

Marches Academy Trust

Complaints procedure

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The new draft is more precise, more compliant with union and legal guidance, more robust procedurally at Stage 3, clearer for complainants and stronger on conduct expectations and meeting management.

Major Clarifications

Staff Witness Accompaniment - A significant addition: Staff do not need to be accompanied when interviewed as witnesses, but may request union or colleague support.

Confidentiality and GDPR - Added explicit clarification that complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against staff (already implied in Appendix 1 but now reinforced in the main procedure).

Independent/External Investigation - Revised to clarify: "Independent external person" = an Executive Director or Trust staff member not linked to the school. External legal/HR involvement may be considered for complex cases.

Stage 3 - Complaints Panel Process (Substantial Rewrite) - this is the section with the most change with clearer guidance on scope of the panel, new requirement for a Stage 3 Form asking complainant to set out why they remain dissatisfied & identify

specific outcomes they seek. Also disclose whether AI was used to write their complaint.
Friend/Relative Role Clarified - They may attend for emotional support only. Not permitted to ask questions or address the panel.

Meeting Logistics- Terminology changed across the procedure from “hearing” to “meeting”.

Non-attendance Procedure (New) for if the complainant has not arrived at the start time.

Role of Chair Strengthened

Stage 4 - Escalation Terminology - Replaced “ESFA” with DfE, aligning with current regulatory guidance.

Related Policies

MAT Whistleblowing Policy, Dealing With Abusive Persons Policy

Policy control survey

Please complete this survey and provide feedback if you have had to use this policy
<https://forms.office.com/r/HMeZtB29Si>

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1 Aims and application

- 1.0 The Marches Academy Trust (the Trust) has clear vision and values, which build upon collaborations and aim to ensure that every school within the Trust works in a productive and positive partnership with all adults responsible for children and young people to realise 'Achievement through caring'. Adults responsible for children and young people are referred to throughout this policy as responsible adults, taken to mean those with parental responsibility for the child or young person and may include parents, carers, kinship carers, corporate parents, or guardians, and other agencies.
- 1.1 In respect of complaints relating to the school, or Trust, all complainants should use this complaints procedure, and refrain from airing any grievance or concerns on social media sites, as this could be potentially damaging to the school, Trust and our children & young people (CYP).
- 1.2 The aims of the procedure are to deal with complaints and concerns:
 - i. about a school, the Trust or any individual connected with it by following the correct procedure;
 - ii. thoroughly; and
 - iii. in an open, honest and fair manner.
- 1.3 This complaints procedure is not limited to responsible adults of CYP who are registered at one of the schools within the Trust. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to an individual school within the Trust, or the Marches Academy Trust itself, about any provision of facilities or services that we provide. Part 1 of this policy outlines how responsible adults of registered CYP currently attending schools within the Trust can raise a concern or complaint. Concerns or complaints from other persons will be dealt with in accordance with Part 2 of this policy. Concerns or complaints from registered CYP should be raised by their responsible adult.
- 1.4 This procedure does not apply to concerns and complaints relating to the matters listed in Appendix 1.
- 1.5 Anonymous concerns or complaints will not normally be investigated under this procedure. The Headteacher or Chair of Governors or Chief Executive Officer, if appropriate, will determine whether there are exceptional circumstances to justify conducting an investigation into the issues raised.
- 1.6 All staff will be made aware of this complaints procedure and are expected to review this policy regularly in order that they are familiar with our process of dealing with complaints and can be of assistance when an issue is brought to their attention.

1.7 In this procedure:

- i. 'complaint' means an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action.
- ii. 'concern' means an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought.
- iii. 'meeting' means an in person or virtual meeting (i.e., telephone or video conference where all parties can participate verbally), virtual meetings will only be held in the event that all parties have access to appropriate equipment to attend and are happy to do so.
- iv. 'responsible adult/s' means those with parental responsibility for the child or young person and may include parents, carers, kinship carers, corporate parents, or guardians, and other agencies.
- v. 'school days' excludes weekends and academy holidays and periods of partial or total school closure;
- vi. 'Trust' means Marches Academy Trust.

1.8 The timeframes referred to in this policy are our usual timeframes and the school/Trust will seek to adhere to these timeframes where possible.

1.9 In accordance with equality law, reasonable adjustments will be made to this procedure where required to ensure that all complainants can 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.

1.10 Complainants will be asked if they have used AI to formulate their complaint. AI-generated text can include unnecessary detail or overly formal language. Raising concerns in your own words usually allows for quicker and more amicable resolution. Where AI is used, complainants remain responsible for the accuracy of the information provided, and the school may seek clarification if needed.

2 Key principles

- 2.1 The Trust acknowledges that raising concerns or complaints can be a difficult, emotional, and stressful time, particularly for the responsible adult/s. We expect our staff to always be respectful and courteous when dealing with you. We also expect you to treat our staff with the same respect and courtesy. We will not accept abusive and threatening behaviour towards our staff from anybody at any time. In circumstances where this happens the Trust will take the action outlined in section 7 of this policy.
- 2.2 The Trust expects all complainants to make reasonable attempts to seek an informal resolution. This will usually be the most effective way to swiftly resolve any concerns.
- 2.3 The Trust encourages the responsible adult/s and others to approach the school with any concerns and refrain from airing concerns about the school and its staff on social media sites. Posting negative comments on social media can cause damage and upset and is often counter-productive to CYP education.
- 2.4 To investigate your complaint properly and fairly, we have implemented a staged approach. We anticipate that almost all complaints that arise will be resolved at Stage 1 or Stage 2 as outlined below.
- 2.5 We expect our members of staff to be addressed in a respectful manner and for communication to remain calm at all times. The procedure under Part 7 will only be used on very rare occasions to deal with repetitious and/or vexatious complaints or complaints pursued in an otherwise unreasonable manner.
- 2.6 Concerns or complaints should be brought to our attention as soon as possible. Any matter raised more than three months after the incident being complained of (or, where a series of associated incidents have occurred, within three months of the last of these incidents) will not be considered unless the Headteacher/Chair of Governors (or CEO if the complaint is about the Headteacher) accepts that there are exceptional circumstances to justify accepting the complaint out of the permitted timeframe.
- 2.7 Where a complaint is received outside of term time, we will consider it to have been received on the first school day following the holiday period.
- 2.8 On rare occasions a school or the Trust may receive complaints from a number of individuals relating to the same issue. In order to deal with these complaints efficiently the school will follow the procedure set out in Part 8.
- 2.9 If it becomes necessary to alter the time limits and deadlines set out within this procedure, you will be advised accordingly and given an explanation as to why this has been the case and provided with revised timescales. If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police, local authority safeguarding teams or tribunals/courts, 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. Where a complaint is raised but we do not have clarity from the complainant on the issues and/or desired outcomes, we will inform the complainant what information we need to progress the complaint and pause this procedure until reasonable clarity is achieved.

- 2.10 Complainants should not approach individual Governors or Trustees to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis and it may prevent them from considering complaints at later stages.
- 2.11 If a complainant commences legal action against the Trust in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether it would be appropriate to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.
- 2.12 If a complainant wishes to withdraw their complaint, we will ask them to confirm this in writing.

3 Records of complaints

- 3.1 A record will be kept of all written formal complaints, including at what stage they were resolved, and action taken by us as a result of those complaints regardless of whether they were upheld.
- 3.2 Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints will be kept confidential except where:
 - i. access is requested by the Secretary of State;
 - ii. disclosure is required in the course of a school inspection;
 - iii. an individual has a legal right to access their own personal data contained within such documentation; or
 - iv. under other legal authority e.g. police or LADO.
- 3.3 We will make the findings and recommendations of the complaints panel available for inspection on the school premises by the Trust and the Headteacher.

4 Part 1: Complaints procedure for responsible adults

Stage 1: Informal concerns

- 4.1 An informal concern or a complaint can be raised in person, by email or by telephone at stage 1. All concerns or complaints must start at stage 1 (subject to the exception in 4.3 of the policy). They may also be raised by a third party acting on behalf of a complainant, as long as they have appropriate authority to do so. Most enquiries concerns and complaints can be dealt with satisfactorily by the class teacher, Head of Year or other members of staff without the need to resort to the formal stage 2 procedure. We value informal meetings and discussions and encourage responsible adults to approach staff with any concerns they may have, and aim to resolve all issues with open dialogue and mutual understanding.
- 4.2 It is always helpful if you can fully explain the nature of the concern or complaint and identify the outcome you are looking for. Where appropriate, you may be invited to an informal meeting with the member of staff most appropriate for dealing with that concern or complaint. The member of staff dealing with the concern or complaint will make sure that you are clear on what action (if any) has been agreed. This may be put in writing if appropriate.
- 4.3 If the matter is brought to the attention of the Headteacher they may decide to deal with your concerns directly at this stage. If the concerns are about the Headteacher these should be referred directly to the Chair of the Local Governing Body under Stage 2 by completing a complaints form. The Chair of the Local Governing Body will liaise with the Trust's Governance Officer and relevant school link Executive Director to resolve the complaint.
- 4.4 It is essential that the school/Trust respects the views of a complainant who indicates that they would have difficulty discussing a concern or complaint with a particular member of staff. In this case, the Headteacher will refer the complainant to another designated member of staff. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved in the circumstances leading to the concern or complaint feels the same, the Headteacher may consider referring the complainant to another member of staff. The member of staff may be more senior, but this is not essential.
- 4.5 Staff members should log all informal complaints on the school Management Information System (e.g. Arbor) and inform the Headteacher of any serious concerns.
- 4.6 There is no suggested timescale for resolution at this stage given the importance of dialogue through informal discussion, although it would be expected that most issues will be resolved within 15 school days. Where no satisfactory solution has been found, you will be advised that if you wish your concerns to be considered further you should write to the Headteacher under Stage 2 of this procedure within 15 school days and submit a complaints form found under appendix 2.

Stage 2: Formal written complaints

- 4.7 If your concerns are not resolved under Stage 1, you should put your complaint in writing and send this to the Headteacher of the relevant school/Line Manager of central Trust staff. Please use 'complaint' as the subject of your email or mark it clearly on your letter. This will ensure that your correspondence gets the priority it deserves from a large volume of communications each school receives each day.
- 4.8 It is very important that you include a clear statement of the actions that you would like us to take to resolve your complaint. The Complaint Form provided at Appendix 2 of this procedure must be completed. If you require help in completing the form, please contact the school office. You can also ask third party organisations like the Citizens Advice to help you. In all cases your written complaint must include:
- i. the nature of the complaint explaining the complaint in full;
 - ii. details of how the matter has been dealt with so far;
 - iii. the names of potential witnesses, dates and times of events and copies of all relevant documents; and
 - iv. a clear statement of the actions that you would like us to take to resolve your complaint.
- 4.9 Your complaint will normally be acknowledged in writing by the Headteacher/Line Manager within five school days of receipt. The acknowledgement will give a brief explanation of the school's complaints procedure and a target date for providing a response to the complaint. This will normally be within 25 school days of receipt (with a maximum extension of 65 school days).
- 4.10 If appropriate, the Headteacher/Line Manager (or someone appointed by them) may invite you to a meeting to clarify your complaint and to explore possible resolutions. If you accept that invitation, you may be accompanied by one other person, such as a friend or relative to support you. They cannot speak or ask questions on your behalf. Where possible, this meeting will take place within 15 school days of receipt of the written complaint.
- 4.11 If necessary, an investigation will be conducted. Witnesses will be interviewed, and statements taken from those involved. If the complaint centres on a CYP, the CYP should also be interviewed. CYPs should normally be interviewed with their responsible adult/s present, but if this would seriously delay the investigation of a serious or urgent complaint or if the CYP has specifically said that s/he would prefer that their responsible adult/s were not involved, another member of staff with whom the CYP feels comfortable should be present. If the matter includes a complaint relating to a member of staff, the member of staff must have the opportunity to respond

to the complaint. Please note that witness statements can be disclosed to other relevant parties as part of the investigation.

- 4.12 It is not necessary for a Trust employee is to be accompanied to an interview as a witness in the stage 2 investigation. The Trust, however, recognises that in some instances staff may wish to be accompanied by a trade union representative or work colleague for support. The employee may request to be accompanied and the stage 2 investigator will decide whether to allow this. Such decisions will be made on a case by case basis and the investigator may consult HR for advise before making a decision.
- 4.13 Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint in line with GDPR.
- 4.14 Once the relevant facts have been established as far as possible, the Headteacher/Line Manager will provide a written response to the complaint, including an explanation of the decision and the reasons for it. This will include what action will be taken to resolve the complaint (if any). You will be advised that if you are dissatisfied with the outcome of the complaint, you may request that your complaint be heard by the complaints panel under Stage 3 of this procedure.
- 4.15 The Trust may engage an independent, external person to carry out the investigation into the Stage 2 complaint or to review the investigation and response at Stage 2. This may be appropriate where the complaint is particularly complex and involves legal issues.
- 4.16 An independent, external person will be an executive director at the Trust or another member of staff within the Trust but not at the school. If the complaint is particularly complex and involves legal issues an executive director will be involved, and they may consider whether an external organisation should be instructed.
- 4.17 Q. What if the complaint is specifically about the Headteacher

In these cases, your complaint should be sent to the Chair of the Local Governing Body who will liaise with the Trust's Governance Officer and relevant school link Executive Director to carry out the stage 2 procedure.

- 4.18 Q. What if the complaint is about a member of the Local Governing Body (LGB)?

Complaints about the Chair of Governors, any individual governor or the whole governing body should be addressed to the Trust's Governance Officer via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR. It can also be emailed to belen.lopezbloor@mmat.co.uk Please mark them as Private and Confidential. The Trust's Governance Officer will arrange for another Governor or Trustee with no connection to the complaint, or the relevant school link Executive Director if appropriate, to investigate the concerns in accordance with Stage 2.

- 4.19 If the complaint is about the Clerk of the LGB or the LGB as a whole, you should send your complaint to the Trust's Governance Officer via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR or via email to belen.lopezbloor@mmat.co.uk who will then determine the most appropriate action with regards stage 2 and stage 3.
- 4.20 Q. What if the complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer?
- If the complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer of the Trust, or if they have been closely involved at Stage 1, your complaint should be sent to the Trust's Governance Officer via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR or via email to belen.lopezbloor@mmat.co.uk who will arrange for a Trustee to conduct all the Stage 2 procedures.
- 4.21 Q. What if the complaint is about a Trustee or a Member of the Trust?
- You should contact the Trust's Governance Officer via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR or via email to belen.lopezbloor@mmat.co.uk who will arrange for another Trustee to investigate the concerns in accordance with Stage 2.
- 4.22 If the complaint is about the Trust's Governance Officer, your complaint should be sent to the Director of Finance and Business via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR.
- 4.23 If your complaint is about the Board of Trustees as a whole, you should send your complaint to the Trust's Governance Officer who will arrange for the matter to be independently investigated.
- 4.24 All complaints should be marked as Private and Confidential.
- 4.25 Please be aware that where your complaint relates to an employee a copy of the complaint may be shared with them in order to investigate the issues raised
- 4.26 If you remain dissatisfied with the stage 2 outcome, you may request a complaints panel meeting. The panel will give fresh scrutiny to the complaint and the handling at earlier stages. The panel will:
- i. Consider whether the school handled the complaint correctly at previous stages
 - ii. Reconsider ~~of~~ the parts of the complaint that were not upheld by the school

- 4.27 The panel will not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the original complaint.
- 4.28 The panel will decide whether the complaint should be upheld, upheld in part, or dismissed and may recommend appropriate actions.
- 4.29 When acknowledging your request, we will ask you to explain why you remain dissatisfied with the stage 2 response by completing a stage 3 complaints form, provided at Appendix 3 of this procedure. This form must also state the specific outcomes you are seeking, so the panel can prepare for a fair and focused meeting. New complaints must be dealt with from Stage 1 of the procedure.
- 4.30 To request a meeting of the complaints panel, you should submit your stage 3 complaints form to the Trust's Governance Officer at Marches Academy Trust c/o Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR within 10 school days of receiving notice of the outcome of Stage 2. Requests received outside of this time frame will only be considered if exceptional circumstances apply. You should ensure that you provide copies of all relevant documents and state all the grounds for your complaint and the outcome that you are looking for.
- 4.31 Your written request will be acknowledged within 5 school days of receipt.
- 4.32 The Trust's Governance Officer will arrange for a complaints panel to be convened, made up of at least three members, including:
- i. members of the LGB and/or Trustees of the Trust (as appropriate) with no prior involvement in the matter; and,
 - ii. one person who is independent of the management and running of the school/Trust. This could be a local Governor from another school within the Trust or an educational professional who has no link to the school.
- 4.33 The Trust's Governance Officer shall liaise with the members of the complaints panel to agree a Chair of the panel.
- 4.34 It is important that the panel is independent and impartial, and that it is seen to be so. In deciding the make-up of the panel, the Trust's Governance Officer will need to try and ensure that they are sensitive to the needs of those with protected characteristics as required under the Equality Act 2010.
- 4.35 The panel will focus on the school's/Trust's actions and investigation at previous stages of the complaint, whether school/Trust policy and any relevant legislation and/or statutory guidance has been followed and can make findings and recommendations (where appropriate). The aim of the panel meeting is for the panel to consider the complaint with the aim of resolving the complaint and achieving reconciliation between the school/Trust and the complainant. The panel will consider whether the school

handled the complaint correctly at previous stages of the complaint and reconsider parts of the complaint that were not upheld by the school. The panel will not consider any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint.

- 4.36 Every effort will be made to enable the meeting to take place within 25 school days of the receipt of your request (with a maximum extension to 65 school days). As soon as reasonably practicable and in any event at least 5 school days before the meeting, you will be sent written notification of the date, time and place of the meeting, together with brief details of the panel members who will be present. Fair consideration will be given to any bona fide objection to a particular member of the panel. You will also be informed of the name of the person who will be presenting the case on behalf of the school/Trust (referred to in this policy as the 'school representative'). This may be the person who is the subject of the complaint, the person who undertook the investigation at Stage 2 or another person with sufficient knowledge of the matter.
- 4.37 You have the right to be accompanied to the meeting by a friend or relative. The friend or relative may provide emotional support only. They must not ask questions, make representations or address the panel. However, they may request a break if they feel the complainant requires it. You should notify the Trust's Governance Officer in advance if you intend to bring anyone to the meeting.
- 4.38 Please note that we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the panel meeting. Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend. The complaints panel itself may take legal advice and/or be supported by a legal advisor at the meeting on matters of law and procedure.
- 4.39 A copy of the complaint, decisions made with rationales at previous stages, correspondence between the complainant and the school and any other documents provided by you in support of your complaint, or by the school representative in defence of the complaint, will be provided to the complaints panel as soon as practicable upon receipt. Copies of these documents shall also be provided to you and the school representative (as applicable) at least five school days before the meeting.
- 4.40 The complaints panel reserves the right not to consider any documentation presented by either party less than five days prior to the meeting. The complaints panel is under no obligation to hear oral evidence from witnesses but may do so and/or may take written statements into account. The panel will not normally accept recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.
- 4.41 The meeting will be conducted to ensure that each party has the opportunity to address the complaints panel. The procedure to be followed during the meeting will be explained to the parties by letter in advance of the meeting. The Trust's Governance Officer will ensure that sufficient notes are taken to

record an accurate reflection of the points considered and any decisions taken, or actions agreed. Electronic recordings of the meeting will not normally be permitted and, in any event, would require the consent of all those present.

4.42 Unless otherwise stated, the procedure for the Stage 3 meeting is as follows:

- i. The responsible adult/s and school representative will enter the meeting together;
- ii. the Chair of the panel will introduce the panel members and outline the process;
- iii. the responsible adult/s will explain the complaint;
- iv. the school representative and panel members will question the responsible adult/s;
- v. the school representative will explain the school/Trust's actions;
- vi. the responsible adult/s and the panel members will question the school representative;
- vii. the responsible adult/s will sum up their complaint;
- viii. the school representative will sum up the school/Trust's actions;
- ix. the Chair of the panel will explain that both parties will hear from the panel within ten school days;
- x. both parties will leave together while the panel decides;
- xi. the Trust's Governance Officer, or any other legal advisor (if applicable), will stay to assist the panel with its decision making.

4.43 The Trust's Governance Officer and or complaints panel reserves the right to modify the above procedure at their sole discretion, for example requiring the responsible adult/s and the school representative to present their complaint/actions separately to the complaints panel in the absence of the other party.

4.44 If the complainant has not arrived by the start of the panel meeting, the Trust's Governance Officer will attempt to contact the complainant via telephone to ascertain if they are delayed, have chosen not to attend, or wish to withdraw their complaint. If the Trust's Governance Officer is unable to speak with the complainant, or if the complainant confirms that they have chosen not to attend, the meeting will proceed in the complainant's absence 30 minutes after the scheduled start time. The panel will consider the complainant's written submissions previously provided.

4.45 A panel meeting may be adjourned if the panel require further evidence or in exceptional circumstances e.g. if clarification sought by the panel is essential to the proceedings. The adjourned date must be as soon as possible.

4.46 After the meeting, the complaints panel will consider their decision and inform the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about of their decision in writing within 10 school days. The letter will set out the decision of the panel together with the reasons underpinning that decision. The panel can (by a majority if necessary):

- i. dismiss the complaint in whole or in part;
- ii. uphold the complaint in whole or in part;
- iii. decide on the appropriate action to be taken to resolve the complaint;
- iv. make findings and recommend changes to the school or Trust systems or procedures to ensure that problems of a similar nature do not happen again.

Stage 4: Referral of complaint to the Department of Education (DfE)

- 4.47 If you are dissatisfied with the decision of the complaints panel, you are entitled to refer your complaint to the Department of Education (DfE). The DfE will only investigate in limited circumstances. For more information on the DfE's remit in relation to academy complaints, visit: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/complain-about-an-academy/complain-about-an-academy>

5 Roles and Responsibilities

5.1 The role of the Clerk and Trust's Governance Officer

The Clerk/ Trust's Governance Officer is the contact point for the complainant and the complaints panel, and should:

- i. ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure;
- ii. liaise with staff members, headteacher, CEO, Chair of Governors and Chair of Trustees to ensure the smooth running of the complaints procedure;
- iii. be mindful of the timescales to respond to complaints;
- iv. ensure that all people involved in the complaint procedure are aware of their legal rights and duties, including any under legislation relating to school complaints, education law, the Equality Act 2010, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR);
- v. ensure that the panel has access to legal advice, where appropriate;
- vi. set the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that the dates are convenient to all parties (if they are invited to attend) and that the venue and proceedings are accessible;
- vii. collate any written material relevant to the complaint (for example: stage 1 paperwork, school and complainant submissions) and send it to the parties in advance of the meeting within an agreed timescale;
- viii. minute the meeting;
- ix. notify all parties of the panel's decision;
- x. assist the school/Trust in issuing a summary letter to the complainant.

5.2 The role of the Headteacher/Line Manager of Trust Staff at Stage Two (or Chief Executive Officer and/or Local Governor etc).

- i. to ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure;
- ii. to ensure that the correct procedure has been followed;
- iii. to ensure that an investigation is carried out, and a report compiled;
- iv. to meet the complainant, if appropriate;
- v. if the complaint is being referred to Stage Three, notify the Trust's Governance Officer to arrange the complaints panel.

5.3 The role of the Chair of the complaints panel

The Chair of the panel has a key role, ensuring that:

- i. 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;
- ii. order is maintained and proper procedure followed, pausing or adjourning the meeting where necessary to restore procedural compliance and/or order.
- iii. complainants who may not be used to speaking at such a meeting are put at ease. This is particularly important if the complainant is a CYP;
- iv. the remit of the panel is explained to the complainant;
- v. the written material is seen by everyone in attendance (provided it does not breach confidentiality or any individual's rights to privacy under the DPA 2018 or GDPR);
- vi. key findings of fact are made, and that any issues not previously mentioned in writing should not be raised at the meeting and, if they are mentioned at the meeting, these should not be noted or considered by the panel;
- vii. both the complainant and the school/Trust are given the opportunity to make their case, and seek clarity, either through written submissions ahead of the meeting, or verbally in the meeting itself;
- viii. the panel is open-minded, acts independently and no panel member has an external interest in the outcome or any involvement in an earlier stage of the procedure;
- ix. the meeting is minuted.

6 Part 2: Concerns or complaints from other persons

Part 1 of this complaints policy applies only to complaints made by responsible adult/s of current registered CYP of schools within the Trust. However, the Trust wishes to work closely with other members of the local community and will deal with their concerns and complaints as follows:

- i. **Stage 1** - a concern regarding a school or its operations may be made to any member of staff. That member of staff will attempt to resolve the matter immediately or may, if appropriate, refer the matter to their line manager or member of the senior leadership team (SLT) who is best placed to deal with the concern. It is expected that most concerns will be responded to orally or in writing within 10 school days. If a longer period is required, you will be kept informed of the progress of the investigation.
- ii. **Stage 2** - where a concern is not resolved at stage 1, or you wish your concerns to be dealt with immediately as a formal complaint, you should put your complaint in writing using the complaints form in appendix 2 and send this to the Headteacher of the relevant school to investigate. The Headteacher may delegate the task of investigation and/or responding to the complaint to a member of the Senior Leadership Team or may escalate the complaint straight to stage 3. A formal response to the complaint will usually be provided within 25 school days of receipt of the letter of complaint although if a longer period is required to respond, you will be kept updated.
- iii. **Stage 3** - if you are not satisfied with the response at stage 2, you may request a review by writing to the Clerk of the school's LGB. You should write to the Clerk within 10 school days of receipt of the letter at stage 2. Requests received outside of this time frame will only be considered if **exceptional** circumstances apply. The Clerk will liaise with the Trust's Governance Officer and arrange for a Governor to consider the complaint alone or may convene a complaints panel on the same terms as set out in Part 1 of this complaints policy. The decision at this stage will usually be sent to you within 25 school days of receipt of the request for a review. The decision at stage 3 exhausts the Trust's complaints procedure.
- iv. **Stage 4** - if you are dissatisfied with the decision at Stage 3, you are entitled to refer your complaint to the Department for Education as outlined in Part 1 of this complaints policy.

Concerns or complaints regarding the Headteacher or the Trust as a whole should be referred direct to the CEO, The Marches Academy Trust via Trust Central Office c/o The Grange Primary School, Bainbridge Green, Shrewsbury SY1 3QR who will arrange for the stages above to be considered by an appropriate person.

7 Unreasonably persistent complainants and unreasonable complainant behaviour

There are rare circumstances where we will deviate from the Complaints Procedure set out in Parts 1 and 2. These include, but are not necessarily limited to:

7.1 Repetitious, including serial and/or persistent, complaints

Where the complainant's complaint is the same, similar to or based on the same facts of a complaint which has already been considered in full and we have:

- i. taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns; and
- ii. given the complainant a clear statement of our position and their options,

we will write to the complainant to advise that the complaints procedure has been exhausted and that we will not be responding to any further correspondence in relation to these matters. The complainant will be referred to Stage 4.

7.2 Vexatious complaints

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator defines the characteristics of a 'frivolous' or 'vexatious' complaint as:

- i. complaints which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific or repetitious;
- ii. insistence upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason;
- iii. insistence upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner;
- iv. complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance;
- v. demands for redress that lack any serious purpose or value.

Examples include but are not limited to:

- i. refusal to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance;
- ii. refusal to co-operate with the complaints investigation process;
- iii. refusal to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure;
- iv. insistence on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice;

- v. introducing trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on;
- vi. raising large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales;
- vii. making unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced;
- viii. changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds;
- ix. seeking an unrealistic outcome, such as the inappropriate dismissal of staff;
- x. making 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;
- xi. knowingly providing falsified information;
- xii. publishing unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

7.3 Complaints pursued in an otherwise unreasonable manner

Where the complainant's behaviour or language towards staff, Governors, Trustees or Members is aggressive, abusive, offensive, discriminatory or threatening or insulting personal comments are made about, or threats are made towards, staff.

In the circumstances outlined in (2) and (3) above, we may:

- i. inform the complainant that we consider their complaint to be vexatious or the manner in which they are pursuing their complaint to be unreasonable and why, and ask them to desist;
- ii. conduct the complaints panel on the papers only i.e. not hold a meeting;
- iii. refuse to consider the complaint any further and refer the complainant directly to Stage 4.

Pursuant to the Dealing with Abusive Persons Policy we may also restrict the complainant's access to the school, e.g. requesting contact in a particular form (for example, letters only), requiring contact to take place with a named person only, restricting telephone calls to specified days and times or number of contacts or banning the complainant from the school premises.

Pursuant to the Dealing with Abusive Persons Policy, where the complainant's behaviour is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, Governors, Trustees or Members we will consider other options - for example, reporting the matter to the police or taking legal action. In such cases, we may not give the complainant prior warning of that action.

8 Complaint campaigns

For the purposes of this policy, a complaint campaign is defined as a complaint from three or more separate individuals (whether or not connected with a school or the Trust) which are all based on the same subject.

Depending on the subject in question, we may deviate from the procedure set out in this policy and instead:

- i. send a template response to all complainants and/or;
- ii. publish a single response on the school/Trust's website (as applicable).

9 Appendix 1 - Matters excluded from scope of this policy

Excluded Matters	Signposting
Admissions	The process for challenging admissions decisions is set out in our admissions policy in accordance with relevant statutory guidance.
Child protection matters	Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our child protection and safeguarding policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance. If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
Exclusions	The process for challenging exclusions decisions is set out in the DfE's statutory guidance and information can be found at: School suspensions and permanent exclusions - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
National Curriculum content	Please contact the Department for Education at www.education.gov.uk/contactus
School re-organisation proposals	Where concerns are not adequately addressed by the Trust, complaints can be raised direct with the Department for Education.
Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities	Providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with complaints about service. Please contact them direct.
Staff grievances	Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.
Staff conduct	Certain complaints about staff may need to be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate. Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint. However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.
Trustee and governor grievances	Complaints from trustees and governors will be dealt with by the chair of trustees under the Trust's internal governance procedures. This does not preclude governors or trustees from raising complaints in their capacity as a parent.
Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs (SEN)	Concerns about statutory assessments of special educational needs should be raised directly with the Local Authority.
Whistleblowing	We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors. The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for whistleblowers in education who do not want to raise matters direct with their employer. Referrals can be made at: www.education.gov.uk/contactus .

	<p>Volunteer staff who have concerns should complain through the school's complaints procedure. You may also be able to complain direct to the Department for Education (see link above), depending on the substance of the complaint</p>
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10 Appendix 2 – Stage 2 Complaints Form

Your name:
Children or Young Person's (CYP) name:
Your relationship to CYP:
Your address and postcode:
Your daytime telephone number:
Your evening telephone number:
Your email address:
Your complaint is: (if you have more than one complaint, please number these)
What action have you already taken to try and resolve your complaint(s) in accordance with Stage 1 of this procedure? (Who did you speak to and what was the response?)

<p>What would you like as an outcome from your complaint(s)?</p>
<p>Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, give details here:</p>
<p>Please advise here if you have used AI to formulate your complaint.</p>

Your signature..... Date

All functions of the complaints procedure must adhere to the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Please complete and return to the academy office in a sealed envelope addressed to the Headteacher, Clerk of the Local Governing Body or Trust's Governance Officer (as appropriate).

Office use

Date received

Date acknowledgement sent

Responsible member of staff

Action taken

11 Appendix 3 - Stage 3 complaints form

MARCHES ACADEMY TRUST STAGE 3 COMPLAINTS FORM

To ensure your concerns are fully understood and addressed appropriately within the process, please complete the form below with as much detail as possible. This will enable a fair and focused meeting.

Please disclose if you have used artificial intelligence (AI) to help write your complaint.

Note: At Stage 3 the panel will:

- Consider whether the school handled the complaint correctly at previous stages
- Reconsider of the parts of the complaint that were not upheld by the school

For transparency, the panel will consider the complaint as set out in your original submission and responses to date; it will not review new complaints or unrelated evidence at this stage.

The aim of the panel meeting is for the panel to consider the complaint with the aim of resolving the complaint and achieving reconciliation between the school and yourself.

If you would like to continue with a Stage 3 request for a meeting to go ahead and ensure the panel can prepare for a fair and focused meeting, please could you complete this form by:

- explaining why you remain dissatisfied with the stage 2 response; and
- stating the specific outcomes you are seeking from the panel that was not the case at stage 2.

Your name:
Children or Young Person's (CYP) name:
Your relationship to CYP:
Your daytime telephone number:
Your evening telephone number:

Your email address:

For a Stage 3 meeting we need you to explain in as much detail as possible:

- For each item you are disputing from the Stage 2 outcome, explain why you are disputing the item.
- If applicable - Why the response to Stage 2 response was insufficient or factually incorrect
- If applicable - How the investigation was procedurally flawed
- Why you remain dissatisfied with the Stage 2 written outcome, in relation to each point (why each point is incomplete, inaccurate, contradictory, or did not address your original concern)

Please state what outcomes or resolutions you are seeking from the Stage 3

panel that were not reached or available at Stage 2.

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Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please order them in date order and give details here:

Your signature..... Date

All functions of the complaints procedure must adhere to the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Please complete and return to the Trust's Governance Officer.

Office use

Date received

Date acknowledgement sent

Responsible member of staff

Action taken

Appendix 4 - Summary of Complaints Procedure for responsible adult/s (Part 1)

