of receipt of the letter requesting a complaint panel hearing under stage 3 of this complaints policy and detailing why they are not satisfied with the outcome at stage 2. Furthermore, the complainant should not introduce any new complaint or include evidence unrelated to the initial complaint.
- In stage 2, where the complaint is about the CEO, the investigation will be carried out by the chair of the trust board or the chair may delegate this to another member of the board.

3.5.3 Stage 3: Panel hearing

Stage 3 is the final stage of the complaints process where the complainant can request a complaints panel.

- The administration for stage 3 complaint panel hearings will be handled by a senior member of the trust's governance team, hereinafter referred to as "clerk".
- The clerk will acknowledge receipt of a request to escalate to stage 3 within 5 school days.
- The panel will be arranged by the clerk at a location and time convenient to all parties. This meeting will not normally take place longer than 20 school days from the date the panel was requested. Any delay in timescales will be communicated to the complainant as soon as possible in writing.
- The makeup and procedures of the complaints panel will follow the same process and composition as detailed in paragraph 3.4.3.

Rearrangement of hearings

- Once a complaint hearing has been arranged, every effort should be made by all parties to attend on the agreed date.
- Where a complainant is unable to attend, the Trust will consider one reasonable request to rearrange the hearing. Any request should be made as soon as possible and supported by an explanation.

- If the complainant is unable to attend the rearranged hearing, the panel reserves the right to proceed in their absence and reach findings based on the written evidence available, unless there are exceptional circumstances which justify a further postponement.
- The decision as to whether exceptional circumstances exist rests with the chair of the panel.

4 Next Steps

If the complainant believes that a school or trust complaint was not handled in accordance with the published complaints policy or they acted unlawfully or unreasonably in the exercise of their duties under education law, the complainant can contact the Department for Education after they have completed all stages.

Complain to DfE

DfE will consider your complaint. They may use the information you provide to recommend improvements to school policies.

DfE cannot deal with complaints about:

- fines for taking holidays in term time (sometimes known as a 'fixed penalty notice')
- lack of compensation or apologies from the school
- the behaviour of school staff

If you have followed all the steps in the school's complaints procedure and believe your complaint was not dealt with correctly, you can complain to DfE via this link here.

5 Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed annually or earlier if required, for example:

- where there are changes in legislation and/or government guidance
- as a result of any other significant change or event
- in the event that the policy is determined not to be effective

If there are urgent concerns about this policy, please raise these with the school headteacher or the CEO in the first instance. This will enable them to consider whether a review of the policy is required/recommended in advance of the review date.

6. This policy has been developed with reference to:

- Education Act 2002
- Best Practice Advice for School Complaints Procedures 2020 (Department for Education)
- Keeping Children Safe in Education (current edition)
- Data Protection Act 2018
- UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)

Related trust policies:

- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
- SEND Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Records Retention Schedule
- Whistleblowing Policy

Appendix 1: Contacts

Stage	Section	Who to Contact
Informal stage	2	Verbally to school staff, headteacher or school office
Stage 1	3.4.1	In person, by telephone or in writing to the headteacher (use form in appendix 2). If the complaint is about the headteacher, in writing to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk (attach complaints form in appendix 2)
Stage 2	3.4.2	In writing (if not already completed, the complainant **must** complete the formal complaint form – see appendix 2) to a trust executive or delegated trust leader via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to Director of Education, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ. Please mark as private and confidential.
Stage 3	3.4.3	In writing to the executive named on the stage 2 decision letter via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk or by post to the executive named on the stage 2 decision letter, The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ. Please mark as private and confidential.
Trust Complaint (all stages)	3.5	In writing via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk (use complaints form in appendix 2) or by post to CEO (if the complaint is about the CEO, the complaint should be addressed to the chair of trustees), The Rivers CofE Academy Trust, Jenny Lind Building, Farrier Street, Worcester, WR1 3BZ. Please mark as private and confidential.

Appendix 2: Formal Complaint Form

Please complete and return to the headteacher or school office who will acknowledge receipt and explain what action will be taken.

Your name:	
Pupil's name (if applicable):	
Your relationship to pupil (if applicable):	
Address and postcode:	
Daytime telephone number:	Evening telephone number:
Email address:	
Details of complaint (including the names of all persons involved and the dates of incidents referred to):	
What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint (for example, who did you speak to and what was the response)?	
What key actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?	

Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.	
Signature:	Date:
For official use:	
Date acknowledgement sent:	
Name of person complainant referred to:	
Action taken:	
Signature:	Date:

Appendix 3: Exceptions Contact Details

Contact details for organisations relating to complaints that are covered by other trust policies or procedures.

Exceptions	Who to contact
Admissions to schools Statutory assessment of special educational needs	Concerns about admissions should be handled through a separate process – either through the appeals process or via the local authority.
Matters relating to child protection	Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our 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 and or the relevant local authority children's social care/safeguarding contact.
Exclusions	Matters relating to a pupil's exclusion are handled under the trust's exclusion policy.
Whistleblowing	We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors.
Staff grievances	Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.
Staff conduct	Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the trust'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 (due to confidentiality and employment law). However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.

Appendix 4: Complaints Procedure Flowchart – School Complaints

If the complaint is about the school

Informal stage
Concern raised with a member of school staff, headteacher or school office.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 1

Stage 1
*(**formal stage** – referral to headteacher)*
Formal complaint to headteacher in person, by telephone or in writing. Acknowledged within 5 school days and written response within 20 school days. If unsatisfied with outcome, complainant may write to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 5 school days of receiving the outcome asking for the complaint to be reviewed by the trust's executive team under stage 2.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 2

Stage 2
*(**formal stage** – review by trust executive)*
Request for complaint to be considered under stage 2 acknowledged within 5 school days. Trust executive writes to complainant confirming the outcome of the review within 20 school days of receiving the request.
If unsatisfied with the outcome of stage 2, the complainant may write to the executive named on the decision letter via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 5 school days of receiving the outcome letter requesting a complaint panel hearing under stage 3 of this policy.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 3

Stage 3
*(**final formal stage** – panel hearing – this is the final stage of the trust's complaints process)*
Formal complaint reviewed by impartial panel (one panel member will be independent of the trust). The panel will normally take place no longer than 20 school days from the date the panel was requested. The outcome will be confirmed in writing within 10 school days.

If the complaint is about the headteacher

Informal stage – complaint about the headteacher
Concern made to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 2

Stage 1
*(**formal stage** – referral to trust's exec team)*
Formal complaint to a member of the trust's executive team via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk Acknowledged within 5 school days. May be escalated straight to stage 2. If unsatisfied with the outcome, the complainant may write to complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 5 school days of receiving the outcome asking for the complaint to be reviewed under stage 2.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 2

Stage 2
*(**formal stage** – review by a trust executive)*
Request for complaint to be considered under stage 2 acknowledged within 5 school days. Trust executive writes to complainant confirming the outcome of the review within 20 school days of receiving the request.
If unsatisfied with the outcome of stage 2, the complainant may write to the executive named on the decision letter via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 5 school days of receiving the outcome letter requesting a complaint panel hearing under stage 3 of this policy.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 3

Stage 3
*(**final formal stage** – panel hearing – this is the final stage of the trust's complaints process)*
Formal complaint reviewed by impartial panel (one panel member will be independent of the trust). The panel will normally take place no longer than 20 school days from the date the panel was requested. The outcome will be confirmed in writing within 10 school days.

Appendix 5: Complaints Procedure Flowchart – Trust Complaints

Informal stage
Concern raised with a member of the central team.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 1

Stage 1
*(**formal stage** – review by trust leader, chair or vice-chair of trustees – may be escalated straight to stage 2)*
Formal complaint to The Rivers CofE Academy Trust's CEO or chair of trustees if the complaint is about the CEO. Acknowledged within 5 school days and written response within 20 school days. Complaint may be escalated straight to stage 2 by the CEO or chair of trustees.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 2

Stage 2
*(**formal stage** – review by trust executive)*
Request for complaint to be considered under stage 2 acknowledged within 5 school days. Trust executive writes to complainant confirming the outcome of the review within 20 school days of receiving the request.
If unsatisfied with the outcome of stage 2, the complainant may write to the executive named on the decision letter via complaints@riverscofe.co.uk within 5 school days of receiving the outcome letter requesting a complaint panel hearing under stage 3 of this policy.

Matter concluded
No further action

Matter not concluded
Move to stage 3

Stage 3
*(**final formal stage** – panel hearing - this is the final stage of the trust's complaints process)*
Request for complaint to be considered under stage 3 acknowledged within 5 school days. Formal complaint reviewed by impartial panel (one panel member will be independent of the trust). The panel will normally take place no longer than 20 school days from the date the panel was requested. The outcome will be confirmed in writing within 10 school days.

Appendix 6: Guidance on using AI tools to raise concerns or complaints

Introduction

AI tools (such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini and similar large language model applications) can help you organise your thoughts, structure your concern or complaint clearly, and express yourself effectively. However, these tools have significant limitations and must be used with care. This Annex provides practical guidance on how to use AI tools effectively when raising a concern or complaint under this procedure, and what to avoid.

If you are unsure about how to use AI tools when raising a concern or complaint, or if you would like help preparing your concern or complaint, please contact the school office and we will arrange for a member of staff to assist you.

How AI tools can help you

AI tools can be useful for:

(a) Organising your thoughts and structuring your concern or complaint in a clear and logical way;

(b) Helping you express what happened in plain, clear language if you find writing difficult;

(c) Summarising a timeline of events based on information you provide;

(d) Suggesting what outcome you might want to ask for; and

(e) Checking your draft for clarity, tone and spelling before you submit it.

Important limitations and risks

You should be aware of the following limitations and risks when using AI tools:

(a) AI tools do not know what happened – they can only work with the information you give them, and they may fill gaps with invented details that sound convincing but are untrue (this is sometimes called 'hallucination');

(b) AI tools may generate references to laws, regulations, policies or legal rights that do not exist, are out of date, or do not apply to your situation;

(c) AI tools may produce language that is overly formal, legalistic or aggressive, which may not reflect your genuine concern and may make it harder for us to resolve the matter constructively;

(d) any personal data (including names, dates of birth, or other identifying information about your child, other children, staff or other individuals) that you enter into an AI tool may be stored, processed or used by the AI provider in ways that are outside your control and may breach data protection law;

(e) AI-generated complaints that do not accurately reflect your experience may cause delays in resolving your concern, as we may need to spend time clarifying what actually happened; and

(f) AI tools work by predicting the most likely answer based on the information they have been trained on. They do not check whether their output is accurate or relevant to your particular situation, and the most likely-sounding answer is not always the correct one. AI tools are also designed to make you feel helped and understood, which means they may agree with your point of view, use an overly sympathetic tone, or present your complaint in a one-sided way rather than giving a balanced account of what happened. This can wrongly reinforce your point of view and make you more fixed in your position, which may make it harder for us to work together to resolve the matter.

What to do and what to avoid

Do	Don't
Write down the key facts yourself first (what happened, when, who was involved, and what you would like us to do) before using an AI tool.	Copy and paste AI-generated text without reading and checking it thoroughly.
Use AI to help you structure and clarify what you have already written, rather than to generate the complaint from scratch.	Submit a complaint that contains facts, events or details that you have not personally verified as accurate.
Read everything the AI produces carefully and remove or correct anything that is inaccurate, exaggerated or that you did not experience.	Rely on any legal advice, references to legislation or statements about your rights generated by an AI tool without checking them independently.
Use your own words where possible – your complaint should sound like you.	Enter the names or personal data of your child, other children, staff members or any other individuals into an AI tool.
Remove all personal data (names, dates of birth and other identifying information about individuals) before entering any information into an AI tool – you can use placeholders such	Use AI to generate multiple or repetitive complaints about the same issue.

as 'my child', 'the class teacher' or 'Teacher A' instead.	

Example prompts for using AI tools effectively

The following example prompts illustrate how AI tools can be used effectively to help you prepare a concern or complaint.

In each case, you should replace the descriptions in square brackets with your own details, taking care not to include any personal data or names.

Example 1 Organising your thoughts:

"I want to raise a concern with my child's school about [describe the issue in general terms, e.g. 'how a bullying incident was handled']. The key things that happened are: [list the main events in the order they happened, using descriptions such as 'my child', 'the class teacher' etc. instead of names]. Can you help me organise these into a clear, chronological summary that I can use when speaking to the school?"

Why this helps: Before writing a formal complaint, it can be difficult to know where to start, particularly if a number of things have happened over a period of time. This prompt helps you to present the key events in a logical order, making it easier for us to understand your concern and for you to feel confident that nothing important has been left out.

Example 2 – Structuring a written complaint:

"I need to write a formal complaint to my child's school. The issue is [describe the issue]. I have already tried to resolve this informally by [describe what you did]. The key facts are [list the facts]. The outcome I am looking for is [describe what you want to happen]. Can you help me structure this into a clear letter, using plain language and a respectful tone? Do not add any facts or details that I have not provided."

Why this helps: A well-structured complaint is more likely to be understood and dealt with effectively. This prompt helps you to set out the issue, the steps you have already taken, the relevant facts, and the outcome you are seeking in a clear and logical way, without the AI tool adding anything you have not told it.

Example 3 – Checking tone and clarity:

"I have drafted the following complaint to my child's school: [paste your draft, with names removed]. Can you suggest how I could make this clearer and more constructive in tone, without changing the facts or adding anything new?"

Why this helps: When raising a concern or complaint, it is natural to feel frustrated or upset. This prompt allows you to check that your draft communicates your concern clearly and constructively, which is more likely to lead to a productive response, without altering the substance of what you have written.

Example 4 – Identifying what outcome to request:

"I am raising a complaint with my child's school about [describe the issue]. I am not sure what outcome to ask for. Based on the facts I have described, can you suggest some realistic outcomes I could request? Please do not suggest legal remedies or refer to specific laws."

Why this helps: It is not always easy to know what to ask for when raising a complaint. This prompt can help you to think through realistic and proportionate outcomes, whilst ensuring that the AI tool does not stray into providing legal advice, which it is not equipped to give.