



## Complaints procedure

Approved by: OLICAT Board

Last reviewed on: February 2024

Next review due by: February 2026

## Notes of clarification

The word "Director/s" is used to refer to Directors of Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Academies Trust. The Directors have the ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of the Trust and ensuring that it is solvent, well run and delivering the outcomes for which it has been set up.

The word "Governor "is used as a term to cover Directors of the Trust and people appointed by the Trust Board and/or Diocese to serve as Members of a School Local Academy Committee (LAC). Governors set high standards of achievement for all children and young people in the school by: setting the school's vision, ethos and strategic direction; holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils; and overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent

The words 'Trust Board' or 'Board' refers to the Board of Directors of the Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Academies Trust.

The words 'Local Academy Committee (LAC)' refers to the local governing body of a school.

The words "Clerk to the Governors" or Clerk refers to a role appointed by the governors to provide advice and guidance to the governing board on governance, constitutional and procedural matters, and supports the efficient functioning of a governing board and its committees.

## **Aims**

The schools within the Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Academies Trust (OLICAT) always welcome meaningful communication with parents, students and the wider community, and whilst we hope you are always happy with your child's progress or relationship with the schools we recognise there are occasions when you will want to bring questions or concerns to a school's attention.

When responding to complaints, we aim to:

- Be impartial and non-adversarial.
- Facilitate a full and fair investigation by an independent person or panel, where necessary.
- Address all the points at issue and provide an effective and prompt response.
- Respect complainants' desire for confidentiality.
- Treat complainants with respect.
- Ensure that any decisions we make are lawful, rational, reasonable, fair and proportionate, in line with the ethos of the Trust and principles of administrative law.
- Keep complainants informed of the progress of the complaints process.
- Consider how the complaint can feed into school improvement evaluation processes.

We try to resolve concerns or complaints by informal means wherever possible. Where this is not possible, formal procedures will be followed.

The school will aim to give the complainant the opportunity to complete the complaints procedure in full. To support this, we will ensure we publicise the existence of this policy and make the policy and the procedure available on the school website.

Throughout the process, we will be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved, and make any reasonable adjustments needed to accommodate individuals.

## **Legislation and guidance**

This document meets the requirements set out in part 7 of the schedule to [the Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), which states that we must have and make available a written procedure to deal with complaints from parents of pupils at the school.

It is also based on guidance published by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) on [creating a complaints procedure that complies with the above regulations](#), and refers to [good practice guidance on setting up complaints procedures](#) from the Department for Education (DfE). This policy complies with our funding agreement and articles of association.

In addition, it addresses duties set out in the [Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework](#) with regards to dealing with complaints about the school's fulfilment of Early Years Foundation Stage requirements.

## **Definitions and scope**

The DfE guidance explains the difference between a concern and a complaint:

- A concern is defined as "an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought".
- A complaint is defined as "an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action".

The schools will resolve concerns through day-to-day communication as far as possible.

The schools intend to resolve complaints informally where possible, at the earliest possible stage. There may be occasions when complainants would like to raise their concerns formally. This policy outlines the procedure relating to handling such complaints.

This policy does not cover complaints procedures relating to:

- Admissions.
- Statutory assessments of special educational needs (SEN).
- Safeguarding matters; Exclusion; Whistle-blowing.
- Staff grievances and Staff discipline.

- Withdrawal from the curriculum (parents and carers can withdraw their child from any aspect of religious education, including the daily act of collective worship. They do not have to explain why).

Please see our separate policies for procedures relating to these types of complaint.

Complaints about services provided by other providers who use school premises or facilities should be directed to the provider concerned.

### **Principles for investigation**

When investigating a complaint, we will try to clarify:

- What has happened.
- Who was involved.
- What the complainant feels would put things right.

### **Timescales**

We intend to address complaints as quickly as possible. To achieve this, realistic and reasonable time limits will be set for each action within each stage.

If at any point we cannot meet the time scales we have set out in this policy, we will:

- Set new time limits with the complainant.
- Send the complainant details of the new deadline and explain the delay.

The school expects that complaints will be made as soon as possible after an incident arises and no later than 3 months afterwards. We will consider exceptions to this time frame in circumstances where there were valid reasons for not making a complaint at that time and the complaint can still be investigated in a fair manner for all involved.

When complaints are made out of term time, we will consider them to have been received on the next school day.

### **Complaints about our fulfilment of early years requirements**

We will investigate all written complaints relating to the school's fulfilment of the Early Years Foundation Stage requirements, and notify the complainant of the outcome within 28 days of receiving the complaint. The school will keep a record of the complaint (see section 10) and make this available to Ofsted on request.

Parents and carers can notify Ofsted if they believe that the school is not meeting Early Years Foundation Stage requirements, by calling 0300 123 4234 or 0300 123 4666, or by emailing [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk). An online contact form is also available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted#org-contacts>.

We will notify parents and carers if we become aware that the school is to be inspected by Ofsted. We will also supply a copy of the inspection report to parents and carers of children attending the setting on a regular basis.

## **Stages of complaint (not complaints against the headteacher or a governor)**

### **Stage 1: informal**

The school will take informal concerns seriously and make every effort to resolve the matter quickly. Many concerns may be settled by contacting your child's teacher because they work regularly with your child, and provision or clarification of information will resolve the issue.

You should raise the complaint as soon as possible with the relevant member of staff – this may be your child's class or subject teacher, head of year or subject, or the headteacher. If the complaint is regarding the special needs provision provided by the school for your child you may wish to direct your complaint to the school SENCO. You can do so either in person or by letter, telephone or email. If you are unclear who to contact or how to contact them, please contact the school office.

The school will acknowledge informal complaints within five school days, and investigate and provide a response within fifteen school days.

If the complaint is not resolved informally, you can escalate it to a formal complaint.

### **Stage 2: formal**

Formal complaints can be raised:

- By letter or email.
- Over the phone.
- In person.
- By a third party acting on behalf of the complainant.

The complainant should provide details such as relevant dates, times, and the names of witnesses of events, alongside copies of any relevant documents, and what they feel would resolve the complaint. For clarity and speed of resolution you may be asked to detail your complaint in writing. If complainants need assistance raising a formal complaint, they can contact the school office.

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 five school days.

The headteacher (or other person appointed by the headteacher for this purpose) will then conduct an investigation. You may be asked for further information and/or invited to a meeting to discuss your complaint. The complainant may be accompanied to this meeting, and should inform the school of the identity of their companion in advance. In certain circumstances, the school may need to refuse a request for a particular individual to attend any such meeting – for example, if there is a conflict of interest. If this is the case, the school will notify the complainant as soon as they are aware, so that the complainant has the opportunity to arrange alternative accompaniment.

The written conclusion of this investigation will be sent to you within fifteen school days.

If the complainant wishes to proceed to the next stage of the procedure, they should inform the clerk to the governing board within fifteen school days.

### **Stage 3: Review Panel**

Complaints will be escalated to the panel hearing stage if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal, stage. You must explain how you feel the previous stage of the procedure has not addressed your complaint sufficiently, and what you feel would resolve the complaint.

The panel will be appointed by or on behalf of the Trust and will consist of at least 3 people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. At least 1 panel member must be independent of the management and running of the school. The panel cannot be made up solely of governing board members, as they are not independent of the management and running of the school.

The panel will have access to the existing record of progress in dealing with the complaint.

The complainant must have reasonable notice of the date of the review panel. The clerk will aim to find a date within fifteen school days of the request, where possible.

If the complainant rejects the offer of 3 proposed dates without good reason, the clerk will set a date. The hearing will go ahead using written submissions from both parties.

Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least five school days before the date of the meeting.

### **At the meeting**

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 will be sought before the recording of meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken. Any recordings taken by the school will be kept for ninety days or until the complaint has reached its conclusion.

At the review panel meeting, the complainant and representatives from the school, as appropriate, will be present. Each will have an opportunity to set out written prior to the meeting.

The complainant must be allowed to attend the panel hearing and be accompanied if they wish. We don't encourage either party to bring legal representation, but will consider it on a case-by-case basis. For instance, if a school employee is called as a witness in a complaint meeting, they may wish to be supported by their union.

Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

At the meeting, each individual will have the opportunity to give statements and present their evidence, and witnesses will be called, as appropriate, to present their evidence.

The panel, the complainant and the school representative(s) will be given the chance to ask and reply to questions. Once the complainant and school representative(s) have presented their cases, they will be asked to leave and evidence will then be considered by the panel.

The panel will put together its findings and recommendations from the case. The panel will also provide copies of the minutes of the hearing and the findings and recommendations to the complainant and, where relevant, the individual who is the subject of the complaint, and make a copy available for inspection by the Trust and headteacher.

### **The outcome**

The panel can:

- Uphold the complaint, in whole or in part.
- Dismiss the complaint, in whole or in part.

If the complaint is upheld, the panel will:

- Decide the appropriate action to resolve the complaint.
- Where appropriate, recommend changes to the school's systems or procedures to the SEL and Directors to prevent similar issues in the future.

The school will inform those involved of the decision in writing within ten school days.

## **Complaints against the headteacher, a governor or the governing board**

### **Stage 1: informal**

Complaints made against the headteacher or any member of the governing board should be directed to the clerk to the governing board in the first instance.

If the complaint is about the headteacher or one member of the governing board (including the chair or vice-chair), a suitably skilled and impartial governor will carry out the steps at stage 1 (set out in section above).

### **Stage 2: Formal**

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- The entire governing board or
- The majority of the governing board

An independent investigator will carry out the steps in stage 2 (set out in section above). They will be appointed by the Trust and will write a formal response at the end of their investigation, which will be presented to the Chair of the Board.

### **Stage 3: Directors**

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- The entire governing board or
- The majority of the governing board

A committee of independent governors will hear the complaint. They will be sourced by the MAT and will carry out the steps at stage 3 (set out in section above).

### **Complaints about the Trust, Trust Leadership or Directors**

#### **Stage 1: informal**

We make every effort to address any concerns or complaints early through informal measures.

The complainant should raise any concerns as soon as possible directly with the Trust using the email [info@olicatschools.org](mailto:info@olicatschools.org)

If the concern regards the SEL the complainant should contact the Chair of Directors.

If the complainant is unsure who to contact, or needs to contact the Members regarding conduct of the Directors they should contact the trust office [info@olicatschools.org](mailto:info@olicatschools.org)

The process for responding to and investigating an informal complaint about the trust or central staff is the same as that set out above.

#### **Stage 2: formal**

If the complaint is not resolved satisfactorily at the informal stage, the complainant may submit a formal complaint in writing. The complainant will receive written acknowledgement of their complaint within five school days.

An investigating officer will be appointed by the Chair of the Board conduct an investigation, in line with the process set out above, providing a written response to the complainant within fifteen school days.

### **Stage 3: Panel Hearing**

#### **Convening the panel**

Complaints will be escalated to the panel hearing stage by the Investigating Officer if the complainant is not satisfied with the response to the complaint at the second, formal stage. Complainants will be required to explain in writing how the decision reached is incorrect and provide additional supporting information to substantiate their opinion.

A panel will be appointed by the trust, and will consist of 3 members of the board not involved in investigating the complaint in the formal stage.

If the complaint is:

- Jointly about the chair and vice-chair or
- The entire trust board or
- The majority of the trust board

The panel will be entirely made up of independent members. They will be sourced by the MAT and will carry out the steps at stage 3 (set out in section above).

### **Referring Complaints On Completion Of The School's Procedure**

If the complainant is unsatisfied with the outcome of the school's complaints procedure, they can refer their complaint to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA will check whether the complaint has been dealt with properly by the school. The ESFA will not overturn a school's decision about a complaint but will intervene if a school or trust has:

- Breached a clause in its funding agreement.

- Failed to act in line with its duties under education law.
- Acted (or is proposing to act) unreasonably when exercising its functions.

If the school's complaints procedure is found to not meet regulations, the school will be asked to correct its procedure accordingly.

For more information or to refer a complaint, see the following webpage: <https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school>

We will include this information in the outcome letter to complainants.

### **Persistent and/or unreasonable complaints**

Most complaints raised will be valid, and therefore we will treat them seriously. However, a complaint may become unreasonable if the person:

- Has made the same complaint before, and it has already been resolved by following the school's complaints procedure.
- Makes a complaint that is obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific, defamatory or repetitive.
- Insists on pursuing a complaint that is unfounded, or out of scope of the complaints procedure, or beyond all reason.
- Pursues a valid complaint, but in an unreasonable manner e.g. refuses to articulate the complaint, refuses to co-operate with this complaints procedure, or insists that the complaint is dealt with in ways that are incompatible with this procedure and the time frames it sets out.
- Makes a complaint designed to cause disruption, annoyance or excessive demands on school time.
- Seeks unrealistic outcomes, or a solution that lacks any serious purpose or value.

### **Steps we will take**

We will take every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns, and give them a clear statement of our position and their options. We will maintain our role as an objective arbiter throughout the process, including when we meet with individuals. We will follow our complaints procedure as normal (as outlined above) wherever possible.

If the complainant continues to contact the school in a disruptive way, we may put communications strategies in place. We may:

- Give the complainant a single point of contact via an email address.
- Limit the number of times the complainant can make contact, such as a fixed number per term.
- Ask the complainant to engage a third party to act on their behalf, such as [Citizens Advice](#).
- Put any other strategy in place as necessary.

### **Stopping responding**

We may stop responding to the complainant when all of these factors are met:

- We believe we have taken all reasonable steps to help address their concerns.
- We have provided a clear statement of our position and their options.
- The complainant contacts us repeatedly, and we believe their intention is to cause disruption or inconvenience.

Where we stop responding, we will inform the individual that we intend to do so. We will also explain that we will still consider any new complaints they make.

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 our school site.

### **Duplicate complaints**

If we have resolved a complaint under this procedure and receive a duplicate complaint on the same subject from a partner, family member or other individual, we will assess whether there are aspects that we had not previously considered, or any new information we need to take into account. If we are satisfied that there are no new aspects, we will:

- Tell the new complainant that we have already investigated and responded to this issue, and the local process is complete.
- Direct them to the DfE if they are dissatisfied with our original handling of the complaint.

If there are new aspects, we will follow this procedure again.

### **Complaint campaigns**

Where the school receives a large volume of complaints about the same topic or subject, especially if these come from complainants unconnected with the school, the school may respond to these complaints by:

- Publishing a single response on the school website.
- Sending a template response to all of the complainants.

If complainants are not satisfied with the school's response, or wish to pursue the complaint further, the normal procedures will apply.

### **Record-keeping**

The school will record the progress of all complaints, including information about actions taken at all stages, the stage at which the complaint was resolved, and the final outcome. The records will also include copies of letters and emails, and notes relating to meetings and phone calls.

This material will be treated as confidential and stored securely by the school/central office, and will be viewed only by those involved in investigating the complaint or on the review panel.

This is except where the Secretary of State (or someone acting on their behalf) or the complainant requests access to records of a complaint through a freedom of information (FOI) request or under the terms of the Data Protection Act, or where the material must be made available during a school inspection.

Records of complaints will be kept securely, only for as long as necessary and in line with data protection law, our privacy notices and data retention schedule.

The details of the complaint, including the names of individuals involved, will not be shared with the whole local governing body of the school (or the entire trust board) in case a review panel needs to be organised at a later point.

Where the local governing body is aware of the substance of the complaint before the review panel stage, the school will (where reasonably practicable) arrange for an independent panel to hear the complaint.

Complainants also have the right to request an independent panel if they believe there is likely to be bias in the proceedings.

The decision to approve this request is made by the local governing body, who will not unreasonably withhold consent.

### **Monitoring arrangements**

The Governing Body monitors the Complaints Procedure, in order to ensure that all complaints are handled properly. The headteacher will log all formal complaints received by the School and record how they were resolved. Governors will review these on an annual basis and consider the need for any changes to the procedure.

## **Appendix 1 – roles and responsibilities**

### The complainant

The complainant will get a more effective and timely response to their complaint if they:

- Follow these procedures.
- Co-operate with the school throughout the process, and respond to deadlines and communication promptly.
- Ask for assistance as needed.
- Treat all those involved with respect.
- Not publish details about the complaint on social media.

### The investigator

An individual will be appointed to look into the complaint, and establish the facts. They will:

- Interview all relevant parties, keeping notes.
- Consider records and any written evidence and keep these securely.
- Prepare a comprehensive report to the headteacher or complaints committee which includes the facts and potential solutions.

### The complaints co-ordinator

The complaints co-ordinator can be:

- The headteacher.
- A designated complaints governor.
- Any other staff member providing administrative support.

The complaints co-ordinator will:

- Keep the complainant up to date at each stage in the procedure.
- Make sure the process runs smoothly by liaising with staff members, the headteacher, chair of governors, and clerk.
- Keep records.
- Be aware of issues relating to:
  - Sharing third party information.
  - Additional support needed by complainants, for example interpretation support or where the complainant is a child or young person.

### Clerk to the governing board

The clerk will:

- Be the contact point for the complainant and the panel, including circulating the relevant papers and evidence before the panel meeting.
- Arrange the complaints hearing.
- Record and circulate the minutes and outcome of the hearing.

### Panel chair

The panel chair will:

- Chair the meeting, ensuring that everyone is treated with respect throughout.
- Make sure all parties see the relevant information, understand the purpose of the committee, and are allowed to present their case.