



Pontefract Region Complaints Policy

PURPOSE

Ark Schools is committed to providing the very best education and school experience to pupils across all our schools. We welcome any feedback as an important part of continuous improvement and accept that this will not always be positive.

The following policy explains how to raise a concern or make a complaint and what process staff within the Pontefract Region of Ark Schools will follow to resolve the matter as quickly as possible

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POSITIONING WITHIN ARK OPERATIONAL MODEL

Component	Element
☐ Strategic Leadership & Planning ☐ Monitoring, Reporting & Data ☒ Governance & Accountabilities ☐ Teaching & Learning ☐ Curriculum & Assessment ☐ Culture, Ethos & Wellbeing ☐ Pathways & Enrichment ☐ Parents & Community ☐ Finance, IT & Estates ☐ Our People	

Contents

1.	Introduction.....	2
2.	Who can make a complaint?	2
3.	The difference between a concern and a complaint.....	2
4.	Complaints about third parties	3
5.	Serial, persistent, and unreasonable complaints	3
6.	Anonymous complaints	5
7.	Timescales	5
8.	Complaints received outside of term time.....	5
9.	Scope of this complaint’s procedure	5
10.	Resolving complaints	7
11.	Duplicate complaints	7
12.	Withdrawal of a complaint	7
13.	Support for Complainants with Disabilities or Language Needs.....	8
14.	Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Complaints	8
15.	Stage 1 – informal complaints/concerns.....	9
16.	Stage 2 – formal complaints.....	9
17.	Stage 3 – panel hearing.....	10
18.	Closure of complaints	12
	Appendix A – Complaints Form	13

1. Introduction

Ark Schools is committed to providing the very best education and school experience to pupils across all our schools. We welcome any feedback as an important part of continuous improvement and accept that this will not always be positive.

Ark supports the principles set out in guidance developed by the Department for Education (DfE), Parentkind and Ofsted, which promotes **early, respectful and constructive resolution of concerns**.

We recognise that most concerns arise from worry, confusion or a feeling of not being heard, rather than an intention to make a formal complaint.

Our aim is to work in partnership with parents/carers to resolve issues quickly through a fair, transparent process which is without prejudice and in the best interests of the child.

This policy, which will be published on the Ark Schools website, plus individual school websites, explains how to raise a concern or make a complaint and what process the Pontefract Region of Ark Schools will follow to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

All parents/carers will be made aware of this policy and the procedures to follow if they wish to make a complaint.

2. Who can make a complaint?

This complaints procedure is not limited to parents or carers of pupils that are registered at the school. Any person, including members of the public, may make a complaint to any school within the Pontefract Region of Ark Schools, about the provision of facilities or services provided. Unless complaints are dealt with under separate statutory procedures (for example appeals relating to exclusions or admissions), we will use this complaints procedure.

We will not normally investigate complaints that are anonymous, or which have not been raised within the specified timescale, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

3. 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, 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 complaint's procedure. The Pontefract Region of Ark Schools takes concerns seriously and will make every effort to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

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

4. Complaints about third parties

Should parents/carers have a complaint about services provided by other suppliers/providers or companies who may use school premises or facilities, the supplier/provider should be contacted directly, and the complaint will be dealt with under their own complaints policy. If there is any ambiguity, the complaint should be accepted and triaged, before redirection/closure as appropriate.

Where the complaint concerns a third party operating under a service-level agreement or hire arrangement, the Region may facilitate contact but will not normally intervene.

5. Serial, persistent, and unreasonable complaints

This policy aims to limit the number of complaints that become protracted. However, there will be occasions when, despite the complaint procedure being followed, the complainant remains dissatisfied. If a complainant tries to re-open the same issue, they will be informed that the procedure has been completed and that the matter is now closed.

All schools will not normally limit the contact complainants have with the 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.

The Pontefract Region of Ark Schools defines unreasonable complainants as 'those who, because of the frequency or nature of their contacts with the school, hinder our consideration of their or other people's complaints'.

A complaint may be regarded as unreasonable when the person making the complaint:

- 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 while still wishing their complaint to be resolved
- refuses to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of a complaint's procedure
- insists on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the Complaints Policy or with good practice
- introduces trivial or irrelevant information which the complainant expects to be taken into account and commented on, or 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
- seeks an unrealistic outcome
- makes excessive demands on school time by frequent/lengthy/complicated and/or stressful contact with staff regarding the complaint in person, in writing, by email and/or by telephone while the complaint is being dealt with

A complaint may also be considered unreasonable if the person making the complaint does so either face-to-face, by telephone or in writing or electronically:

- maliciously
- aggressively
- using threats, intimidation, or violence
- using abusive, offensive, or discriminatory language
- knowing it to be false
- taking videos or recordings of pupils or staff without their consent
- using falsified information
- publishing unacceptable information in a variety of media such as in social media websites and newspapers

Complainants should limit the numbers of communications with a school while a 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 Principal will discuss any concerns with the complainant informally before applying an 'unreasonable' marking to the complaint.

If the behaviour continues the Principal will write to the complainant explaining that their behaviour is unreasonable and asking them to change it. For complainants who excessively contact the school causing a significant level of disruption, we may specify methods of communication and limit the number of contacts in a communication plan. This will usually be reviewed after 6 months.

Any communications about the complaint received outside the set communication plan will be ignored, and persistence non-adherence to the communication plan may result in the school ceasing responding altogether, about matters other than those for which we have a statutory responsibility. If this decision is taken, we will write to the complainant advising them of this.

In response to any serious incident of aggression or violence, the concerns and actions taken will be put in writing immediately and the police informed. This may include banning an individual from the school.

6. Anonymous complaints

We will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Principal will determine whether the complaint warrants an investigation upon receipt.

Where the complaint raises a safeguarding or health and safety concern, it will be considered under the appropriate statutory process.

7. Timescales

The complaint must be raised within three months of the incident. We will only consider complaints made outside of this time frame if exceptional circumstances apply. Any complainant who makes a complaint outside of the timescale will be informed that the complaint will not be investigated, and the matter is now closed.

8. 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.

9. Scope of this complaint's procedure

This procedure covers all complaints about any provision of community facilities or services by any school within the Pontefract Region of Ark Schools:

This policy applies to all schools within the Pontefract Region of Ark:

- Carleton High School, Green Lane, Pontefract WF8 3NW
- The King's School, Mill Hill Lane, Pontefract WF8 4JF
- Carleton Park Primary School, Moxon Close, Pontefract WF8 3PT
- The Rookeries Primary School, Carleton Road, Pontefract WF8 3NP
- De Lacy Primary School, Chequerfield Lane, Pontefract WF8 2TG
- Larks Hill Primary School, Larks Hill, Pontefract WF8 4RJ
- Orchard Head Primary School, Orchard Head Lane, Pontefract WF8 2NJ
- Halfpenny Lane Primary School, Halfpenny Lane, Pontefract WF8 4BW
- Northfield Primary School, Northfield Lane, Pontefract WF9 3LY

Certain matters fall outside the scope of this complaints procedure and must be dealt with under separate statutory or internal procedures. The following table sets out some of the circumstances where an alternative process will apply.

Exceptions	Who to contact
Admissions to schools	Concerns about admissions should be handled through a separate process – either through the appeals process or via the local authority.
Matters likely to require a Child Protection Investigation	Complaints about child protection matters are handled under our safeguarding and child protection policy, and in accordance with relevant statutory guidance. If you have serious concerns, you may wish to contact the local authority designated officer (LADO) who has local responsibility for safeguarding, or the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
Exclusion of children from school*	See government guidance on exclusions. *Complaints about the application of the Behaviour & Relationships Policy can be made through the schools' complaints procedure.
Whistleblowing	We have an internal whistleblowing policy which applies to all employees, including permanent, temporary, and agency staff, as well as contractors working for or on behalf of the Ark Schools. This procedure enables staff to raise genuine concerns about wrongdoing, malpractice, or risks that affect others, without fear of reprisal. Concerns raised under the whistleblowing procedure will be handled confidentially and in accordance with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The Secretary of State for Education is a prescribed person under the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014 (as amended). This means that individuals working in education who do not wish to raise a concern directly with their employer may make a protected disclosure to the Secretary of State. Referrals can be made via the Department for Education's form at: Blowing the whistle to the Department for Education - GOV.UK.
Staff grievances	Complaints from staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures.
Staff conduct	Complaints about staff will be dealt with under the school's internal disciplinary procedures, if appropriate. Complainants will not be informed of any disciplinary action taken against a staff member as a result of a complaint. However, the complainant will be notified that the matter is being addressed.

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 this happens, we will inform you of a proposed new timescale.

If a complainant commences legal action against any school within the Pontefract Region of Ark Schools in relation to their complaint, we will consider whether to suspend the complaints procedure until those legal proceedings have concluded.

10. Resolving complaints

At each stage in the procedure, the aim is 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 if deemed appropriate:

- 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.

At all stages, we aim to maintain open communication and seek an outcome that is proportionate and fair to all parties.

11. Duplicate complaints

If a duplicate complaint is received about the same subject as a previous complaint (for example, from a spouse, partner, grandparent, child) we will inform the new complainant that the trust has already considered that complaint and the process is complete.

12. Withdrawal of a complaint

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

13. Support for Complainants with Disabilities or Language Needs

Ark Schools is committed to ensuring that the complaints procedure is accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities or those who may have language support needs. We will make

reasonable adjustments to support complainants throughout the complaints process to ensure equal access to the procedure.

If you have a disability, or if you need assistance with communication due to language barriers, please let us know as soon as possible. We can provide a range of reasonable adjustments, including but not limited to:

- Providing written materials in accessible formats
- Providing assistance with completing forms or writing letters
- Offering translation or interpretation services
- Allowing the use of a support person or advocate to help with the complaint process
- Conducting meetings or hearings in a location that is accessible

Please contact the school or email us at PHQ.AdminSupport@arkonline.org to discuss how we can best accommodate your needs. We will make every effort to ensure that you can fully engage with the complaints process in a way that meets your requirements.

14. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Complaints

Ark recognises that parents/carers may choose to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (such as text generators or assistants) to help draft or structure complaints. While this is acceptable, it is important that any complaint submitted reflects the parent/carer's genuine concerns and is accurate.

Expectations when using AI

If AI tools are used to assist in preparing a complaint, parents/carers should ensure that:

- **Content is accurate and factual**
All details included in the complaint must be correct and based on real events. AI tools can sometimes generate incorrect or misleading information.
- **The complaint reflects your own experience and views**
The submission should clearly represent your personal concerns and the impact on your child, rather than generic or hypothetical statements.
- **Evidence is genuine and verifiable**
Any supporting information, dates, names, or documents must be real and not generated or altered by AI.
- **Language is appropriate and respectful**
Complaints must follow Ark's expectations for respectful communication. AI-generated text should be reviewed and edited to ensure it meets these standards.
- **Clarity and relevance are maintained**
Complaints should be concise and focused on the issue(s) being raised. Overly lengthy or repetitive AI-generated content may delay the process.

Transparency

- Parents/carers are not required to declare the use of AI; however, they remain fully responsible for the content of their complaint.
- We will assess complaints based on their substance, evidence, and relevance.

Good practice tips for parents

To support an effective complaints process, parents are encouraged to:

- Focus on **specific incidents, dates, and outcomes**
- Clearly state what resolution they are seeking
- Review any AI-generated text carefully before submission
- Keep the complaint **clear, concise, and relevant**

15. Stage 1 – informal complaints/concerns

It is hoped that most concerns can be expressed and resolved on an informal basis.

The Pontefract Region of Ark Schools have adopted the following key principles, consistent with DfE and Parentkind guidance:

- Resolution, not conflict, is the primary aim of the complaints process
- Concerns should be raised through the appropriate channels, rather than through public forums or unrelated parties
- Aggressive, abusive or excessive communication may hinder the effective handling of a complaint and will be managed in line with the Ark's expectations on conduct

Concerns should be raised with an appropriate member of school staff, for example, the class teacher, Student Liaison Officer, or Curriculum Leader. Complainants should not approach individual governors to raise concerns or complaints. They have no power to act on an individual basis.

We will aim to provide a response by the end of the next school day following receipt of your concern. If this is not possible, we will explain to you the reason for the delay. For example, we may wish to speak with the complainant to gather more information.

If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint.

16. Stage 2 – formal complaints

Should the complainant be dissatisfied with the outcome of the informal complaint, a formal complaint must be made in writing to the school's Complaints Co-Ordinator within 10 school days of receiving the response to the informal complaint using the complaints form (Appendix A). Details can be located on individual school websites. Assistance completing the form is available if required.

The Complaints Co-Ordinator will record the date the complaint is received and will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing (usually by email) within five school days. In this communication, the Complaints Co-Ordinator will confirm which Senior Leader your complaint has been assigned to. They will also provide a copy of the Complaints Policy and Procedure and the date by which a response will be sent. The school will aim to provide a response within 10 – 20 school days, depending on the complexity of the complaint. If this is not possible, the Complaints Co-Ordinator will explain the delay and give a revised date by which a response will be sent.

In the case of a complaint about an Assistant Principal, the Deputy Principal will investigate.

In the case of a complaint about a Deputy Principal, the Principal will investigate.

In the case of a complaint about the Principal, the complaint must be directed to the Executive Principals, reachable via PHQ.AdminSupport@arkonline.org.

In the case of a complaint about the Regional Director or Senior Management Team, the complaint must be directed to the Head of Schools Governance, reachable via Governance.team@arkonline.org.

The senior leader investigating the complaint will contact the complainant in writing to provide an opportunity for a meeting and/or to provide any additional information they feel is relevant to the complaint. The complainant may be accompanied to any meeting by a friend, relative, representative, or advocate who can speak on their behalf with their permission. The senior leader should be made aware if you have any additional requirements, for example, a disability which should be considered prior to the meeting. Interpretation facilities are available if needed.

At the conclusion of the investigation, a full written response will be provided, which will include a full explanation of the decision and the reasons for it. Where appropriate, this includes what action the school will take to resolve the complaint.

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at stage 2, the complaint can be escalated to stage 3. This can be done in writing to the Complaints Co-Ordinator within 10 school days of receipt of the written response to stage 2.

17. Stage 3 – panel hearing

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome at stage 2 and wishes to take the matter further, they can escalate the complaint to stage 3. A request to escalate to stage 3 must be made to the Complaints Co-Ordinator within 10 school days of receipt of the stage 2 response using the complaints form (Appendix A). Requests received outside of this time frame will only be considered if exceptional circumstances apply.

Stage 3 is a panel hearing consisting of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint. The panel will include at least one member who is independent of the management and running of the school. This may, for example, be a governor, trustee, member of staff from another school or organisation, or another suitably independent person who has had no prior involvement in the complaint.

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

The Complaints Co-Ordinator will write to the complainant to inform them of the meeting date. They will aim to convene a meeting within 20 school days of receipt of the stage 3 request. If this is not possible, the Complaints Co-Ordinator will provide an anticipated date and keep the complainant informed.

If the complainant rejects the offer of three proposed dates, without good reason, the Complaints Co-Ordinator will decide when to hold the meeting. It will then proceed in the complainant's absence based on written submissions from both parties.

A complainant may bring someone along to the panel meeting to provide support. This can be a relative or friend. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the panel 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. Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.

The complainant must submit any further written material they wish to include at this stage to the Complaints Co-Ordinator at least 10 school days before the meeting.

At least five school days before the meeting, the Complaints Co-Ordinator 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. Any written material will be circulated to all parties at least five school days before the meeting date. The committee will not usually 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 this procedure.

It is the responsibility of the Clerk to the panel, usually the Principal's PA or appropriate Office Manager, to ensure that the meeting is properly recorded. If the hearing is to be digitally recorded, this will be made clear to the attendees and deleted once transcribed. No other recordings will be authorised. Attendees must not record the hearing covertly. 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 with a full explanation of their decision and the reason(s) for it, in writing, usually within 10 school days.

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 the Trust will take to resolve the complaint.

The panel will ensure that those findings and recommendations are sent by electronic mail or otherwise given to the complainant and, where relevant, the person complained about. Furthermore, they will be available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor and the Principal.

A record will be kept of all complaints, and of whether they are resolved at the preliminary stage or proceeded to a panel hearing, along with what actions have been taken, regardless of the decision in line with our retention policy.

All correspondence statements and records relating to individual complaints will 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.

This is the final stage of the Ark Schools (Pontefract Region) complaint procedure.

18. Closure of complaints

Very occasionally, after all stages of this procedure have been completed, it may be necessary to close a complaint even where the complainant is still dissatisfied. We will make every reasonable effort to resolve concerns and complaints fairly and thoroughly. However, there may be circumstances where it is not possible to meet all of the complainant's expectations or achieve the outcome they are seeking. In such cases, we may acknowledge that there is a difference of view and bring the complaints process to a close.

Once all stages of the complaints procedure have been completed, the Region considers the matter closed. Further correspondence will only be acknowledged if it raises new and relevant information.

Appendix A – Complaints Form

Please complete the form and return to the school or email this completed form to the school.

Personal data collected in this form will be processed in accordance with the Data Protection Policy and retained only as long as necessary for the purpose of handling your complaint.

Your Name:
School Name:
Students name (if relevant):
Your relationship to the student (if relevant):
Address: Postcode: Day time telephone number: Evening telephone number: Email address:
Please give details of your complaint, including whether you have spoken to anybody at the school about it.
What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage? What would you like the outcome to be?
Are you attaching any paperwork? If so, please give details.

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