



COMPLAINTS POLICY

Date of approval by the Trust Board	15 October 2025
Review cycle	Annual

This policy is based on the Department for Education's 'Best Practice Advice for School Complaints Procedures 2016' and summarises how complaints are managed within Alternative Learning Trust and all its provisions.

This policy makes provision for complaints by parents/carers of current students at schools, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision (AP) within Alternative Learning Trust.

Where other members of the local community raise valid concerns, then the provision will use the informal stage and Formal Stage 1, short of progressing to Formal Stage 2, as described in these procedures to respond to the complaint. If this does not resolve the matter, then the Chair of the Local Governing Body will review the information provided and decide whether:

- To implement Formal Stage 2, or
- To consider that the provision has responded reasonably to the complaint and that no further action should be taken.
- To conclude that the Trust needs to review the complaints decision.

For parents/carers of ex-students, valid complaints will be treated in the same way as those from other members of the local community. However, where a valid complaint (see para 2.2 for time limits etc) is raised regarding an issue when the student attended the provision, all stages of the procedures would apply.

The policy does not cover complaints relating to Admissions, Special Educational Needs or Exclusions which are covered by separate procedures laid down in national codes of practice.

This policy, therefore, covers the following:

- Complaints about the curriculum defined as those falling within Section 409 of the Education Act 1996.
- Complaints about the provisions within Alternative Learning Trust, its management, or staff.

The policy is split into the following sections for ease of use by parents/carers, staff and the complaints panel.

1. Purpose of the Complaints Policy
2. Non-valid complaints
3. Complaints Process – Informal Stage
4. Complaints Process – Formal Stage 1
5. Complaints Process – Formal Stage 2: Hearing
6. Outcome of the Hearing
7. Confidentiality and record-keeping
8. Appeal process

Appendix A: Model Complaint Hearing Agenda

Appendix B: Complaints Hearing Information

Appendix C: Complaint Form

1. Purpose of the Complaints Policy

- 1.1 The purpose of the procedure is to:

- Make clear that Alternative Learning Trust values its working partnerships with its community and wishes to engage in dialogue in a timely fashion where there are concerns.
- Support good working relationships and, where possible, reconcile the complainant with Alternative Learning Trust and its provisions.
- Recognise that it is in the best interest of all parties that any concern is expressed and resolved quickly and at the earliest possible stage.
- Identify, acknowledge and rectify any deficiencies in the provision's practice to ensure the best possible provision for individual students.
- Provide a framework for further consideration where concerns cannot be resolved to mutual satisfaction at an earlier stage.
- Make clear when concerns will not be considered under this process due to there being other statutory procedures that apply and/or where the time elapsed is outside reasonable limits.

2. Non-valid complaints

2.1 Alternative Learning Trust and its provisions wish to deal with complaints made in a timely fashion, and also within a reasonable time scale of any concern given. Complaints raised **more than three months** after an event are difficult to resolve in any satisfactory manner because after such a delay investigation would be impractical. In addition, any necessary action would normally be too late to resolve any deficiencies for an individual student. Similarly, anonymous complaints are difficult to resolve, since there is no known complainant with whom to engage.

2.2 Therefore, save in exceptional circumstances, the following complaints will not be heard:

- Anonymous complaints.
- Complaints raised **more than three months** after the relevant incident, save where there are written communications with the complainant before the 3 months have expired that indicate
 - (i) concerns were raised within that time period and
 - (ii) the complainant had indicated in writing that the matter was still unresolved after any previous communications or meetings had taken place.
- Complaints raised more than 3 months after the last written communication between the complainant and College on the incident of concern.
- Complaints which are not pursued **within three months of the provision** advising (in writing) that the complainant should proceed to the formal stage of the process should he/she remain dissatisfied with the provision's response.

2.3 In addition, complaints relating to Admissions, Special Educational Needs or Exclusions are considered under different procedures and would not be valid complaints under these procedures. Neither will complaints from the same complainant be "re-heard" when the substance is similar to one already heard and concluded. This would include issues raised, heard and considered under other formal procedures such as Admissions Appeals, Exclusion Hearings.

3. Complaints process – Informal Stage

3.1 Most concerns are easily resolved informally by discussion with staff at the provision, or by letter and response. Any concerns should be raised as soon as possible after the event. This stage of contact is considered informal and does not need any use of the complaint form in order to raise any concerns or complaints.

- 3.2 A complaint may require investigation, including the collection of any relevant evidence or information needed to support the response. Alternative Learning Trust and its provisions are allowed reasonable time for this process.
- 3.3 Alternative Learning Trust and its provisions aim to respond promptly to concerns. Most informal complaints will be answered within 5 school days, whether by email, telephone contact, written response or through meetings. The provisions will usually indicate the approximate length of time before an informed response can be made for any extended investigation, and keep the complainant informed if there are reasons why this time has to be extended.
- 3.4 Where informal discussions or written responses have taken place, have concluded and have failed to satisfy the complainant, then the complaint can become formal in nature. The informal process must have been concluded before a formal complaint can be raised.
- 4. Complaints process – Formal Stage 1**
- 4.1 Once the informal process has been concluded, should a complainant be dissatisfied with the response to the complaint then a formal complaint can be raised.
- 4.2 Progress to the formal stage requires the complainant to use the formal complaint form to record all details of the complaint, attaching any evidence that will form part of the case. This should be done as soon as possible after the informal stage is deemed to have failed. Where there is more than one complaint, then each distinct complaint should be recorded on a separate complaint form. It is important that complainants ensure that they provide all the information they wish to be considered in relation to the complaint. No additional points, complaints or evidence can be added to this form at a later stage of the formal process.
- 4.3 The complaint forms and any accompanying evidence should then be sent to the Headteacher/Head of provision, who must acknowledge receipt of these papers within 5 working days of their arrival at the provision. The Headteacher/Head of provision will provide a copy of the complaint papers to the Chair of the Governing Body within this same time frame.
- 4.4 The Headteacher/Head of provision, on behalf of the Trust, has the right of written reply to the formal complaint. In addition, the Trust and its provisions may also offer to meet with the complainant. Where the right of a written reply is waived, this must be made clear to the complainant.
- 4.5 Any formal response from the provision will be provided in a reasonable time span. It would be exceptional, even for multiple or complex complaints, for the period of investigation/evidence gathering, and preparation of a formal response, to exceed 6 school weeks. Most complainants will receive a formal response well within this time. Where this is not possible, the complainant will receive an explanation indicating why this is the case, copied to the Chair of the Governing Body.
- 4.6 In addition, the provision may offer mediation. Mediation could involve a governor or other person nominated by the Chair of the Local Governing Body. Any such mediator could not subsequently be involved in any other part of the procedure.
- 4.7 The process stops at Formal Stage 1 in situations where the complainant is satisfied, or chooses not to continue to Formal Stage 2.

- 4.8 Where the complainant, having engaged in any meetings or mediation offered and having received the provision's written responses, remains dissatisfied he/she can progress the complaint to Formal Stage 2. Formal Stage 1 processes must have been concluded before Formal Stage 2 can commence.

5. **Complaints process – Formal Stage 2: Hearing**

- 5.1 Once the Formal Stage 1 processes have been exhausted, as described above, then the complainant can ask for the complaint to be heard by the Governors' Complaints Panel.
- 5.2 Progress to Formal Stage 2 requires the complainant to write to the Clerk of the Governing Body and ask for the complaint to be heard by the Governors' Complaints Panel. This must be done **within four school weeks** of the last communication that formed part of Formal Stage 1.
- 5.3 The Clerk will respond within five school days to advise that either:
- (i) There are outstanding procedures such as mediation, or further correspondence to be sent by the provider, meaning that the process remains at Formal Stage 1,
 - or
 - (ii) The complaint is acknowledged as having progressed to Formal Stage 2 with effect from the date of receipt of the letter from the complainant. A hearing will be arranged and further details and papers will follow once dates are confirmed.
- 5.4 The Clerk will ask the Headteacher/Head of provision for the originals of the complaint forms and any attached evidence submitted by the complainant on the day of the receipt of the letter. The Clerk will also notify the provision that they have up to 10 school days from the date of receipt of the letter from the complainant to submit any response via the Clerk.
- 5.5 The panel will be convened within 15-30 school days of the date of receipt of the letter from the complainant. If there is a difficulty agreeing a date the Chair of the Local Governing Body will make the final decision.
- 5.6 The agenda and guidance notes will be sent out with the papers/evidence provided by the complainant and the provision at least 5 working days before the hearing date. Papers will be provided for the complainant, provision's representative, members of the panel and the Clerk.
- 5.7 Where there are distinct complaints, these will be heard on the same day and by the same panel where possible, with the outcome for each complaint delivered after all complaints have been heard and with a short break between hearings for different complaints. However, where necessary, hearings may be separately scheduled with each panel responding separately.

6. **Outcome of the Hearing**

- 6.1 The panel can make one of the following decisions with regard to any complaint heard by them:
- Uphold the complaint in full.

- Uphold the complaint in part.
- Dismiss the complaint.

In situations where the panel is unable to draw a conclusion with confidence, the complaint will be treated as dismissed. The panel can, if it so chooses, note its difficulty in confidently drawing a conclusion in its response.

- 6.2 The Clerk and/or administrative support will attend all parts of the hearing in order to record decisions, supporting evidence and any other relevant information.
- 6.3 The panel will not use the level of proof required in criminal court cases to come to a decision as to whether an event happened or not. They will base their decisions on the balance of probabilities having given due consideration to the evidence provided.
- 6.4 The panel's decision will be related to the evidence, and not simply to opinion or feeling; notes of the rationale behind the decision are made for any future reference.
- 6.5 The panel will usually consider the evidence and make a decision on the same day. Where this is not possible, then a meeting should be held within 48 hours to carry out this work. Members of the panel will not discuss the hearing with each other, or others, until the panel reconvenes.
- 6.6 Once the panel has made its decision regarding a complaint, then the Clerk will send the complainant, Headteacher/Head of provision, and Chair of the Local Governing Body, by electronic mail or otherwise, the outcome within 7 working days of the hearing.
- 6.7 Having come to a decision about the complaint, the panel may refer issues of principle or general practice to another forum, such as the Governing Body, or to an individual such as the Headteacher.
- 6.8 Minutes of the hearing will be agreed with the chair of the panel and copies sent to the complainant, College representative, Chair of the Governing Body and members of the panel.

7. Confidentiality and record-keeping

- 7.1 The minutes of the meeting will be kept with copies of the evidence considered and the decision letter.
- 7.2 All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints are to be kept confidential except where the Secretary of State or a body conducting an inspection under section 162A of the 2002 Act requests access to them. Such records are available to inspection by the Headteacher/Head of provision, Chair of the Local Governing Body and any other governor so authorised by the Local Governing Body.
- 7.3 Alternative Learning Trust and its provisions keep a written record of all complaints dealt with under the formal stage of the process, including whether these were resolved at Stage 1 or Stage 2.
- 7.4 It is usual for all documents relating to a complaint to be kept for a period of 5 years following the complaint or, in the case of a parental complaint, 5 years after the relevant child has left the provision within Alternative Learning Trust.

8. **Appeal process**

There is no right of appeal with respect to complaints. However, if a complainant has been through all the stages of the Trust's complaints procedure but remains dissatisfied, he/she can ask the Education Funding Agency to review the handling of the complaint.

Key staff	Headteacher/Head of provision Chairs of Local Governing Bodies Clerk to Local Governing Body
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Person responsible for updating this policy:

Chief Executive Officer

Appendix A

Complaint Panel Hearing Agenda

The panel will not accept tabled papers and may adjourn for a short period if they feel that they need time to consider an unexpected issue, including procedural issues.

Agenda

1. To consider members' declaration of interests, entitlement to vote and any requirements to withdraw from the meeting
2. To confirm the order of the procedure
3. Invitation to complainant and provision representatives to join meeting and introduction to the panel
4. Introduction and explanation of the procedure
5. To note the role of the Clerk/administrative support at the meeting
6. Complainant's presentation* and questions from the provision's representatives and/or panel members (enclosure A)
7. The provision's response* and questions from complainant/s and/or panel members (enclosure B)
8. Any further questions or points from any of the parties
9. Opportunity for summing up by the provisions
10. Opportunity for summing up by the complainant
11. Summing up by the Chair
12. Complainant and College representatives leave the meeting.

Where multiple complaints are to be heard by the same panel, there will be a short break before the hearing of each complaint. The provision's representatives and the complainant would then be asked to re-join the meeting and the agenda would return to items 6 – 12 for the next complaint, and so on, until all complaints to be heard were presented.

13. To decide on each complaint heard. The panel can:
 - Uphold the complaint in full.
 - Uphold the complaint in part.
 - Dismiss the complaint.
14. To consider whether and how to refer issues of principle or general practice to another forum, such as the Governing Body, or to an individual, such as the Headteacher/Head of provision.
15. Confidentiality: to note the confidentiality that will extend to the papers.

* Where possible, witness statements should be used rather than requiring witnesses to attend. However, where either party wishes to bring witnesses, then witness statements must be part of the paperwork provided and it is at the discretion of the Chair of the panel whether witnesses be admitted to the hearing. Any witnesses admitted to the hearing will be present only to give their evidence and answer any questions.

Appendix B

Complaint hearing information

Panel membership

- B1 The Local Governing Body has a Complaints Committee whose members may be requested to sit on any Complaints Hearing Panel required. The Complaints Committee consists of a greater number of members than would normally be used in order that governors with expertise in the area of complaint can be selected from a larger pool, e.g. complaints against the Curriculum would have a committee consisting of largely Curriculum Committee members which may include a teacher governor.
- B2 The panel will consist of at least three members with at least one member being independent of the running and management of the provision. The independent member may be experienced in the running and management of another secondary College, such as a Governor, Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher, or be an individual with expertise in the particular area of the complaint. The panel must not include any individual who has had any significant involvement with the complaint. The Chair of the Local Governing Body will decide the panel composition and also select the Chair of the panel from governors on the panel. The provision can also ask for a professional advisor in the area of the complaint or legal advisor to attend, but the advisor will not be part of the panel.

Panel administration

- B3 The Complaints Panel Clerk, who will be the Clerk to the Governing Body unless otherwise nominated by the Chair of the Governing Body, is responsible for making all arrangements for the meeting, including time and place. The Clerk will ensure that all complaints papers submitted by the complainant and any response from the provision that meets the deadline set are simultaneously circulated to all those attending the hearing at least 5 working days before the hearing date. The Clerk will attend all parts of the hearing and provide administrative support. The panel members should not meet in the absence of the Clerk. A minuting secretary may also be provided for the panel.

The Clerk will remind each panel member that they should immediately read the papers sent relating to any complaint to check that they have no significant involvement with the case under consideration and that they should not discuss it with anyone else. If they need to withdraw from the committee they should advise the Clerk as soon as possible so that a substitute can be arranged.

- B4 Complainants will be asked to arrive and report to the relevant provision's reception as indicated in the letter from the clerk. The Clerk (or other nominated member of staff) will come to the reception area and guide complainants to the hearing venue where separate tables for the complainant and provision's representatives will be laid out, together with water for all participants. Provision representatives will also be invited to join the hearing, entering at the same time as the complainant.

Alternative Learning Trust (and provisions within it) and complainant representation at the panel

- B5 The complainant may bring a friend, supporter or interpreter to the hearing. It is not appropriate for a child/pupil to attend.
- B6 The provision's representatives, including any members of staff asked by the Headteacher to be present at a complaints hearing, each have the right to bring a friend, colleague or professional representative to the meeting.
- B7 In the event of either party not attending the hearing, the panel chair has discretion to proceed or to adjourn at any stage.

Expectations for the conduct of the hearing

- B8 Given that hearings can be stressful matters for participants, every effort will be made to ensure that the hearing conforms to the following aims:
- To avoid tone, manner or approach that could be seen as intimidating, hectoring or threatening.
 - To avoid shouting or other emotional outbursts from any participant.
 - To avoid undue repetition, whilst ensuring that every opportunity be given to both sides to make their case.
- B9 The chair of the panel is responsible for ensuring that hearing procedures are followed. Where he/she feels there is a breach, then he/she will intervene.

Intervention may take the form of one or more of the following:

- Stating concerns about the tone, manner or approach being used, and asking for these to be moderated, so that any comments or questions are delivered in a conversational and measured level rather than in any hectoring or aggressive manner.
- Offering or implementing a break in the meeting so that equilibrium can be restored or consultation undertaken.
- Noting that the presentation is not helping the case (whether this be by the provision's representatives or complainant).
- Commenting that the point had already been made and has been noted.
- Asking for the speaker to ensure that he/she follows the agenda and/or addresses the panel rather than other individuals present.
- Adjournment of the meeting to another time.

B10 Advice for the Chair

Managing the process

You are responsible for managing the hearing process. With regard to time and discussion opportunities, you should aim to:

- Complete all the business at a reasonable hour and without the need to adjourn to another day.
- Ensure that, where multiple complaints are considered, there is a short break between each complaint to allow the panel to have an initial discussion and record any key points for later consideration and for the complainant and College to prepare for the next complaint to be heard.
- Leave sufficient time for the panel to meet that same day in order to consider their decision. Where this is not possible, then a meeting should be held within 48 hours to carry out this work.
- Remind members of the panel that, in the event of any delay, members will not discuss the hearing with each other, or others, until the panel reconvenes.
- Remind members that the panel must maintain confidentiality as laid down in this policy.

1 During the hearing

- Take control of the hearing with confidence; use your judgement to move the hearing on when necessary.
- Make any decisions regarding the calling of any witnesses present.
- Convey to all concerned that you are acting impartially by treating all participants even-handedly.
- Begin to hear the complaint, being firm about keeping to the agenda and reminding participants as necessary about the procedure.
- Bear in mind that all participants will be under stress; be calm and impartial; intervene when necessary to ensure that the expectations of conduct of the meeting are met.

2 Explaining the hearing's procedures to the main participants

- Introduce those present at the hearing.
- Make it clear that you will keep to the agenda.
- Explain, for example, that you will hear the complainant speak without interruption and then ask the provision representatives and panel members to ask any questions to clarify any issues raised; then the provision's representatives' response will be heard, again without interruption, and there will be an opportunity for the panel members and the complainant to ask any questions about what has been said.
- Indicate any time limits that you would like to adhere to.
- Run down the items briefly.
- If the complaint is complex and there are some aspects of it that fall outside the panel's remit, clarify this and explain exactly which aspects of the complaint can be addressed by the panel; later, you may wish to advise the complainant as to how best to follow up any complaint that could not be dealt with by the panel.

3 Concluding the discussion

- It is important that all the participants feel that they have had every opportunity to be heard, but if they are beginning to repeat themselves at the “further questions or points” stage, you can move the hearing on by proceeding to the summing up. The complainant and the provision’s representatives are then invited to sum up if they wish. However, if the issues are clear, formal summing up may not be appropriate in which case relevant agenda items can be referred to but not used.
- Confirm the arrangements for the participants to receive the decision of the meeting i.e. by letter within 7 working days.

4 Managing the decision-making process

- Remind the panel that the options with regard to a decision on a complaint are one of:
 - Uphold the complaint in full
 - Uphold the complaint in part
 - Dismiss the complaint
- Remind the panel that the decision must be based on evidence, not simply on feelings or opinion and must refer to the evidence in papers received and what is said at the hearing. Members should try to avoid their own experiences or prejudices from influencing a decision.
- Consider each complaint in turn, making a decision about each complaint based on the evidence. Where there is conflicting evidence or different perceptions of the event/incident that triggered the complaint, then ask the panel to consider:
 - (i) The reliability of the evidence provided by either party such as: the extent to which it is contemporaneous with the event; the sources of the information provided; any inconsistencies or inaccuracies identified.
 - (ii) The balance of the evidence provided, and whether they feel confident in making a decision due to a significant weight of evidence favouring one version of events rather than the other.
- In situations where the panel is unable to draw a conclusion with confidence, the complaint will be treated as dismissed. The panel can, if it so chooses, note its difficulty in confidently drawing a conclusion in its response.

5 Decision letter and minutes of the meeting

- Once the discussion of a complaint has been concluded, write down the decision of the panel together with any key points relating to evidence.
- Draft any recommendations or other points to be considered by another forum.
- Use the minutes of the meeting, together with the key points relating to evidence, to draft (normally within 48 hours of the hearing) the panel’s response plus any recommendations to another forum. The Clerk can aid with this as needed. Check that all panel members are satisfied that this accurately reflects the panel’s decisions and related evidence base.
- Ensure that these final responses are given to the clerk to distribute as required within 5 working days of the hearing.
- Receive the minutes of the hearing, and read them for accuracy, correcting any errors.

Appendix C

Alternative Learning Trust complainant form

Please complete this form and return it to the Headteacher who will acknowledge its receipt within five school days of receipt. The submission of this form will start the formal stage of the complaints process provided that all informal discussions and procedures have been completed. **Should there be more than one complaint, a separate complaint form should be completed for each complaint.**

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Your name: _____

Relationship with provision concerned [e.g. parent/carer of a pupil on the provision's roll]:

Pupil's name [if relevant to your complaint]:

Your address:

Daytime telephone number: _____ Mobile: _____

Evening telephone number: _____ Email: _____

Complaint details:

Please give concise details of your complaint, [including dates, reference to evidence including references to witness statements] to make your case, and also to allow a full investigation and/or formal response. Please ensure you include all the information/evidence (including witness statements) that you wish the Headteacher or Complaints Panel to consider in responding to your complaint.

Please attach your written complaint, numbering/signing each page. Please also add any evidence, continuing numbering these pages, and writing the total number of pages attached to this form in the box below.

The next page asks you to list any evidence that you have enclosed to support your complaint (including any witness statements) as well as the names of any witnesses who are prepared to attend meetings to answer questions on their witness statement.

Number of additional pages attached

Evidence or witness statements attached

Please list any evidence attached, including witness statements (please ensure witness statements are signed and dated). Witness statements can be submitted without the need for witnesses to attend.

Any witnesses whose written statements are enclosed that you may wish to call to the hearing and who have indicated that they are prepared to attend:

Actions to try to resolve your complaint

What action, if any, have you already taken to try to resolve your complaint? [i.e. who have you spoken with or written to and what was the outcome?]

What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage? [i.e. what do you hope will happen as a result of this complaint?]

Signature:

Date:

Complaints by parents/carers of current students at Alternative Learning Trust's schools

- For detailed explanation of the process, refer to Alternative Learning Trust's Complaints Policy. **The policy does not cover complaints relating to Admissions, Special Educational Needs or Exclusions, which are covered by separate procedures laid down in national codes of practice.**
- Each stage of the process must have been fully completed before moving to the next stage.

Process	Main points	Timeframe for Response from the school/LGB Panel
Informal Stage	No form required.	Most informal complaints answered within five school days via e-mail, telephone, letter or meeting. School to follow up in writing and advise complainant that, if they remain dissatisfied, they should proceed to the formal stage of the process within three months.
Formal Stage 1	- Complaint form and evidence to be submitted as soon as possible after the informal stage is deemed to have failed. - Each distinct complaint to be recorded on separate forms. Evidence received retrospectively will not be considered. - Head provides copy of complaint to Local Governing Body (LGB) Chair. - Head has right of written reply. If this is waived, it must be conveyed to complainant. - School may offer to meet complainant. - School could offer mediation (for example, a Governor).	- Head to acknowledge receipt within five working days. - Formal response from the school to be provided, usually within six weeks (if longer, need to explain reasons why to the complainant and send copy to the LGB Chair).
Formal Stage 2	HEARING - Complainant to write to Clerk of LGB within four school weeks of the last communication that formed part of Formal Stage 1, to ask that the complaint be heard by the Governors' Complaints Panel. - Clerk asks Head for originals of complaint forms and evidence on the day of receipt of the complainant's letter. - Clerk notifies the school that they have up to 10 school days from the date of receipt of complainant's letter to submit any response to the Clerk. OUTCOME - Panel's decision conveyed within seven days of the hearing.	HEARING - Clerk to respond within five school days - Panel convened within 15-30 school days. - Clerk sends agenda and guidance note with the papers at least five days before the hearing date. OUTCOME - Clerk sends complainant, Head and LGB Chair by e-mail or otherwise, the outcome within seven days of the hearing.
Appeal	There is no right of appeal; however, having followed all stages of the complaints process, if the complainant remains dissatisfied they can ask the Department for Education to review the handling of the complaint.	

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