David Ross Education Trust

Broadening Horizons

Complaints Policy and Procedure

Document Management Information

Applicable to:	All staff in all academies and central Support Services including individuals employed by the trust, contractors and agency staff. All members, trustees and local governors.
Development and Consultation:	This policy has been developed based upon DfE guidance and model documentation and adapted to the Trust's operations.
Dissemination:	The policy will be made available to all staff via the Trust's policy centre. It will also be made available on the David Ross Education Trust and individual academy websites.
Review Frequency:	Three years (or sooner if there are significant changes in statutory guidance, data protection expectations, AI regulation or Trust practice.)
Policy Author:	Maria Maltby, Director of Governance
Executive Policy Owner:	Maria Maltby, Director of Governance
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Revision History

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Version 1.1	Policy adapted to follow DfE 2021 model policy template with adaptations to take into account Trust context.	16 February 2022
2.0	Policy approved by Education Committee	04 May 2022
2.1	Update to reflect removal of ESFA handling of complaints and clarification of areas as requested by DfE.	30 May 2023
2.2	Update to include a formal review stage prior to governor panel.	16 September 2024
2.3	Update to include section on AI assisted complaints	July 2026

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1. Introduction

1.1. The David Ross Education Trust and its academies endeavour to provide the best education possible for all its pupils in an open and transparent environment. We welcome any feedback that we receive from parents, pupils or third parties, and we accept that on occasion individuals may feel dissatisfied with the service they receive and will wish to express this dissatisfaction.

1.2. Where concerns are raised, we intend for these to be dealt with fairly, openly, promptly and without prejudice.

1.3. This policy explains the process for handling complaints regarding the trust and its academies.

2. Policy Scope

2.1. This policy and procedure covers all concerns and complaints relating to academies, academy staff and academy governors, the trust and trustees.

2.2. It does not apply to the following topics of complaints, as these are dealt with by alternate specific policies and procedures.

- **Admissions** –should be handled either through the appeals process or via the Local Authority.
- **Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation** –handled under our Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance. If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the Designated Officer (commonly referred to as LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- **Exclusions of children** - further information about raising concerns about exclusions can be found at: www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions. Nevertheless, complaints about the application of the behaviour policy can be made through the Complaints Procedure.
- **Whistleblowing** – covered via the Whistleblowing Procedure for all employees. 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 directly with their employer. Referrals can be made at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus. Volunteer staff who have concerns about an academy should complain through the Complaints Procedure. Depending on the circumstances of the complaint it may also be appropriate to complain direct to the Local Authority or the Department for Education.
- **Staff grievances** – dealt with under the internal Grievance Procedures.
- **Staff conduct** – 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. However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.
- **Subject Access Requests and Freedom of Information Requests.**
- **Withdrawal from the curriculum** - Parents and carers can withdraw their child from any aspect of Religious Education (RE), including the Daily Act of Collective Worship (DACW). They do not have to explain why. If parents or carers are not satisfied with the handling of a request to withdraw their child from RE or the DACW, they can follow the Complaints Procedure. The right of withdrawal does not apply to other areas of the curriculum where religious matters may be spontaneously raised by pupils or arise in other subjects such as History or Citizenship.

2.3. If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police, local authority safeguarding teams or tribunals, this may impact on our ability to adhere to the timescales within 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.

2.4. If a complainant commences legal action against the academy or trust in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

2.5. The trust will not investigate complaints about services provided by other providers who may use academy premises or facilities. These organisations will have their own complaints procedures and should be contacted directly.

3. Who can make a complaint?

3.1. The complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of children that are registered at our academies. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to academy or trust about any provision of facilities or services that we provide. Unless complaints are dealt with under separate statutory procedures (such as appeals relating to exclusions or admissions), we will use this complaints procedure.

4. Complaints from those who are parents or carers of a pupil on roll at an academy within the trust

4.1. All four stages of the complaints procedure outlined in section 18 will apply.

5. Complaints from those who are not parents/carers of a pupil on roll at an academy within the trust

5.1. Only the informal stage and the formal stage 1 of the complaints procedure outlined in section 18.1 and 18.2 will apply. This is because the statutory academy complaints requirements apply principally to complaints from parents/carers of pupils on roll. The trust will nevertheless consider non-parent complaints fairly and proportionately.

5.2. Trust staff may seek to meet with the complainant in order to resolve the concerns, but are not obliged to do so.

5.3. Informal Stage: Complainants should first address their concern informally to the relevant academy or to the trust (as appropriate) via email to complaints@dret.co.uk or by post to the Director of Governance (complaints), The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ. If this fails to resolve the situation, the complaint may be submitted in writing to the governance team.

5.4. Formal Stage: The escalation request should be submitted in writing to the governance team via email to complaints@dret.co.uk or by post to the Director of Governance (complaints), The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ). It will be acknowledged in writing within 5 school days, with a final written response issued within 15 school days.

6. The difference between a concern and a complaint

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

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

6.3. 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 trust and its academies take concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

6.4. If you have difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff, we will respect your views. In these cases, the academy principal, will refer you to another staff member. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved feels unable to deal with a concern, the academy principal will refer you 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.

6.5. We understand however, that there are occasions when people would like to raise their concerns formally. In this case, the academy will attempt to resolve the issue internally, through the stages outlined within the Complaints Procedure.

7. How to raise a concern or make a complaint

7.1. 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.

7.2. For ease of use, a template concern/complaint form is available online, and a template copy included in **Appendix A.** If you require help in completing the form, please contact the academy/trust office. You can also ask organisations like Citizens Advice Bureau to help you.

7.3. In accordance with equality legislation, 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.

7.4. **For concerns or complaints about an academy**

7.4.1. **A concern should be raised with either the class teacher/tutor/head of year (or equivalent) or principal.** It is always our hope that most concerns can be dealt with informally by talking through the issues when they first arise. If, however the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint. **A complaint should be sent to the academy principal** via the academy office, marked 'private and confidential'.

7.4.2. Complainants should not approach individual academy governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis, and it may also prevent them from considering a complaint at stage 3 of the procedure.

7.4.3. If a concern or a complaint is made directly to the trust, the complainant will be asked to complete the online concern/complaint form or email complaints@dret.co.uk (template at **Appendix A).** The academy will be asked to investigate the complaint in the first instance.

7.4.4. **A complaint that concerns the principal, chair of the academy scrutiny committee, any individual governor or the whole academy scrutiny committee** should be addressed to the trust's governance team via the academy office, marked 'private and confidential', via email to complaints@dret.co.uk or by post to the Director of Governance (complaints), The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ.

7.5. **For concerns or complaints about the trust, head office staff or the trust's teaching school hub**

7.5.1. **Concerns and complaints relating to the trust, head office staff, the teaching school hub, the trust's chief executive officer, the chair of trustees, any individual trustee or the whole trust board** should be sent by email to complaints@dret.co.uk or by post to the Director of Governance (complaints), The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ.

8. Anonymous Complaints

8.1. Anonymous complaints will not be investigated, save in exceptional circumstances, as we are unable to respond to the complainant. These circumstances would include serious concerns such as child protection issues, where the trust is either required to involve appropriate external agencies or might conduct its own internal review to test whether there is any corroborative evidence which might trigger a formal investigation.

8.2. Whistleblowing complaints, e.g., a criminal offence, fraud, someone's health and safety is in danger, risk or actual damage to the environment, a miscarriage of justice, the trust is breaking the law, someone is covering up wrongdoing will be investigated under the trust's Whistleblowing Policy.

9. Timescales

9.1. 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.

10. Complaints received out of term time

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

11. Resolving complaints

11.1. At each stage in the procedure, the academy and wider trust wants to resolve the complaint. 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 event complained of 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 policies in light of the complaint.
- an apology.

12. Withdrawal of a Complaint

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

13. Social Media

13.1. In order for complaints to be resolved as quickly and fairly as possible, the trust requests the complainants do not discuss complaints publicly via social media such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Complaints will be dealt with discretely for those involved, and we expect complainants to exercise discretion also.

14. Duplicate complaints and complaint campaigns

14.1. If, after closing a complaint at the end of the complaints procedure, a duplicate complaint is received from someone connected to the original complainant (e.g. spouse, partner, grandparent or child), the new complainant will be informed that the complaint has been considered and that the local process is complete.

14.2. The new complainant will be advised to contact the Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) if they are dissatisfied with the handling of the original complaint.

14.3. If the academy, trust, or teaching school hub receives large volumes of complaints all based on the same subject and/or from complainants unconnected with the academy, trust, or teaching school hub, we may address the complaints by:

- sending a template response to all complainants; and/or
- publishing a single response on the website of the academy/trust/teaching school hub.

14.4. Such responses will advise complainants to contact the Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) if they are dissatisfied with the handling of their complaint.

15. Serial, persistent and unreasonable complaints

15.1. For the purpose of this procedure, a complaint may be viewed as serial and/or persistent if it relates to the same issue that was the subject of a previous complaint (made by the same complainant) which has already been through the formal complaints procedure in which the complainant has been notified of the outcome. In such cases, it is likely that the complainant will be informed that the matter is now closed and that no further response will be provided.

15.2. For the purpose of this procedure, a complaint may be viewed as unreasonable if it contains threatening, abusive or offensive language and/or conveys unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason. In such cases, the principal/senior trust member of staff will consult with relevant parties and may decide that the complaint is not considered under this procedure. The complainant will be notified in writing that this is the case and that no further response will be provided.

15.3. Before applying the serial, persistent or unreasonable complaints provisions, consideration will be given as to whether the frequency, tone or form of correspondence may be linked to distress, communication needs, disability, language barriers or misunderstanding, and whether any reasonable adjustments or support are appropriate.

15.4. The application of a serial, persistent or unreasonable categorisation will be against the subject or complaint itself rather than the complainant.

15.5. Please see **Appendix B** for more information on handling unreasonable complaints.

16. Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assisted Complaints

16.1. Where a complaint appears to have been drafted wholly or partly using artificial intelligence (AI), this will not in itself affect the consideration of the complaint. Consideration will be given to the substance of the issues raised, the evidence provided and the reasonableness of the complaint in line with this policy. Where AI-assisted correspondence is unclear, excessive, repetitive, unsupported by evidence, or appears to include inaccurate or fabricated information, clarification may be sought before progressing the complaint and may apply the provisions relating to serial, persistent or unreasonable complaints where appropriate. Further guidance is set out in **Appendix C** – Policy for Handling Complaints Submitted Using Artificial Intelligence (AI).

16.2. Where AI appears to have been used as an accessibility, translation or communication support tool, this will not be treated negatively. Consideration will be give as to whether reasonable adjustments are required before requesting clarification, pausing timescales or applying provisions relating to serial, persistent or unreasonable complaints.

17. Record keeping and Retention

17.1. A written record will be kept in all academies of all complaints and whether they are resolved following a formal procedure or proceed to a panel hearing and action taken as a result of those complaints (regardless of whether they are upheld). The principal is responsible for ensuring staff consistently and accurately record all formal complaints.

17.2. It is good practice to also record concerns dealt with informally along with actions taken.

17.3. All complaints will be treated as confidential. Only those members of staff concerned with investigating the complaint will have access to documentation relating to the complaint. No confidential information regarding the investigation will be made available publicly. However, it should be noted that if any action taken by a member of staff is the subject of a complaint, then that person will be advised of the complaint made against them.

17.4. All confidential information will be securely maintained by the academy/trust on its premises and all data will be handled in line with the principles of the Data Protection Act 2018. Complaints files will be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the head teacher.

17.5. 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.

18. Complaints Procedure

18.1. Informal concerns

18.1.1. We recognise that parents/carers, pupils and others will have concerns from time to time. In the first instance, we encourage individuals to make those concerns known to the relevant member of staff so that they can be addressed in partnership with the academy/teaching school hub/trust. It is always our hope that most concerns can be dealt with informally by talking through the issues when they first arise.

18.1.2. For parents/carers, this would normally be their child's class teacher/tutor/head of year (or equivalent). For other stakeholders this would normally be the principal.

18.1.3. Individuals should not approach academy governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis and it may also prevent them from considering a formal complaint at stage 3 of the procedure.

18.1.4. There is no rigid timescale for resolving concerns at this informal stage, given the importance of dialogue through informal discussions, however it is expected that most concerns will be resolved within 15 school days.

18.1.5. Should informal meetings and telephone discussions appear unlikely to resolve the concern, either party may initiate a move to the Stage 1 of the formal process, for the complaint to be investigated and responded to formally. The procedure in 18.2 should be followed to escalate the concern to a formal complaint.

18.2. Stage 1: Formal complaints about the academy/academy staff

18.2.1. Formal complaints must be made to the academy principal (unless they are about the principal). This may be done in person or in writing, preferably on the online complaint form, (a template of the form is available at **Appendix A)** to ensure that all relevant information is provided however it is not a requirement that it is used.

18.2.2. If the complaint is made in person, written notes should be made by the person receiving the complaint and, if possible, countersigned by the complainant.

18.2.3. The complaint will be acknowledged within 5 school days of receipt of the written formal complaint.

18.2.4. The principal will investigate the complaint and make every effort to resolve the issue. The principal may arrange a meeting to clarify details of the complaint.

18.2.5. The principal may delegate the investigation to another member of the senior management team, but the principal will still be responsible for the decision and response.

18.2.6. Following the investigation, the principal will write to the complainant confirming the outcome of the investigation within 15 school days of receipt of the written formal complaint. This response will also detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint, the reasons for the decision and, if appropriate, any actions to be taken to resolve the complaint.

18.2.7. The principal's response will advise the complainant how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome at this stage.

18.2.8. Should the nature or complexity of the complaint mean that more time than 15 school days is required, the complainant will be written to prior to the 15 school days ending informing them of the reason for the delay and confirming a revised date for resolution.

18.2.9. Where a formal complaint concerns the principal or an individual governor, it will be referred to the governance team who will arrange an appropriate investigation under stage 1 of this procedure.

18.2.10. Where a formal complaint concerns the chair of the academy scrutiny committee or the whole academy scrutiny committee, it will be referred to the trust's governance team who will arrange an appropriate investigation under stage 1 of this procedure. This may involve escalating the complaint to the trust board to investigate the complaint and hold the panel hearing.

18.3. **[or] Stage 1: Formal complaint about DRET, head office staff, or the teaching school hub**

18.3.1. Formal complaints relating to the work of DRET, head office staff or the teaching school hub can be made by email to complaints@dret.co.uk or by post marked 'private and confidential' to the Director of Governance, The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ.

18.3.2. If the complaint is made in person, written notes should be made and, if possible, countersigned by the complainant.

18.3.3. Upon the receipt of the completed complaints form, the trust's governance team will identify an appropriate member of staff to investigate the complaint.

18.3.4. Where a complaint concerns a member of the governance team, the complaint will be referred to the chief executive officer who will identify an appropriate member of staff to investigate the complaint.

18.3.5. Where a complaint concerns the chief executive officer or a trustee, the complaint will be referred to the chair of the board of trustees who may delegate investigation to a trustee or appropriate external investigator.

18.3.6. Where a complaint concerns the chair of the board of trustees or the whole board, the governance team will arrange an appropriate investigation.

18.3.7. The complaint will be acknowledged within 5 school days of receipt of the written formal complaint.

18.3.8. The appointed person will investigate the complaint further and make every effort to resolve the issue. They may arrange a meeting to clarify details of the complaint.

18.3.9. Following the investigation of the complaint, the investigator will write to the complainant confirming the outcome of the investigation within 15 school days of receipt of the written formal complaint.

18.3.10. This response will also detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint, the reasons for the decision and, if appropriate, any actions to be taken to resolve the complaint.

18.3.11. The response will advise the complainant how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome at this stage.

18.3.12. Should the nature or complexity of the complaint mean that more time than 15 school days is required, the complainant will be written to prior to the 15 school days ending informing them of the reason for the delay and confirming a revised date for resolution.

18.4. **Stage 2: Formal review**

18.4.1. If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the first formal stage, they may request that the complaint be reviewed by someone who has not been involved in the stage 1 formal investigation. This may be an regional director of the academy where they have not been involved in stage 1, an regional director from another academy in the trustor another appropriate trust manager/director. Where a complaint concerns the chief executive officer or a trustee, the complaint will be referred to the chair of the board of trustees who may delegate the review to another trustee or appropriate external reviewer.

18.4.2. Such a request should be in writing addressed to the Trust's Governance Team (complaints@dret.co.uk), within 10 working days of the response being sent to the complainant and must set out briefly, the reasons why the complainant is dissatisfied with the response and the desired outcome.

18.4.3. The request for review will be acknowledged within 5 school days of receipt of the request.

18.4.4. The appointed person will review the matter to date. All relevant evidence will be considered; this may include but is not limited to:

- The complaint statement from the complainant.
- Steps taken to resolve the matter informally prior to making a formal complaint.
- Where relevant a statement from an individual who is the subject of the complaint.
- Any previous correspondence regarding the complaint.
- The formal complaint response.
- Any supporting documents in either case.
- Interview with anyone related to the complaint.

18.4.5. If required, the appointed reviewer may arrange a meeting with the complainant to clarify details of the complaint.

18.4.6. The reviewer will not consider any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint. New complaints must be submitted by the complainant separately.

18.4.7. The reviewer can make the following decisions:

- Uphold the complaint in whole or in part.
- Not uphold the complaint in whole or in part.
- 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.

18.4.8. The reviewer will provide a response to the complainant within 15 school days. The reviewer must explain clearly why they have come to the decision they have made. They must detail any agreed actions as a result of the review.

18.4.9. Finally, they must provide the complainant with details of how to progress the complaint to Stage 3 – Panel Hearing if they are not satisfied.

18.5. **Stage 3 – Panel Hearing**

18.5.1. If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the stage 2 review and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to stage 3 – a complaints panel hearing. This is the final stage of the complaints procedure.

18.5.2. A request to escalate to stage 3 must be made to the governance team at complaints@dret.co.uk or by post marked confidential to, the Director of Governance, The David Ross Education Trust, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough, LE11 4SQ, within 10 school days of receipt of the stage 2 response.

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

18.5.4. The governance team will acknowledge receipt of the escalation in writing (either by letter or email) within 5 school days and will ask the complainant to provide details of the reason for the escalation, the desired outcome, and any relevant supporting evidence. Once this is received, the governance team will request that the clerk to governors (or trust board, where appropriate) convenes a complaints panel meeting.

18.5.5. The clerk to governors (or trust board where appropriate) will write to the complainant to inform them of the date of the meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within 20 school days of receipt of the stage 3 request. If this is not possible, the clerk will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed.

18.5.6. 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.

18.5.7. Complainants may be supported by a friend, relative, advocate or representative where appropriate. The Trust may ask for written consent where a representative acts on behalf of a complainant. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the committee meeting.

18.5.8. Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

18.6. **Membership of the Complaints Panel**

18.6.1. The complaints panel will comprise three people with no prior connection with the complaint.

18.6.2. For a complaint concerning an academy, two of the panel members will be drawn from the academy scrutiny committee of that academy (or in instances where this is not possible, from another academy from within the trust).

18.6.3. The third panel member will be independent of the management and running of that academy and must be from another academy scrutiny committee within the trust or from outside of the trust.

18.6.4. For a complaint concerning the trust, two of the panel members will be drawn from the trust board and the third member will be independent of the trust.

18.6.5. For a complaint concerning the trust board (chair, vice-chair, other trustee or trust board itself), the panel will be entirely independent.

18.7. **The remit and operation of the Complaints Panel**

18.7.1. The aim of the panel meeting is for the panel to consider the complaint afresh with the aim of resolving the complaint and achieving reconciliation between the academy/trust/teaching school hub and the complainant.

18.7.2. The panel will not consider any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint. New complaints must be submitted separately.

18.7.3. The panel meeting will be professionally clerked.

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

18.7.5. The panel will not normally accept as evidence recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.

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

18.8. **Decision of the Complaints Panel**

18.8.1. After due consideration of all facts the panel considers relevant, the panel will reach a decision. The panel can:

- uphold the complaint in whole or in part.
- Not uphold the complaint in whole or in part.

18.8.2. If the complaint is upheld in whole or in part, the committee will:

- decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint.
- where appropriate, recommend for consideration by the academy changes to the academy's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

18.9. The complainant will be notified in writing of the panel's decision, usually with 5 school days. The letter will confirm the panel's findings and recommendations and will confirm the end of the Complaints Procedure.

18.10. The letter to the complainant will include details of how to contact the Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled.

18.11. The panel will ensure that those findings and recommendations are sent by electronic mail or otherwise given to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about. Furthermore, they will be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the head teacher.

19. Next Steps

19.1. If the complainant believes the academy/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 Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) after they have completed stage 3.

19.2. The Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) will not normally reinvestigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by the academy or trust. They will consider whether the academy or trust has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint and whether they have followed Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

19.3. The complainant can refer their complaint to the Department for Education's School Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) online at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus, or by telephone on: 0370 000 2288.

20. Policy Status

20.1 This policy does not form part of any employee's contract of employment.

21. Related Policies

21.1. This policy is related to the following other trust policies:

- Barring Individuals from School Premises Guide
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy.
- Whistleblowing Policy.
- Data Protection and Freedom of Information Policy.
- Records Retention Policy.
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy.
- Grievance Policy.
- Disciplinary Policy.

Appendix A – Concern/Complaint Form

David Ross Education Trust
Broadening Horizons

Concern/Complaint Form

Your name:	
Pupil's name if appropriate:	
Pupil's Year group if appropriate:	
Your relationship to the pupil (if relevant):	
Academy Name (if applicable):	
Address:	
Email:	
Telephone Number:	
Please provide details of your complaint:	
What action, if any, have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint informally. (Who did you speak to and what was the response?)	
Why does this issue remain unresolved and what actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?	

Are you attaching any paperwork, eg previous correspondence? If so, please provide details:			
Signature:		**Date:**	

Please return the completed form either:

- Directly to the academy (contact details on the academy website)
- By email to the trust's Governance Team: complaints@dret.co.uk
- By post to the trust's Governance Team: Director of Governance, David Ross Education Trust, Charnwood College, Thorpe Hill, Loughborough LE11 4SQ

Appendix B – Policy for Handling Unreasonable Complaints

1.1. Where a complainant raises an issue that has already been dealt with via the trust's complaints policy and procedure, and that procedure has been exhausted, the complaint will not be re-investigated except in exceptional circumstances, for example where new evidence has come to light.

1.2. The trust is committed to dealing with all complaints fairly and impartially, and to providing a high-quality service to those who complain. The trust will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the trust or an academy. However, the trust does not expect staff to tolerate unacceptable behaviour and will take action to protect staff from that behaviour, including that which is abusive, offensive or threatening. The trust defines unreasonable complainants as 'those who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with the trust or academy, hinder our consideration of their or other people's complaints'.

1.3. A complaint may be regarded as unreasonable when the person making the complaint:

- 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 while still wishing their complaint to be resolved.
- Refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a 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 the complainant expects to be considered and commented on, or 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 trust'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 trust/academy time by frequent, lengthy, complicated and stressful 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; or
- Publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

1.4. Complainants should limit the numbers of communications while a 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.

1.5. Whenever possible, the principal or senior trust member of staff will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking.

1.6. Before applying the serial, persistent or unreasonable complaints provisions, consideration will be given as to whether the frequency, tone or form of correspondence may be linked to distress, communication needs, disability, language barriers or misunderstanding, and whether any reasonable adjustments or support are appropriate.

1.7. If the behaviour continues the principal or senior trust member of staff will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and asking them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact causing a significant level of disruption, the trust may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will usually be reviewed after 6 months.

1.8. The decision to stop responding to a specific complaint will never be taken lightly. Before our trust or academies stop responding to a complainant who submits unreasonable complaints, we will need to be able to answer yes to the following questions:

- Have we taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns?
- Has the complainant been given a clear statement of our position and their options?
- Does the complainant contact us repeatedly, making substantially the same points each time?

1.9. We will also consider the following points:

- Are the individual's letters, emails, or telephone calls often or always abusive or aggressive?
- Does the individual make insulting personal comments about or threats towards staff?
- Do we believe that the individual is contacting us with the intention of causing disruption or inconvenience?

1.10. The individual will be informed in writing should the principal or senior trust member of staff determine that the academy/trust should stop responding. In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the concerns and actions taken will be put in writing immediately and the police informed. This may include barring an individual from the trust or academy premises.

Appendix C – Policy for Handling Complaints Assisted by Artificial Intelligence (AI)

1.1. This appendix sets out how the trust and its academies will manage complaints that appear to have been drafted wholly or partly using artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini or similar technologies.

1.2. The trust recognises that parents and carers may use AI tools to assist in preparing correspondence. The use of AI in itself does not invalidate or reduce the legitimacy of a complaint. All complaints will continue to be considered fairly, impartially and in accordance with the trust's Complaints Policy.

1.3. The trust will:

- Treat all complainants with dignity, courtesy and respect, regardless of whether AI has been used to draft the complaint.
- Assess complaints based on their substance and evidence rather than the method of preparation.
- Consider each complaint on its individual merits.
- Ensure complaint handling remains proportionate, fair and efficient.
- Protect staff from unreasonable, excessive or abusive correspondence.
- Comply with relevant data protection legislation and trust policies.

1.4. Identification of AI-Generated Complaints

1.4.1. The trust will not seek to determine or prove whether AI has been used. Any decision to seek clarification or manage correspondence will be based on the clarity, relevance, accuracy, evidence and proportionality of the complaint.

1.4.2. However, where a complaint contains characteristics commonly associated with AI-generated content, including:

- Repetitive or formulaic language.
- Excessive length.
- Multiple allegations unsupported by evidence.
- Generic references to legislation or guidance.
- Apparent factual inaccuracies or fabricated references.

1.5. clarification may be sought from the complainant before progressing the matter.

1.6. The focus will remain on understanding the issues being raised rather than determining how the complaint was produced.

1.7. Where clarification is requested, timescales are paused, correspondence is consolidated, or unreasonable complaints provisions are considered in relation to AI-assisted correspondence, the rationale should be recorded by reference to the clarity, evidence, relevance, proportionality or conduct involved, rather than any assumption that AI has been used.

1.8. Clarification Requests

1.8.1. Clarification may be sought where necessary from the complainant before progressing the matter.

1.8.2. Where clarification is required before the complaint can be fairly considered, the relevant timescale may be paused. The complainant will be told what information is needed, why it is needed, the date

by which it should be provided, and whether any support or reasonable adjustments are required to enable them to respond.

1.8.3. Where clarification is required, the Trust may offer appropriate alternative methods for the complainant to clarify their complaint, such as a telephone call, meeting, supported completion of the complaint form, or communication through an agreed representative, where this is reasonable and proportionate.

1.9. Responsibility for Content

1.9.1. Parents and carers remain fully responsible for all information submitted to the trust, regardless of whether AI has been used to draft or edit the correspondence.

1.9.2. The trust may decline to investigate allegations where:

- The complainant is unable or unwilling to verify the concerns raised.
- The complaint contains clearly false, fabricated or knowingly misleading information.
- The complaint includes content that is defamatory, malicious or abusive.

1.10. Multiple, Repetitive or Template Complaints

1.10.1. The Trust recognises that AI tools can generate large volumes of correspondence quickly.

1.10.2. Where substantially similar complaints are received from the same complainant, or where repeated submissions largely restate issues that have already been addressed, the academy may:

- Consolidate complaints into a single investigation.
- Refer the complainant to previous responses.
- Apply the provisions of the Complaints Policy relating to serial, persistent or unreasonable complaints, see paragraph 15 and Appendix B.

1.11. This will not prevent genuinely new concerns from being considered.

1.12. Evidence Requirements

1.12.1. Assertions, summaries or interpretations generated by AI will not usually be treated as evidence unless supported by verifiable information such as documents, records, correspondence, witness accounts or first-hand evidence.

1.13. Data Protection and Confidentiality

1.13.1. The Trust cannot control how third-party AI providers process information entered by complainants. Complainants are encouraged to avoid entering personal, sensitive or confidential information about pupils, staff, parents, governors or trustees into publicly available AI tools unless they are satisfied it is lawful and safe to do so.

1.14. Vexatious or Unreasonable Use of AI

1.14.1. Examples of unreasonable use may include:

- Generating multiple lengthy complaints on the same issue.
- Producing excessive volumes of correspondence that place a disproportionate burden on staff.
- Using AI to generate abusive, threatening or harassing content.
- Creating fabricated evidence or false allegations.

1.14.2. In such circumstances, the academy may invoke the provisions within the Complaints Policy relating to unreasonable complainant behaviour (See Appendix B).

1.15. Equality and Fairness

1.15.1. The trust acknowledges that AI tools may support accessibility, including for parents who:

- Have disabilities.
- Require language support.
- Experience difficulties with written communication.

1.15.2. The trust will therefore not treat AI-assisted complaints less favourably than complaints drafted without AI.

1.15.3. The determining factors will always be:

- The issues raised.
- The evidence provided.
- The reasonableness of the complaint.
- The requirements of the Complaints Policy.