

# School Complaints

A guide for parents  
and carers

This guide is intended to explain the Trust's Complaints Policy in accessible and practical terms. It should be read alongside the Complaints Policy. If there is any uncertainty about the process, the Complaints Policy will be followed.



Girls' Learning Trust

## WORKING TOGETHER TO RESOLVE CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS

At the Girls' Learning Trust, we want every student to be happy, safe, well supported and able to achieve their best. We recognise that, from time to time, parents and carers may have questions, worries or concerns about something that has happened at school. When this happens, we want to hear from you.

We believe concerns are best resolved through early, open and respectful communication. We want to work constructively with parents and carers, listen carefully, understand what has happened and, where something has gone wrong, put it right as fairly and promptly as possible.

We also see concerns and complaints as an important source of feedback. Where we have made a mistake or something has not gone as it should, we will acknowledge this honestly, consider what needs to change and learn from the experience. Where there are wider lessons to be learned, we will use them to improve communication, strengthen practice and reduce the likelihood of similar issues arising in the future.

### REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

We also recognise that, even after a concern or complaint has been considered carefully, parents and schools may not always agree. Parents and carers know their children extremely well and will quite rightly advocate for them. Schools, in turn, must make decisions using their professional judgement, educational expertise, knowledge of the wider school context, and the legal and policy requirements that apply to them. This means that a school may sometimes reach a decision that a parent would not have chosen, but which is still reasonable, lawful and in line with Trust policies.

The complaints process is therefore not about one side "winning" or proving the other side wrong. Its purpose is to consider whether the school or Trust has acted fairly, reasonably, proportionately and in line with the relevant policy or procedure. Where we cannot agree, we will aim to explain our reasoning clearly and respectfully, and to consider whether there is anything we can learn, including whether communication or practice could be improved in future.

### OUR COMMITMENT

When a complaint is raised, we will:

- Listen carefully.
- Treat parents and carers with courtesy and respect.
- Consider the complaint fairly and objectively.
- Keep the process proportionate and focused.
- Protect confidentiality and personal information.
- Explain our decisions clearly.
- Learn from complaints where they show that something could be improved.

We ask parents and carers to work with us in the same spirit: raising concerns promptly, explaining the issue clearly, engaging constructively with the process, and helping us focus on what will best support the student. When raising a concern or complaint, it is particularly helpful to tell us both what you believe has gone wrong and what you would like to happen as a result. Being clear about the outcome you are seeking helps everyone understand whether, and how, the matter might be resolved.

## HOW DOES THE COMPLAINTS PROCESS WORK?

### 1. PLEASE START BY TALKING TO US

Most concerns can be resolved without using the formal complaints process. If you are worried about something, please raise it as soon as possible with the most appropriate member of staff. This will usually be your child's Form Tutor, Head of Year, Head of Department or another relevant member of staff.

A direct conversation can often be the most helpful first step. Emails are useful for recording and clarifying information, but they can sometimes make misunderstandings harder to resolve, especially where several messages are exchanged quickly or where the issue is sensitive. A telephone call or face-to-face meeting can help everyone understand the concern more clearly, ask questions, explain context and agree practical next steps. It also helps to keep the relationship between home and school constructive, which is especially important where the school and family will continue working together to support the student.

Following a conversation or meeting, it might then be helpful for the parent or school to send a short email confirming the main points discussed, any actions agreed and what will happen next. This can provide a useful, shared record and reduce the risk of misunderstandings later.

When you contact the school, it is helpful to explain:

- What has happened.
- When it happened.
- Who was involved.
- What you have already tried.
- What you would like the school to do next.

If you find it difficult to speak to a particular member of staff, please let the school know via email or the school office. The Headteacher or another senior member of staff where better placed can help identify an alternative person to speak with. The key point is that the concern is considered fairly and objectively, and that everyone remains focused on resolving the issue in the best interests of the student.

### 2. WHEN DOES SOMETHING BECOME A FORMAL COMPLAINT?

A concern is usually a worry, question or request for clarification. A complaint is when you remain dissatisfied because you believe something has gone wrong, or something should have been done differently, and you would like a formal response.

Before a formal complaint is made, we normally expect the issue to have been raised with the school first. This gives us the best chance of resolving the matter quickly and directly. It also helps avoid situations where a matter moves into a formal process before there has been a proper opportunity for conversation, explanation or practical resolution.

Once a matter becomes a formal complaint, the school and Trust must follow the steps, timescales and requirements set out in the Complaints Policy. This provides a clear and consistent framework for considering the issues fairly. Formal investigation will necessarily involve much more detailed investigation, documentation and written responses, so where a concern can be resolved satisfactorily through early constructive dialogue, this will often be the quickest and most effective outcome for everyone.

Complaints should be made as soon as possible and normally within 20 school days of the issue arising. The Trust may consider complaints outside this timescale where there are exceptional circumstances.

### **3. WHAT THE COMPLAINTS PROCESS CAN AND CANNOT CONSIDER**

The Complaints Policy is for general complaints about the Trust, one of its schools, or services provided by the school. Some matters have their own separate procedures and cannot usually be dealt with under the Complaints Policy. These include:

- Admissions.
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs.
- Matters likely to require a child protection investigation.
- Suspensions or exclusions.
- Whistleblowing.
- Staff grievances.
- Staff conduct or performance matters.
- Services provided by third parties using school premises.
- Withdrawal from the curriculum.
- Data protection or processing concerns

If your concern is better dealt with under another policy or legal process, we will explain this and signpost you to the appropriate route. This will either come directly from the Trust, or via school.

### **4. OPTIONAL COMPLAINT TEMPLATES**

To help parents and carers set out their complaint clearly, the Trust provides optional templates for Stage One, Stage Two and Stage Three of the complaints process.

You do not have to use these templates. A complaint or request for review will not be rejected simply because it has been submitted in another written format, provided that it includes the information needed for the relevant stage of the process.

However, we encourage parents and carers to use the templates where possible. They are designed to help you identify the key issues, explain why you remain dissatisfied, provide relevant supporting information and set out the outcome you are seeking. Using the template can also help the school or Trust understand your concerns more quickly and ensure that everyone is clear about the matters being considered.

The templates can be downloaded from the Trust website: [www.girlslearningtrust.org/complaints](http://www.girlslearningtrust.org/complaints)

### **5. STAGE ONE: FORMAL COMPLAINT TO THE HEADTEACHER**

If the issue has not been resolved informally, you may submit a Stage One complaint in writing to the Headteacher of the relevant school.

Stage One is a very important part of the complaints process. The Girls' Learning Trust is a single organisation, but our Scheme of Delegation gives each school significant autonomy and freedom to make day-to-day decisions in the best interests of its students. This means that many decisions about teaching, pastoral care, behaviour, communication, curriculum, staffing, school routines and student support are made at school level by the Headteacher and their senior team.

For this reason, the school must normally have the first opportunity to consider and respond to a formal complaint. The Headteacher is usually best placed to understand the local context, speak to the relevant staff, review the records, consider what information was available at the time, and decide

whether anything should have been handled differently. This also reflects the Trust's belief that most issues are best resolved as close as possible to the people and circumstances involved.

Stage One also gives the Headteacher, or a senior member of staff acting on their behalf, the opportunity to respond directly and constructively. Many complaints can be resolved at this stage when there is a clear shared understanding of the issue, the school has had a proper opportunity to investigate, and any appropriate next steps can be agreed. This may include an explanation, an apology, a change in communication, a review of practice, or another practical action.

Stage One also helps make sure that, if a complaint does need to move further through the process, there is a clear written record of what was complained about, what was investigated, what evidence was considered, and what conclusion was reached. For this reason, it is important that the Stage One complaint is clear and focused.

Your complaint should explain:

- The specific issue you are complaining about.
- The specific policies, procedures or regulations who believe have not been followed.
- The key facts, including dates where possible.
- The people involved.
- The evidence you want the school to consider.
- What you believe should have happened.
- What outcome you are seeking.

An optional Stage One Complaint Template is available to help you provide this information clearly and concisely.

The Headteacher may investigate the complaint personally or ask another senior member of staff to investigate. You may be offered a meeting to discuss the complaint. A meeting can often be helpful at this stage because it allows the school to clarify the issues, understand your perspective, explain relevant context and identify whether there are practical steps that could help resolve the matter.

Where a meeting is needed, the school will aim to arrange this within 15 school days of receiving the written complaint.

A written response will normally be provided within 15 school days of the investigation meeting. If no meeting is held, the response will normally be provided within 15 school days of receiving the complaint.

## **6. STAGE TWO: REVIEW BY THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

If you remain dissatisfied after Stage One, you may request Stage Two. This request must be made in writing to the Chief Executive Officer within 10 school days of receiving the Stage One outcome.

Stage Two is different from Stage One. Stage One is the school's formal opportunity to investigate the original complaint, speak to the people involved, review relevant information and provide a written response. Stage Two is not a repeat of that process, and it is not a completely new investigation from the beginning. The purpose of Stage Two is to provide a Trust-level review of how the complaint was handled at Stage One. The Chief Executive Officer will consider whether the Stage One investigation and response were fair, reasonable, proportionate, evidence-informed and in line with the Trust's Complaints Policy.

This means the CEO will usually look at questions such as:

- Was the complaint properly understood?
- Were the relevant issues considered?
- Was the investigation fair and proportionate?
- Was relevant evidence taken into account?
- Were relevant policies and procedures followed?
- Was the outcome explained clearly?
- Was the decision one the school could reasonably reach?
- Were any appropriate actions or learning points identified?

The CEO may make further enquiries where needed. However, these enquiries will normally be to test the Stage One outcome, the process, and consider the specific reasons why you remain dissatisfied, rather than to reopen every part of the original complaint.

This is particularly important in a school trust. The Girls' Learning Trust's Scheme of Delegation gives schools significant autonomy and freedom to make decisions in the best interests of their students. The CEO's role at Stage Two is not to replace the Headteacher's day-to-day professional judgement simply because a parent may disagree with it. Instead, the CEO will consider whether the school's decision-making and handling of the complaint were reasonable, fair and consistent with policy.

Your Stage Two request should explain:

- Which parts of the Stage One response you disagree with.
- Why you believe the Stage One investigation or outcome was not reasonable or fair.
- What you believe should have been done differently.
- What outcome you are now seeking.

***An optional Stage Two Review Template is available to help you identify the specific aspects of the Stage One process or outcome that you would like reviewed.***

Stage Two is not normally an opportunity to introduce new complaints or raise issues that could reasonably have been raised at Stage One. If new issues are raised, the Trust may ask for them to be dealt with separately.

The CEO may review the complaint personally or appoint an appropriate person to do so. This may include a member of the Trust Board, a Local Governing Body member or, where appropriate, an independent investigator.

A meeting may be offered where this would help clarify the issues. Where a meeting is offered, the Trust will aim to arrange it within 15 school days. A written response will normally be provided within 15 school days of the meeting, or within 15 school days of receiving the Stage Two request if no meeting is held.

## **7. STAGE THREE: COMPLAINTS PANEL**

If you remain dissatisfied after Stage Two, you may request a Stage Three Complaints Panel. This request must be made in writing to the Chief Executive Officer and the Clerk to the Trust Board within 10 school days of receiving the Stage Two outcome.

***An optional Stage Three Complaint Panel Template is available to help you explain clearly why you remain dissatisfied following Stage Two and the specific matters you would like the Panel to***

***consider.***

Stage Three is the final stage of the Trust's complaints process. It is different from both Stage One and Stage Two. Stage One is the school's formal investigation of the original complaint. Stage Two is a Trust-level review of whether the Stage One investigation and response were reasonable, fair, evidence-informed and in line with policy. Stage Three is a panel review of the complaint process as a whole.

The purpose of the panel is to consider whether the complaint has been handled properly through the earlier stages of the procedure. It is not a fresh investigation, a rehearing of all the original issues, or a legal hearing. The panel will not normally re-investigate every event, interview all witnesses again, or consider new complaints that were not raised previously.

The panel will usually consider:

- The original complaint.
- The Stage One response.
- The Stage Two request and response.
- Your written reasons for remaining dissatisfied.
- The school or Trust's response to the Stage Three request.
- Any supporting information that the panel considers relevant and proportionate.

The panel will focus on whether:

- The complaint was considered fairly.
- The relevant issues were addressed.
- The process followed the Trust's Complaints Policy.
- The conclusions reached at earlier stages were reasonable based on the evidence available.
- The school or Trust has identified appropriate actions or learning where needed.

The panel will include at least three people who have not been directly involved in the complaint. At least one panel member will be independent of the Trust's management and governance. This helps ensure that the final stage provides a fair and objective review.

You may attend the panel meeting and may be accompanied by a friend. Legal representation is not permitted because the panel is not a court or tribunal process. The meeting will be conducted as informally as the circumstances allow. You will have the opportunity to explain why you remain dissatisfied, and the school or Trust will have the opportunity to respond. Panel members may ask questions of both sides to help them understand the issues clearly.

The panel may uphold, partially uphold or not uphold the complaint. It may also make recommendations, which could include an apology, a review of communication, a change to practice, further staff guidance, or another appropriate action. In some cases, the panel may conclude that the school or Trust acted reasonably, even if you remain disappointed with the outcome.

The panel will aim to send its findings and any recommendations within 10 school days of the meeting. Once the complaint has completed all stages of the Trust's procedure, the Trust's decision is final.

## **8. POSSIBLE OUTCOMES**

At the end of each stage of the complaints process, the school or Trust will provide a written response explaining the outcome. The response will aim to set out what has been considered, what conclusion

has been reached, and what, if anything, will happen next.

A complaint may be:

**Upheld:** This means the school or Trust agrees that the complaint is justified. This may be because something went wrong, a policy or procedure was not followed, communication was not good enough, or the matter should have been handled differently.

**Partially upheld:** This means the school or Trust agrees with some parts of the complaint, but not all of it. For example, the school may conclude that the original decision was reasonable, but that communication with the parent could have been clearer or more timely.

**Not upheld:** This means the school or Trust does not agree that the complaint is justified. This may be because the evidence does not support the complaint, or because the school acted reasonably, fairly and in line with the relevant policy or procedure. A complaint not being upheld does not mean the concern was not taken seriously; it means that, after review, the school or Trust does not agree that something was handled incorrectly.

**Withdrawn:** This means the parent or carer chooses not to continue with the complaint. This may happen because the matter has been resolved, because further discussion has clarified the position, or because the parent no longer wishes to proceed.

**Closed with no further action:** This means that, after review, no further action is required. This may be because the matter has already been resolved, because it falls outside the Complaints Policy, because it should be considered under another process, or because there is no further practical action the school or Trust can reasonably take.

Where a complaint is upheld or partially upheld, the school or Trust will consider what action is appropriate and proportionate. This may include:

- An apology or acknowledgement that something could have been handled better.
- A clearer explanation of a decision or process.
- A practical step to support the student or family.
- A review of communication, systems, procedures or practice.
- Further guidance, support or training for staff.
- Referral to another relevant policy or process, where appropriate.
- Action to reduce the likelihood of a similar issue arising again.

Sometimes the most appropriate outcome will be an explanation rather than a change in decision. In other cases, the school or Trust may identify learning even where the complaint is not upheld. For example, we may conclude that a decision was reasonable, but that the reasons for it could have been explained more clearly at the time.

Some complaints may lead to internal action involving members of staff. Where this happens, we may not be able to share detailed information with parents because staff matters are confidential. Similarly, we may not be able to share information about other students or families. We will, however, explain the outcome as clearly as we can while respecting confidentiality, safeguarding and data protection requirements.

Our aim is always to reach an outcome that is fair, proportionate and focused on learning, improvement and the best interests of students.

## ADVICE FOR PARENTS

### KEEPING THE COMPLAINT FOCUSED

To make sure complaints can be considered fairly, we may ask you to clarify or narrow your complaint if it is unclear, very broad, or includes several unrelated issues. This is not to prevent you from raising concerns. It is to make sure everyone understands what is being investigated and that the process remains manageable, fair and focused.

It is helpful to avoid:

- Sending very large amounts of information unless it is directly relevant.
- Repeating the same points many times.
- Adding new issues after the complaint has started.
- Requesting large numbers of documents that are not directly linked to the complaint.
- Using the complaints process as a general review of all past decisions, emails or interactions.

The complaints process is not a legal disclosure process or a court-style hearing. We will consider the evidence that is reasonably necessary to understand and determine the complaint.

Where a complaint is accompanied by a very large amount of information, the Trust may set reasonable and proportionate limits on what needs to be submitted or considered. This may include asking the complainant to identify the documents that are directly relevant, setting reasonable word or page limits, limiting the number of supporting documents, or agreeing deadlines for further material. Information that is excessive, duplicated, irrelevant, submitted outside an agreed deadline or relates to new issues may be disregarded where it is reasonable to do so, so that the complaint can be considered fairly, proportionately and without the process becoming unmanageable.

### FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND SUBJECT ACCESS REQUESTS

Parents and carers have legal rights to request certain information from the Trust. These include Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, which relate to recorded information held by the Trust, and Subject Access Requests (SARs), which relate to personal information covered by data protection law.

These are separate statutory processes from the complaints procedure. They have different legal requirements, tests and timescales and are managed under the relevant information rights legislation. Making an FOI request or SAR does not turn the complaints process into a disclosure exercise and does not provide a formal “discovery” mechanism of the kind that might apply in court proceedings.

An FOI request or SAR should also not be assumed to provide a complete record or the full evidential picture relating to a complaint. The information provided will be limited to the information falling within the particular legal right and scope of the request. Some information may lawfully be withheld, exempt from disclosure or redacted, including information relating to other students or families, confidential personal information, safeguarding matters, legally privileged material or information where the rights of another person must be protected.

The complaints process operates differently. The school, Trust investigator or Complaints Panel will consider the information that is relevant and proportionate to determining the complaint. This may include records, correspondence, policies, accounts from those involved and other evidence considered necessary. It does not mean that every document held by the school or Trust about a student, member of staff or event will be disclosed to the complainant.

If you make an FOI request or SAR while a complaint is being considered, the two processes will

normally continue separately and according to their respective timescales. An information request does not automatically pause or extend the complaints procedure. Where there is a significant overlap between the two processes, we will explain how they will be managed and may make appropriate arrangements where this is necessary to ensure the complaint can be considered fairly.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Complaints often involve personal information about students, parents, staff or other members of the school community. We will share as much information as we reasonably can, but we must also protect confidentiality, safeguarding information, legal privilege and the privacy rights of others.

This means that there may be times when we cannot provide all the information a parent has requested, even where we understand why the parent would like to see it. For example, we may need to withhold or redact information about another student, another family, a member of staff, safeguarding matters, legal advice or confidential internal records.

The Trust keeps records of formal complaints, including the stage at which they were resolved and any actions taken. Complaint records are handled securely and in line with data protection requirements.

## **USING AI TO DRAFT A COMPLAINT**

We would generally advise parents and carers not to use public AI tools to draft complaints about school matters. We understand that AI can seem helpful when you are trying to organise your thoughts, but complaints often involve personal, sensitive and emotional situations. In these circumstances, AI can sometimes turn a human concern into something that sounds more formal, legalistic, adversarial or complicated than it needs to be.

This can make it harder, rather than easier, for the school to understand the real issue. AI-drafted complaints may include lengthy background, repeated points, strong legal language, or references to laws, guidance or procedures that are out of date, do not apply in England, or are not relevant to schools. This can delay the process while the school works to identify the key concern and clarify what is actually being complained about.

There are also important confidentiality risks. We recommend that you do not enter personal or sensitive information about your child, another student, a member of staff or another family into a public AI tool. Information about children, school incidents, safeguarding, SEND, behaviour or family circumstances should be treated with particular care.

The most helpful complaint is usually short, clear and factual. It is better to explain, in your own words:

- What happened.
- When it happened.
- Who was involved.
- Who you have already spoken to.
- Why you remain concerned.
- What you would like the school to do next.

You do not need to use legal language or produce a long document. A simple, direct explanation is usually the best way to help us understand the concern and respond properly.

If we are finding it difficult to identify the main issues from what you have shared, we may suggest a phone call or meeting to agree the key points before the complaint is considered. This helps keep the

process focused on the substance of the concern and on finding the fairest and most constructive way forward.

### **COMMUNICATION, MUTUAL RESPECT AND UNREASONABLE COMPLAINT BEHAVIOUR**

Very occasionally, the way in which a complaint is pursued may become unreasonable or vexatious. This might include repeatedly changing the basis of a complaint, refusing to engage with the agreed process, continuing to raise substantially the same issues after they have been considered, making excessive or disproportionate demands on staff, or using abusive, threatening or discriminatory language.

Where this happens, the Trust will normally explain its concerns and give the complainant an opportunity to change their approach. If the behaviour continues, proportionate communication arrangements may be introduced, such as using a single point of contact or reasonable limits on the frequency of correspondence. Any genuinely new complaint will still be considered separately and fairly.

### **IF SEVERAL PARENTS RAISE THE SAME ISSUE**

Sometimes a school or the Trust may receive a number of complaints about the same issue, including through a coordinated campaign. Where this happens, we may use a streamlined approach, such as issuing a shared response, providing a single update to affected parents, or publishing information on the school or Trust website.

This does not mean the concern is being ignored. It means the school or Trust is trying to respond fairly, consistently and efficiently, while making sure staff can continue to focus on the day-to-day education, safety and wellbeing of students.

### **REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS AND SUPPORT**

We want the complaints process to be accessible. If you need support to use the process, please contact the school as soon as possible so that we can consider what reasonable adjustments may be appropriate. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Providing documents in an alternative format
- Accepting a complaint verbally or through an advocate where required and agreed in advance
- Providing an accessible meeting location or remote meeting
- Arranging translation or interpretation where necessary.

Reasonable adjustments are intended to support fair access to the process. They do not remove the need for the complaint to be clear, focused and relevant to the issues being considered, but they may help us agree the best way for you to take part in the process.

### **EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

Parents sometimes wish to contact external organisations such as the Department for Education, Ofsted, the local authority, an MP or another body. In most cases, these organisations will expect the school or Trust's complaints process to have been completed first.

We encourage parents to work through the Trust's process because it gives the school and Trust the best opportunity to understand the issue, respond properly and put things right where needed. It also avoids duplicating work and helps ensure that concerns are considered by the people who are usually closest to the facts, context and records.

Once the Trust's complaints process has been completed, parents who remain dissatisfied may be able to contact an external body where this is appropriate. The Trust will signpost parents to the relevant route where applicable.