Best Foot Forward – Complaints Policy

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1. Policy Statement

Best Foot Forward (BFF) welcomes feedback and provides an accessible, fair route for learners, families and commissioners to raise concerns about its non-school provision in homes, schools, community venues and online. Listen, establish the facts, explain decisions and put things right where needed.

Learner safety takes priority. A complaint is not proof of misconduct, and making one must not lead to retaliation or withdrawal of provision. Any separate safety or placement decision requires its own evidenced review, commissioner involvement where appropriate and safe continuity arrangements.

2. Purpose

This policy provides:

- Prompt, proportionate investigation, a reasoned response and an impartial review route.
- Respectful communication, accessible participation and updates for complainants.
- Fair treatment and appropriate support for people subject to a complaint.
- Remedies, assigned actions and learning that improve BFF services.

3. Scope

This policy applies to:

- Learners, parents/carers, authorised representatives, referrers, schools, local authorities and members of the public; a learner can complain without first obtaining adult permission.
- Teaching, mentoring, commissioned support, transport, administration, communication and the handling of concerns. BFF complaints do not replace a school/council's own duties or statutory decision-making.

Some issues also require another procedure; identify the right route, explain it and coordinate any overlapping service complaint rather than rejecting it solely because of its label:

- Workplace concerns use Grievance; conduct/capability decisions use Disciplinary or Managing Poor Performance, according to actual status and contract.
- Child/adult safeguarding, staff allegations and low-level concerns use the relevant safeguarding procedures immediately (section 6).

- Public-interest wrongdoing may use Whistleblowing. Data-protection complaints and rights requests follow their own requirements alongside this process (section 6).

4. Principles

- Share information only with those who need it for fair handling, protection or lawful duties. Explain confidentiality limits; do not promise absolute secrecy or anonymity. Give the subject enough relevant information to respond, with proportionate privacy safeguards.
- Informal resolution is optional. Serious, sensitive or unresolved concerns may go straight to the formal stage; do not require someone to confront the person complained about.
- Do not intimidate, penalise or disadvantage a learner, family, practitioner or witness for honest reporting. An unproven complaint is not automatically false or malicious.
- Use competent authorised handlers with no conflict. Andrew and Bethany are spouses and cannot provide independent scrutiny of each other. For concerns about either CEO, both leaders or their handling, appoint a suitable independent external handler and separate reviewer.
- Offer reasonable adjustments and accessible communication, including a suitable supporter, interpreter, oral reporting or help recording the complaint. Respect learner wishes, understanding and communication needs; do not require repeated accounts or a joint meeting with the subject.

Chris Tapley may assist only where unimplicated, unconflicted, competent for the complaint and available. Management must publish a direct independent route and cover, accessible without approaching an implicated leader. If that route is unavailable, a commissioning school/council may help arrange appropriate independent handling; external statutory routes remain open.

5. Stages of the Complaints Procedure

Stage 1 – Informal Resolution

- Raise concerns promptly with an unimplicated tutor/coordinator or BFF contact. Learners may tell a trusted adult who helps them report. Use email, telephone, a meeting or a letter; do not require a special form. Historical concerns, especially safety concerns, are not automatically rejected because of delay.
- Discuss the concern where suitable and safe, hear the requested resolution and agree action. Aim to respond within 10 working days. If unresolved, serious, or the complainant prefers, move to Stage 2 without requiring completion of this stage.
- Record the concern, response, agreed action and follow-up, and check the record reflects the person's account. Assess anonymous concerns proportionately; limited contact may prevent a reply but must not prevent necessary safety action.

Stage 2 – Formal Complaint

- Send a formal complaint to an unimplicated CEO/authorised handler using the contacts below. Include what happened, dates, relevant evidence and the outcome sought where available. Accept an oral complaint and offer help to record it; do not reject it solely because writing or a full account is difficult.

BFF contacts: admin@bestfootforward.org.uk; Bethany Russell, beth@bestfootforward.org.uk / 07394 950803; Andrew Russell, andrew@bestfootforward.org.uk / 07538 719783.

Use a contact only where unimplicated. If a complaint concerns leadership, request the independent route rather than a decision by the subject or their spouse. Do not send sensitive case details to a person complained about merely to obtain permission.

- Acknowledge within 5 working days of receipt, confirming the handler, issues, appropriate route, support and planned response date. Working days mean Monday to Friday excluding public holidays in England, not school term days only. Explain necessary changes promptly; urgent protection must not wait.
- Investigate without undue delay: agree the issues, hear relevant accounts, review evidence and give the subject a fair chance to respond. Aim to issue the written outcome within 20 working days of receiving the formal complaint, in an accessible form. State which issues are upheld, partly upheld or not upheld, reasons, remedy/actions, owners, dates and appeal arrangements; protect confidential personnel information.
- If more time is reasonably needed, explain why, give a revised date and arrange updates before the deadline passes. Clarification, referral to another procedure or an external investigation must not cause unexplained delay; agree what can proceed safely. Keep the complainant informed without prejudicing statutory enquiries.

Stage 3 – Appeal

- Request an appeal/review within 10 working days of receiving the formal outcome, explaining grounds such as overlooked evidence, unfair handling or an unreasonable finding/remedy. Offer recording/access support and consider reasonable extensions for health, communication needs or delayed receipt.
- Appoint a competent impartial reviewer not previously involved, with authority to review the outcome. Use external review where no suitable internal person is available. A panel may be used if suitable people can actually be appointed; there is no assumed standing panel or two-person senior team. Check conflicts, expertise and availability; paid adviser status alone does not establish independence.
- Acknowledge the appeal within 5 working days and explain the reviewer, scope, evidence and arrangements. Offer a meeting with a supporter where helpful, or accessible written/remote participation. Aim to provide a reasoned written decision within 20 working days of receiving the appeal; explain delays and revised dates. The reviewer may uphold, vary or overturn findings or require further investigation/remedy.
- This is BFF's final internal stage. It does not remove statutory or contractual rights, access to independent advice, external reporting or applicable appeals. Internal complaints do not pause external deadlines; do not wait for this process if a legal deadline may apply.

6. Safeguarding and Specialist Complaints

- Act immediately under Child Protection and Safeguarding, Managing Allegations/Low-Level Concerns or Safeguarding Adults Procedures as appropriate. Contact an unimplicated safeguarding lead or relevant social care/police directly; call 999 for immediate danger. LADO is for allegations about people working with children, not every complaint or adult safeguarding concern. Seek relevant LADO advice promptly, within one working day where the harm threshold is met or may be met, and follow agency directions before substantive internal enquiries.
- Safety, required referrals and evidence preservation must not await informal resolution, a complaint outcome, CEO permission or an appeal. Coordinate service-quality issues with the safeguarding case without prejudicing enquiries. Use independent/direct statutory routes where leaders are implicated; an adviser's absence must not delay protection.

Data Protection Complaints

- BFF accepts concerns about how it handles personal data through the contacts in Stage 2 and routes them promptly to an unconflicted data-protection handler. No special wording or form is required. Aim to acknowledge within 5 working days and always meet the statutory 30-day acknowledgement deadline. Make appropriate enquiries, provide updates and communicate the outcome without undue delay. The 30 days is not a statutory resolution deadline.
- A data-protection complaint, SAR and other rights request have separate duties and clocks, even if raised together. The complaint/appeal stages do not extend a SAR deadline or delay breach response. Explain ICO escalation in the outcome; do not require all three BFF stages before ICO contact. Resolve conflicts where the data-protection contact is implicated; preserve the independence requirements in the Governance Framework.

7. External Escalation

The appropriate route depends on the issue and who commissioned provision. BFF can explain relevant contacts and share necessary information lawfully. Immediate safeguarding/statutory reporting does not require exhaustion of BFF stages:

- **Commissioning school or local authority:** raise placement, service-quality, funding or commissioning concerns with the responsible body. Complaints about that body's own actions use its procedure. A council's education/alternative-provision duties may fall within the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's remit, normally after the council process; this is not an automatic appeal body for every BFF complaint. See www.lgo.org.uk.
- **Ofsted:** only for matters within its inspection/regulatory remit. Do not present BFF's non-school provision as routinely Ofsted-regulated or Ofsted as an individual complaint appeal body. Concerns about a commissioning school follow that school's route and any applicable external process.
    - Current education complaint routes: www.gov.uk/complain-about-school.

- Ofsted remit and routes: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure.

- **Data protection:** raise the concern with BFF and, if unresolved or BFF does not respond appropriately, contact the ICO using its current route: ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint. An internal appeal is not a prerequisite to ICO contact.
- **SEND/EHCP decisions:** use the local authority's statutory routes and relevant SEND appeal rights, with SENDIASS/independent advice where needed. BFF cannot determine statutory EHCP appeals. Qualification/assessment concerns follow the registered centre and awarding body's applicable procedures. Preserve those deadlines and do not promise that BFF can change an external decision.

8. Confidentiality and Record-Keeping

- Log complaints securely under UK GDPR, Data Protection Act 2018 and BFF Data Protection/SAR and retention procedures. Use restricted approved case records, not general staff groups or ordinary DCPro learner reports. Record necessary child-protection information in CPOMS with appropriate access; staff safeguarding details remain restricted.
- Keep the issues, evidence/source, conflict checks, accounts, support/adjustments, enquiries, decisions, actions, updates and review outcomes. Retain only necessary information for documented lawful purposes; preserve active enquiry, complaint, SAR and legal-hold material. Closure alone does not authorise disposal. Check authority before disclosing another person's information, including to a representative.
- Review proportionate anonymised summaries for patterns, timeliness, equality, repeat issues and completed remedies. Share only necessary information with commissioners or other lawful recipients; explain reasons and outcomes without disclosing another person's confidential disciplinary or health details.

9. Monitoring and Review

- CEOs monitor complaints where unimplicated; leadership cases need suitable independent oversight. Do not assume an unappointed board or senior leadership panel exists. Verify each remedy/action, review date and owner, and check learner provision remains safe.
- Share relevant learning and completed changes without unnecessary identifying details. Make this policy and accessible complaint/contact routes available to learners, families, practitioners and commissioners. Record and review any proportionate communication limits needed for threats or abusive conduct; disability, repetition or disagreement alone must not block a complaint or safety report.
- Review annually and after significant cases or changes to roles, law, guidance or provision. Read with Governance and Accountability; Grievance/Disciplinary; Safeguarding/Managing Allegations/Low-Level Concerns; Adults Procedures; Whistleblowing; Inclusion and SEND; Equality; Data Protection/SAR and retention. October 2027 is the proposed next review. Confirm direct independent contacts and absence cover before issue.