

Shropshire and Telford Education Partnership

Dispute Resolution Policy

Monitoring

The Strategic Director will monitor the outcomes and impact of this policy on an annual basis.

Review

Member of Staff Responsible	STEP Strategic Director
Relevant Guidance/Advice/Legal Reference	Part 7 of the Education Regulations 2014. DfE best practice guidance for school complaints procedures 2021
Policy Adopted By	STEP Executive Board
Consultation	STEP Strategic Board
Date of Policy	Summer 2026
Review Period	Annually
Date of Next Review	Summer 2027

1. Introduction/Scope of Policy

STEP Teaching School Hub ("STEP") is committed to delivering high-quality, inclusive and professional services across all of its programmes, including Initial Teacher Training (ITT), the Early Career Framework (ECF), National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) and wider professional development services. The Hub welcomes feedback and views disputes as an opportunity to improve provision.

This policy covers disputes related to the services and programmes provided by STEP. It does not cover employment-related grievances, safeguarding concerns (which should be reported immediately via safeguarding procedures), or whistleblowing matters (which

should follow the appropriate whistleblowing policy). If you are unsure whether your concern falls within this policy, contact the STEP Administration Lead for guidance.

Most questions or concerns are often best answered by the professional leading a particular area of Hub work via the STEP Administration Lead. Strategic areas are:

- ECTE
- NPQ
- ITT Leads for Individual Partners
- Engagement and Communication

2. Aims and Application

This policy ensures concerns and/or disputes are handled promptly, fairly and consistently, investigated thoroughly and resolved at the earliest possible stage. It applies to concerns and/or disputes about programmes, delivery, decisions, actions, staff or representatives of STEP.

3. Key Principles

3.1 STEP expects all complainants to make reasonable attempts to seek an informal resolution.

3.2 STEP encourages any stakeholder to approach the organisation directly and refrain from airing concerns about STEP and its staff on social media sites.

3.3 To investigate the concern or dispute properly and fairly, STEP has implemented a staged approach. STEP anticipates that almost all concerns or disputes that arise will be resolved at Stage 1 or Stage 2 as outlined in section 5 of this policy.

3.4 Concerns or disputes should be brought to the attention of STEP as soon as possible. Any matters raised more than 3 months after the incident leading to the dispute will not be considered, unless the Strategic Director of STEP accepts that there are good reasons to explain the delay, or the dispute is about a particularly serious matter.

3.5 Where a concern or dispute is received out of term time, STEP will consider it to have been received on the first school day following the holiday period.

3.6 If it becomes necessary to alter the time limits and deadlines set out within this policy, the complainant will be advised accordingly and given an explanation as to why this has been the case and provided with revised timescales. If other bodies are investigating aspects of the concern or dispute, this may impact on STEP's ability to adhere to the timescales within this procedure or result in the procedure being suspended until those public bodies have completed their investigations. Where a

concern or dispute is raised but STEP does not have clarity from the complainant on the issues and/or desired outcomes, STEP will inform the complainant what information they need to progress the concern or dispute, and pause the procedure until clarity is achieved.

3.7 Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Complaints

Complainants may use AI tools to help draft or structure their complaint. However, all information submitted must be accurate, factual, and based on the complainant's own experience.

The organisation may request clarification or evidence where information appears inconsistent, inaccurate, or artificially generated. Submitting false or misleading information, including AI-generated content that does not reflect actual events, may result in the complaint being paused or closed.

4. Records of Concerns and Disputes

A record will be kept of all written formal disputes, including at what stage they were resolved, and action taken by us as a result of those disputes regardless of whether they were upheld. Correspondence, statements and records relating to individual disputes will be kept confidential except where:

- Access is requested by the Secretary of State.
- Disclosure is required in the course of an academy inspection.
- An individual has a legal right to access their own personal data contained within such documentation.
- Under other legal authority.

5. Part 1: Disputes Procedure

5.1 Stage 1 – Informal Concerns:

An informal concern can be raised in person, by telephone or email. Most enquiries and concerns can be dealt with satisfactorily by a member of staff within the strategic area the concern relates to. We value informal face to face meetings and encourage stakeholders to approach staff with any concerns they may have at the earliest opportunity and aim to resolve all issues with open dialogue and mutual understanding.

5.2 It is always helpful if the complainant can fully explain the nature of the concern and identify the outcome they are looking for. Where appropriate, the complainant may be invited to an informal meeting with the member of staff most appropriate for dealing with that concern. The member of staff dealing with the concern will make sure that

they are clear on what action (if any) has been agreed. This may be put in writing if appropriate.

5.3 If the matter is brought to the attention of the Strategic Director, they will refer the matter to the most appropriate strategic lead.

5.4 STEP will respect the views of a stakeholder who indicates that they would have difficulty discussing a concern with a particular member of staff. In this case, the Strategic Director will refer the complainant to another designated member of staff. Similarly, if the member of staff directly involved in the circumstances leading to the concern feels too compromised to deal with it, the Strategic Director may consider referring them to another member of staff.

5.5 There is no suggested timescale for resolution at this stage given the importance of dialogue through informal discussion, although it would be expected that most issues will be resolved within 15 school days. Where no satisfactory solution has been found, you will be advised that if you wish your concerns to be considered further, you should write to the Strategic Director under Stage 2 of this procedure within 15 school days.

5.6 Stage 2 – Formal Written Disputes:

If the complainant's concerns are not resolved under Stage 1, they are entitled to put their dispute in writing and send this to the Strategic Director of STEP via email – info@stepwm2.co.uk

5.7 It is very important that the complainant includes a clear statement of the actions that they would like us to take to resolve the dispute. Any formal disputes must use the dispute form (Appendix A).

5.8 The dispute will normally be acknowledged in writing within 5 school days of receipt. The acknowledgement will give a brief explanation of the Disputes and Resolutions Procedure and a target date for providing a response to the dispute. This will normally be within 20 school days of receipt.

5.9 If appropriate, the Strategic Director or Strategic Lead of the area relating to the dispute may invite the complainant to a meeting to clarify the dispute and to explore possible resolutions. If the invitation is accepted, the complainant may be accompanied by one other person, such as a friend, relative or interpreter, to assist. Where possible, this meeting will take place within 10 school days of receipt of the written dispute.

5.10 If necessary, witnesses will be interviewed, and statements taken from those involved. If the matter includes a dispute relating to a member of staff, the member of staff will have the opportunity to respond to the dispute.

5.11 Please be aware that where the dispute relates to a member of staff, a copy of the dispute may be shared with them in order to investigate the issues raised.

5.12 Once the relevant facts have been established as far as possible, the complainant will be provided with a written response to the dispute, including an explanation of the decision and the reasons for it. This will include what action will be taken to resolve the dispute (if any). The complainant will be advised that if they are dissatisfied with the outcome of the dispute, they may refer to the Department of Education, as set out in section 6 of this policy.

5.13 STEP may engage an independent, external person to carry out the investigation into the Stage 2 dispute or to review the investigation and response at Stage 2. This may be appropriate where the dispute is particularly complex or involves legal issues.

5.14 Logging concerns and disputes

All concerns and disputes will be logged and reported to core partner meetings each half term.

6. Referral to the Department for Education

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision of the Disputes Committee at Stage 2 of this procedure, they are entitled to refer the dispute to the Department for Education (DfE). The DfE will only investigate whether the dispute was handled properly and in accordance with education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the dispute.

6.1 At the time of writing this procedure, details about the DfE procedure and the DfE academy complaints form are available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/complain-about-an-academy/complain-about-an-academy>

Or the complainant can write to the DfE at the following address:

Department for Education
School complaints compliance unit
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester

M1 2WD

7. Repetitious and Vexatious Disputes and Disputes Pursued in an Otherwise Unreasonable Manner

7.1 There are rare circumstances where STEP will deviate from the Disputes and Resolutions Procedure set out in Parts 1 and 2. These include, but are not necessarily limited to:

7.2 Repetitious, **including serial and/or persistent, disputes.**

Where the complainant's dispute is the same, similar to or based on the same facts of a dispute which has already been considered in full and we have:

- taken every reasonable step to address the complainant's concerns; and
- given the complainant a clear statement of our position and their options;

We will write to the complainant to advise that the disputes procedure has been exhausted and that we will not be responding to any further correspondence in relation to these matters. The complainant will be referred to The Department for Education.

7.3 Vexatious disputes

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator defines the characteristics of a 'frivolous' or 'vexatious' complaint as:

- Complaints which are obsessive, persistent, harassing, prolific or repetitious.
- Insistence upon pursuing unmeritorious complaints and/or unrealistic outcomes beyond all reason.
- Insistence upon pursuing meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner.
- Complaints which are designed to cause disruption or annoyance.
- Demands for redress that lack any serious purpose or value.

Examples include but are not limited to:

- Publishing unacceptable information on social media or other public forums.
- Refusal to articulate their dispute or specify the grounds of a dispute or the outcomes sought by raising the dispute, despite offers of assistance.
- Refusal to co-operate with the dispute's investigation process.
- Introducing trivial or irrelevant information which they expect to be taken into account and commented on.
- Raising large numbers of detailed but unimportant questions, and insists they are fully answered, often immediately and to their own timescales.

- Making unjustified disputes about staff who are trying to deal with the issues, and seek to have them replaced.
- Changing the basis of the dispute as the investigation proceeds.
- Seeking an unrealistic outcome, such as the inappropriate dismissal of staff.
- Making excessive demands on staff time by frequent, lengthy and complicated contact with staff regarding the dispute in person, in writing, by email and by telephone while the dispute is being dealt with.
- Knowingly providing falsified information.

7.4 Disputes pursued in an otherwise unreasonable manner.

Where the complainant's behaviour or language towards staff is aggressive, abusive, offensive, discriminatory or threatening or insulting personal comments are made about, or threats are made towards, staff.

7.5 In the circumstances outlined in repetitive, including serial and/or persistent, disputes and vexatious disputes above, we may:

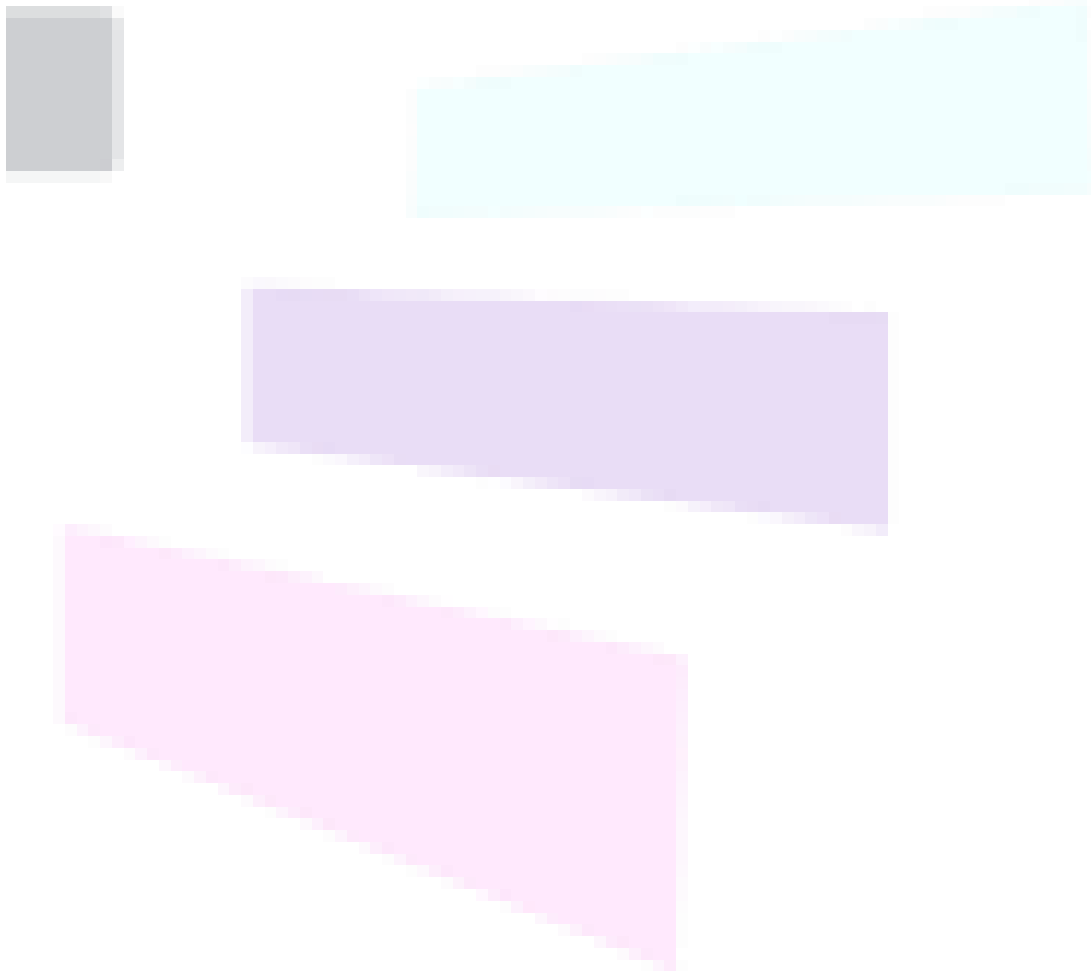
- Inform the complainant that we consider their dispute to be vexatious or the manner in which they are pursuing their dispute to be unreasonable and ask them to desist.
- Refuse to consider the dispute any further and refer the complainant directly to The Department for Education.

7.6 We may also restrict the complainant's access to STEP, e.g. requesting contact in a particular form (for example, letters only), requiring contact to take place with a named person only, restricting telephone calls to specified days and times or number of contacts or banning the complainant from STEP premises.

7.7 Where the complainant's behaviour is so extreme that it threatens the immediate safety and welfare of staff, we will consider other options - for example, reporting the matter to the police or taking legal action. In such cases, we may not give the complainant prior to warning of that action.

8. Dispute Campaigns

Where multiple similar disputes are received, STEP may issue a single response.



Appendix A: Dispute Form

A dispute form will be made available on the STEP Teaching School Hub website. Reasonable adjustments will be offered where required.

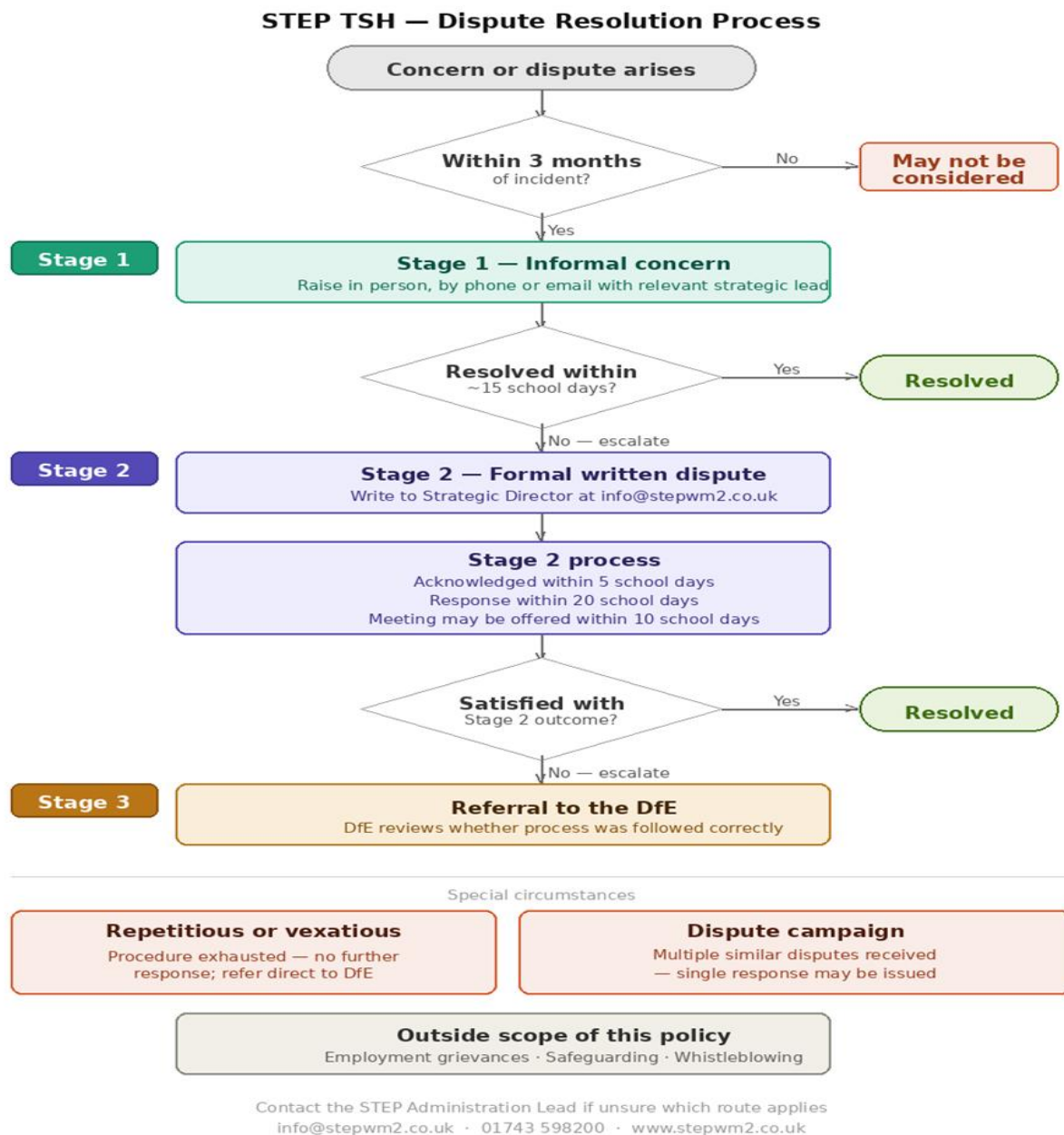
You will find a word document copy of this form on STEP website. Boxes will expand to fit your text. If you need support with this, please contact STEP. Hard copies can be posted upon request.

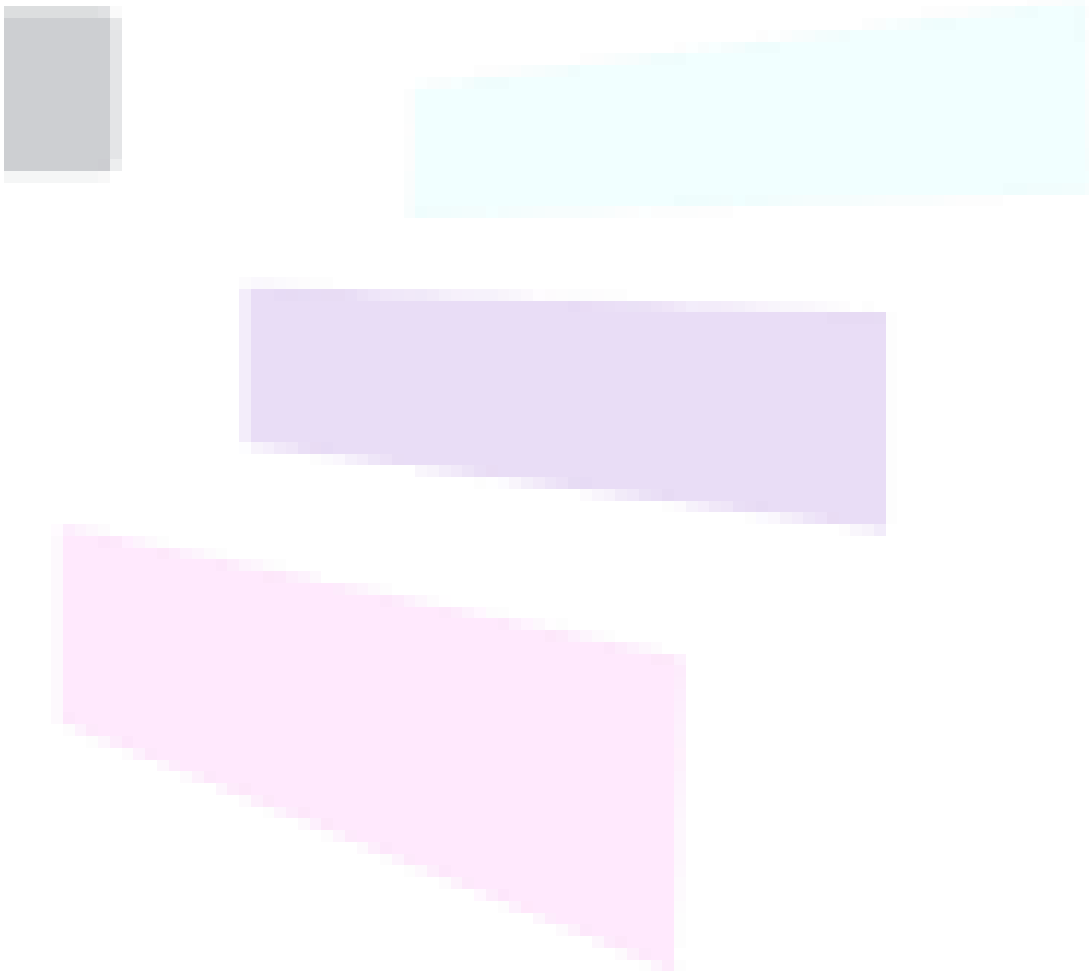
In accordance with equality law, STEP will consider making reasonable adjustments if required, to enable complainants to access and complete this disputes and resolutions procedure. For instance, providing information in alternative formats, assisting complainants in raising a formal dispute or holding meetings in accessible locations.

Your name:
Your role:
Address:
Postcode:
Day time telephone number:
Evening telephone number:
Please give details of your dispute, including whether you have spoken to anybody at STEP about it, and any action taken to date.
What actions do you feel might resolve the problem at this stage?
Are you attaching any paperwork, including electronic evidence. If so, please give details
Signature:
Date:
Official use
Date form received:
Date acknowledgement sent:
By whom:
Dispute referred to:
Date of referral:

Appendix B: Dispute and Resolution Flowchart

This flowchart maps the full disputes resolution journey as set out in the STEP Teaching School Hub Dispute Resolution Policy (Summer 2026). Concerns should be raised as soon as possible and within 3 months of the relevant incident.





Contact Details

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Shrewsbury
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