

# Harlow Inspirational Learning Trust



## Complaints Policy

**(incorporating our Policy for managing serial and unreasonable complaints)**

Staff consulted: September 2025

Ratified by the Governing Body: 26<sup>th</sup> September 2025

## **Who can make a complaint?**

This complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of children that are registered at the school. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to HILT 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.

## **The difference between a concern and a complaint**

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

A complaint may be defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action'. 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. HILT takes concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

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

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

## **How to raise a concern or make a complaint**

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.

Concerns should be raised with either the class teacher or Phase Leader then the Deputy then the Headteacher. If the matter is brought to the attention of the Headteacher, they may decide to delegate the matter or deal with it themselves, depending on the circumstances. If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint.

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

Formal complaints against school staff (except the Headteacher) should be made in the first instance, to the Headteacher via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints that involve or are about the Headteacher should be addressed to the Chair of Governors, via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

Complaints about the Chair of Governors, any individual governor or the whole governing body should be addressed to the Governance Professional to the Governing Body via the school office. Please mark them as Private and Confidential.

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

### **Anonymous complaints**

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Headteacher or Chair of Governors, if appropriate, will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation. If we can find out enough information to take the complaint further, or if the complaint is serious, we will follow this policy as closely as we can. If we can't find out any other information or the complaint isn't serious, we will take no further steps, although the complaint will be logged.

### **Time scales**

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.

### **Complaints received outside of term time**

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

### **Confidentiality**

When participating in the complaints procedure each party automatically agrees to undertake to not at any time disclose to any person (or more widely on social media) any confidential information concerning any part of the complaint's procedure, including but not limited to any personal information regarding any party to the complaint (including any personal information which may be used to identify the complainant or the person subject to the complaint), the content of the complaint, and the timeline and result of the complaint, except as permitted by the following clause:

Each party may disclose the other party's confidential information to any professional or volunteer who are required to know such information for the purposes of carrying out the complaint's procedure or as may be required by law, a court of competent jurisdiction or any governmental or regulatory authority.

## Scope of this Complaints Procedure

This procedure covers all complaints about any provision of community facilities or services provided by HILT other than complaints that are dealt with under other statutory procedures, including those listed below.

| Exceptions  | Who to contact   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admissions to schools</li> <li>• Statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs</li> <li>• School re-organisation proposals</li> </ul> | <p>Concerns about admissions, statutory assessments of Special Educational Needs, or school re-organisation proposals should be raised with Essex County Council.</p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation</li> </ul>  | <p>Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance.</p> <p>If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding or the MultiAgency Safeguarding Hub (MASH. The LADO can be contacted using: 03330 139 797</p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exclusion of children from school*</li> </ul>  | <p>Further information about raising concerns about exclusion can be found at: <a href="http://www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions">www.gov.uk/school-discipline-exclusions/exclusions</a>.</p> <p>*complaints about the application of the behaviour policy can be made through the school's complaints procedure. Please refer to our Behaviour and Anti-Bullying Policy on the school website.</p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whistleblowing</li> </ul>  | <p>We have an internal whistleblowing procedure for all our employees, including temporary staff and contractors.</p> <p>The Secretary of State for Education is the prescribed person for matters relating to education for whistleblowers in education who do not want to raise matters direct with their employer. Referrals can be made at: <a href="http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus">www.education.gov.uk/contactus</a>.</p> <p>Volunteer staff who have concerns about our school should complain through the school's complaints procedure. You may also be able to complain direct to the LA or the Department for Education (see link above), depending on the substance of your complaint.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff grievances</li> </ul>  | <p>Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal grievance procedures.</p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff conduct</li> </ul>   | <p>Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate.</p> <p>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.</p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complaints about services provided by other providers who may use school premises or facilities</li> </ul>                                 | <p>Providers should have their own complaints procedure to deal with complaints about service. Please contact them directly.</p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Curriculum - content</li> </ul>   | <p>Please contact the Department for Education at: <a href="http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus">www.education.gov.uk/contactus</a></p>  |

If other bodies are investigating aspects of the complaint, for example the police, local authority (LA) safeguarding teams or Tribunals, this may impact on our ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations.

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

## Resolving complaints

At each stage in the procedure, HILT 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 school policies in light of the complaint
- an apology.

## Withdrawal of a Complaint

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

## Dealing with your concern or complaint

The majority of concerns from parents, carers and others are managed under the following general procedure. It's in everyone's interest that complaints are resolved at the earliest possible stage. Many issues can be resolved informally, without the need to follow formal procedures. We take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

The procedure is divided into three stages:

**Stage 1** aims to resolve the concern through informal contact at the appropriate level in school, as described above.

**Stage 2** is the first formal stage, when complaints are considered by the Headteacher. Usually, concerns and complaints are resolved either at Stage 1 or Stage 2. If following these stages, the complaint is not resolved to your satisfaction, the Governors will become involved and take your complaint to Stage 3.

**Stage 3** involves a complaints review panel of governors, who will review how your complaint has been handled and the outcome and decisions so far.

Please note that this procedure doesn't include complaints about the personal conduct of members of the school staff, teaching or non-teaching, as these are handled under confidential arrangements in line with employment law. If you're concerned about the conduct of any member of staff other than the Headteacher, you should write to the Headteacher. If your concern is about the personal conduct of the Headteacher, please write to the Chair of Governors c/o the school.

If the school has completed its procedures but you remain dissatisfied with the outcome, you have a right to refer your complaint to the ESFA.

## Stage 2 – First Formal Stage

Formal complaints must be made to the Headteacher (unless they are about the Headteacher), via the school office. This can be done in person, by telephone or in writing. A complaint form is attached to this policy for you to use.

The Headteacher will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within three school days.

Within this response, the Headteacher will seek to clarify the nature of the complaint, ask what remains unresolved and what outcome the complainant would like to see. The Headteacher can consider whether a face to face meeting is the most appropriate way of doing this.

Note: The Headteacher may delegate the investigation to another member of the school's senior leadership team but not the decision to be taken.

During the investigation, the Headteacher (or investigator) will:

- if necessary, interview those involved in the matter and/or those complained of, allowing them to be accompanied if they wish
- keep a written record of any meetings/interviews in relation to their investigation.

At the conclusion of their investigation, the Headteacher will provide a formal written response within fifteen school days of the date of receipt of the complaint.

If the Headteacher is unable to meet this deadline, they will provide the complainant with an update and revised response date.

The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions HILT will take to resolve the complaint.

The Headteacher will advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied with the outcome of Stage 2 (first formal stage).

If the complaint is about the Headteacher, or a member of the governing body (including the Chair or Vice Chair), a suitably skilled governor will be appointed to complete all the actions at Stage 2.

Complaints about the Headteacher or member of the governing body must be made to the Governance Professional, via the school office.

If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or
- the entire governing body or
- the majority of the governing body

Stage 1 will be considered by an independent investigator appointed by the governing body. At the conclusion of their investigation, the independent investigator will provide a formal written response.

### **Stage 3 – Complaints Review Panel**

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at Stage 2 (first formal stage) and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to Stage 3 – a meeting with members of the governing body's complaints panel. The panel will consist of at least three members, who have had no prior connection with the complaint and at least one of these must be an independent panel member. This is to ensure that the panel has the benefit of an external source of scrutiny and challenge in its consideration of the complaint. The independent panel member will not be a member, trustee or employee of the school. This is the final stage of the complaint's procedure.

A request to escalate to Stage 3 must be made to the Governance Professional, via the school office, within ten school days of receipt of the Stage 2 response. The form to complete is attached to this policy.

The Governance Professional will record the date the complaint is received and acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (either by letter or email) within five school days.

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

The Governance Professional will write to the complainant to inform them of the date of the meeting. They will aim to convene a meeting within twenty school days of receipt of the Stage 3 request. If this is not possible, the Governance Professional will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed.

If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Governance Professional 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.

The complaints committee will consist of at least three governors with no prior involvement or knowledge of the complaint, one of whom will be an independent panel member. Prior to the meeting, they will decide amongst themselves who will act as the Chair of the Complaints Committee. If there are fewer than two governors from HILT available, the Governance Professional will source any additional, independent

governors through another local school or through their LA's Governor Services team, in order to make up the committee. Alternatively, an entirely independent committee may be convened to hear the complaint at Stage 3.

The committee will decide whether to deal with the complaint by inviting parties to a meeting or through written representations, but in making their decision they will be sensitive to the complainant's needs.

If the complainant is invited to attend the meeting, they may bring someone along to provide support. This can be a relative or friend. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the committee meeting. However, there may be occasions when legal representation is appropriate.

For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by union and/or legal representation.

Note: Complaints about staff conduct will not generally be handled under this complaints procedure. Complainants will be advised that any staff conduct complaints will be considered under staff disciplinary procedures, if appropriate, but outcomes will not be shared with them.

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

At least five school days before the meeting, the Governance Professional will:

- confirm and notify the complainant of the date, time and venue of the meeting, ensuring that, if the complainant is invited, the dates are convenient to all parties and that the venue and proceedings are accessible
- request copies of any further written material to be submitted to the committee at least three school days before the meeting.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least two school days before the date of the meeting. The committee will not normally accept, as evidence, recordings of conversations that were obtained covertly and without the informed consent of all parties being recorded.

The committee will also not review any new complaints at this stage or consider evidence unrelated to the initial complaint to be included. New complaints must be dealt with from Stage 1 of the procedure.

The 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 meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

The committee will consider the complaint and all the evidence presented. The committee can:

- uphold the complaint in whole or in part
- dismiss the complaint in whole or in part.

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 changes to the school's systems or procedures to prevent similar issues in the future.

The Chair of the Committee will provide the complainant and HILT with a full explanation of their decision and the reason(s) for it, in writing, within ten school days. This:

provides for the panel to make findings and recommendations and stipulates that a copy of those findings and recommendations is:

- provided to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about
- available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the head teacher

The letter to the complainant will include details of how to contact the ESFA if they are dissatisfied with the way their complaint has been handled by HILT. If the complaint is:

- jointly about the Chair and Vice Chair or

- the entire governing body or
- the majority of the governing body

Stage 3 will be heard by a committee of independent governors.

The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint and provide a full explanation of the decision made and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions HILT will take to resolve the complaint.

The response will also advise the complainant of how to escalate their complaint should they remain dissatisfied.

The school will provide for a written record to be kept of all complaints that are made in accordance with sub-paragraph (e) of the DFE Complaints Policy and paragraph (i) whether they are resolved following a formal procedure or proceed to a panel hearing.

Action taken by the school as a result of those complaints (regardless of whether they are upheld) provides that 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 109 of the 2008 Act requests access to them.

Link to DFE Complaints Policy: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-complaints-procedures>

### **What happens if you're not happy with the outcome?**

If a complaint has completed the local procedures and the person making the complaint remains dissatisfied, they have a right to refer their complaint to the ESFA. They may only be able to help if you are unable to complain, or are not satisfied with how the academy handles your complaint, because the academy:

- does not have a complaints procedure
- did not provide a copy of its complaints procedure when requested
- does not have a procedure that complies with statutory regulations
- has not followed its published complaints procedure
- has not allowed its complaints procedure to be completed

The ESFA cannot change an academy's decision about a complaint. Their role is to make sure the academy handles your complaint properly by following a published process. The ESFA will not normally consider complaints received more than 12 months after a decision or the academy's last action.

If you think your concerns are within ESFA's remit, please contact them using the online form at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/complain-about-an-academy/complain-about-an-academy>

The Local Authority (Essex County Council) has no powers to intervene in complaints against schools. You can complain to Ofsted if you think a school isn't run properly and needs inspecting. However, they won't look into problems with individual pupils, e.g. exclusions or not getting a place at the school.

**Complaint form:**

Harlow Inspirational Learning Trust:

*Please complete this form and return it the school office for the attention of the Headteacher, Chair of Governors or Governance Professional.*

Your name:

Relationship with school (e.g. parent):

Pupil's name (if relevant to your complaint):

Your address:

Telephone number:

Email address:

Please give concise details of your complaint (including dates, names of witnesses, etc) to allow the matter to be fully investigated:

What action, if any, have you already taken to resolve your complaint?

What actions do you feel might resolve the complaint at this stage?

Please continue on a separate sheet, or attach additional documents if you wish.

Number of additional pages attached = Signature:

Date:

**Complaint review request form** (must be sent within 10 school days of receiving outcome notice):

Harlow Inspirational Learning Trust:

*Please complete this form and return it the school office for the attention of the Headteacher or the Governance Professional for the attention of Chair of Governors.*

Your name:

Relationship with school (e.g. parent):

Pupil's name (if relevant to your complaint):

Your address:

Telephone number:

Signature:

Date:

Dear Sir/Madam,

I submitted a formal complaint to the school on ....., and I am dissatisfied by the procedure that has been followed.

My complaint was submitted to ..... and I received a response from ..... on .....

I have attached copies of my formal complaint and the response(s) from the school. I am dissatisfied with the way in which the procedure was carried out, because

You may continue on separate paper, or attach additional documents if you wish.

Number of additional pages attached =

What actions do you feel might resolve the complaint at this stage?

## How we manage serial and unreasonable complaints

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

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

- refuses to articulate their complaint or specify the grounds of a complaint or the outcomes sought by raising the complaint, despite offers of assistance
- refuses to co-operate with the complaints investigation process
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the complaints procedure
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the complaints procedure or with good practice
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on
- raises large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales
- makes unjustified complaints about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seeks to have them replaced
- changes the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds
- repeatedly makes the same complaint (despite previous investigations or responses concluding that the complaint is groundless or has been addressed)
- refuses to accept the findings of the investigation into that complaint where the school's complaint procedure has been fully and properly implemented and completed including referral to the Department for Education
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with
- uses threats to intimidate
- uses abusive, offensive or discriminatory language or violence
- knowingly provides falsified information
- publishes unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.

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

Whenever possible, the headteacher or Chair of Governors will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an '*unreasonable*' marking.

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

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