



Cheshire Academies Trust
Inspiring hearts and minds

CAT Complaints Policy and Procedure

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1. Introduction

Cheshire Academies Trust is committed to working in positive partnership with the whole school community. Our shared goal, parents, carers and schools, is the education and wellbeing of every child. Most queries and concerns can be resolved quickly and informally through honest, respectful conversation, and our schools will always aim to do so.

This policy sets out how parents, carers and other members of the public can raise a concern or make a complaint about one of our schools or the Trust itself, and how we will respond. It applies to all schools within the Trust, including those across Cheshire, Wirral and Liverpool City Council areas.

This policy meets the requirements of Part 7 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2014 and reflects current best practice, including:

- the DfE's Best practice guidance for academies complaints procedures (updated 2025);
- the DfE/Parentkind/Ofsted School Guide to Parent Complaints (2025/26); and
- the Parent Guide to School Complaints (2025/26).

Employees raising a workplace concern

Employees should use the Trust's Grievance Policy or Whistleblowing Policy. This Complaints Policy is for parents, carers and members of the public.

2. Our principles

When handling a concern or complaint, the Trust and its schools will:

- encourage resolution at the earliest possible stage, and informally wherever it can be;
- make the procedure easy to find, simple to understand and accessible to all;
- act impartially, non-adversarially and respectfully;
- investigate fairly and, where necessary, independently;
- work to clear, published time limits and keep complainants informed of progress;
- respect confidentiality and ask that complainants do likewise (we ask that complaints are not raised, named or discussed on social media);
- address the points at issue and provide an appropriate response and, where due, redress;
- learn from complaints to improve our schools.

3. What this policy covers

This policy covers complaints about any provision of facilities or services that a school or the Trust provides, unless a separate statutory procedure applies. Separate procedures apply, and so this policy will not be used, for:

Matter	Where to find the right procedure
Child protection or safeguarding allegations	The school's Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy;
Exclusions / suspensions	DfE guidance on suspensions and permanent exclusions; the school's Behaviour and Exclusions policies.
Admissions appeals	The school's Admissions arrangements and the published appeals process.
Staff grievances	The Trust's Grievance Policy.
Staff conduct and disciplinary matters	The Trust's Disciplinary Policy. Outcomes are confidential and will not be shared with the complainant, although we will confirm the matter is being addressed.
Whistleblowing	The Trust's Whistleblowing Policy.
Subject Access Requests and Freedom of Information	The Trust's Data Protection Policy and FOI procedure.
Data Protection Complaints	The Trust's Data Protection Policy and Data Protection Complaints Procedure
Services provided by external organisations using school premises	The external provider's own complaints procedure.

Each school's website contains links to these related policies. If you are unsure which procedure applies, please contact the school office and we will direct you to the right one.

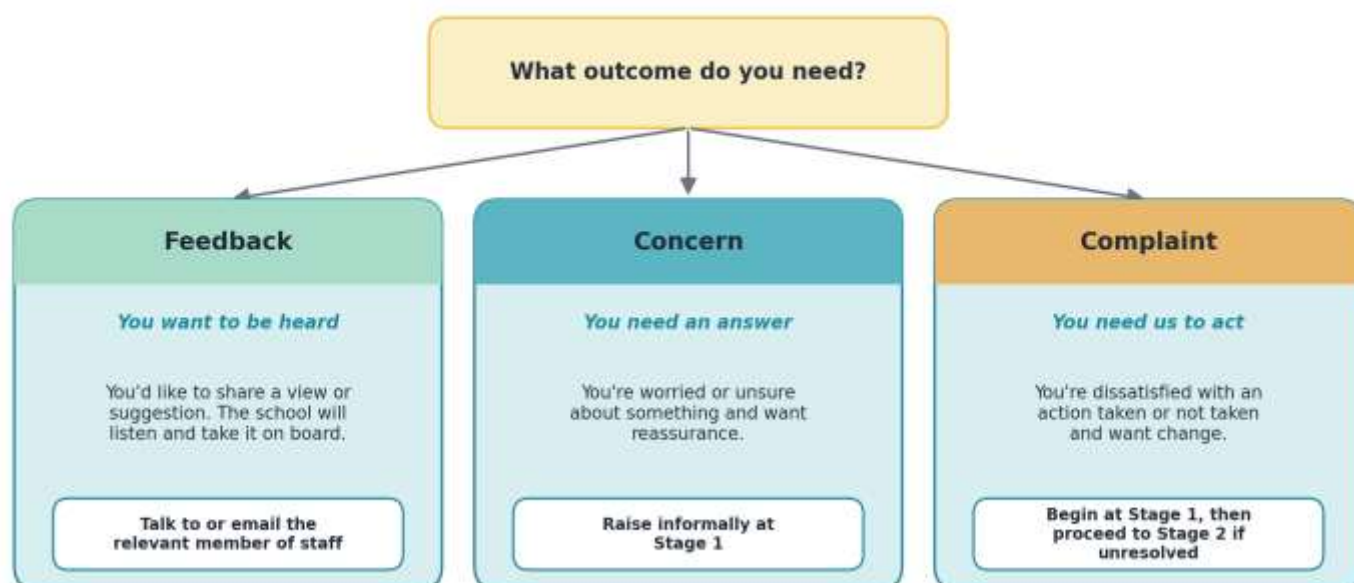
4. Feedback, a concern or a complaint?

Taking a moment to identify the nature of your issue helps us respond in the right way. Definitions are taken from DfE guidance and the Parentkind / Ofsted guides:

Type	What it means	What we will do
Feedback	You wish to share a view or suggestion, positive or otherwise, and want to be heard.	We will listen, thank you, share the feedback with the right person and, where appropriate, close the loop to let you know what (if anything) changed.
A concern	An expression of worry or doubt over an issue that matters to you, for which you are seeking reassurance.	We will take it seriously, investigate informally and respond promptly to provide reassurance or explanation.
A complaint	An expression of dissatisfaction with an action taken or a lack of action, where you are seeking change.	We will follow this Complaints Policy, beginning with Stage 1 informal resolution, and escalating only if you remain dissatisfied.

Is this feedback, a concern or a complaint?

Taking a moment to identify what you need helps the school respond in the right way.



Note: the Trust may treat correspondence as a formal complaint, even if you have not labelled it as one, where the content makes that the appropriate response. We will always tell you when we are doing so.

5. How to raise a concern or complaint

A concern or complaint may be made in person, by telephone, by email or in writing. It may be made by a third party acting on your behalf, provided we have your written consent.

If you are unsure who to contact, the table below sets out the most direct route. Each school publishes the relevant email addresses on its website.

Who do I contact, and how?

A quick guide to the right person at each stage of the process.

If your issue is...	Who to contact	Stage	How to send it
Day-to-day concern about your child's learning	Class teacher	Stage 1	Via the school office or at the end of the day
Concern not resolved by the class teacher, or a wider school concern	Headteacher	Stage 1	Via the school office
Concern still unresolved — you wish to make a formal complaint	Governance Director	Stage 2	Complete Appendix 1 and email to the Governance Director (Private & Confidential)
Dissatisfied with the Stage 2 outcome	Governance Director	Stage 3	Email the Governance Director to request a Panel hearing
All Trust stages completed, still dissatisfied with how the complaint was handled	Department for Education	Stage 4	Online form on GOV.UK ("Complain about a school")

Governance Director: debbie.tomkinson@cheshireacademiestrust.co.uk

Marking correspondence

Stage 1 informal concerns are raised with the class teacher or Headteacher via the school office. All formal complaints (Stage 2 and above) should be addressed to the Governance Director at debbie.tomkinson@cheshireacademiestrust.co.uk, marked Private and Confidential.

The Governance Director acts as the single intake point for formal complaints. They will route your complaint to the appropriate person to manage the relevant stage (see Sections 7 and 8). This protects everyone's confidentiality and ensures the complaint reaches the right person without delay.

Help with making a complaint

We will consider reasonable adjustments to enable you to access this procedure, for example, providing the policy or form in an alternative format, supporting you to complete the form, or holding meetings in accessible locations. If you need help completing the complaint form (Appendix 1), please contact the school office. You may also ask a third-party organisation such as Citizens Advice to support you.

Use of Artificial Intelligence when making a complaint

The school recognises that parents and carers may choose to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools (such as writing assistants) to help prepare a complaint. This is acceptable; however, it is important that any complaint submitted reflects your own views and experiences, and that the information provided is accurate and relevant to the matter being complained about. The school may request further information or clarification where necessary (such as where the nature of the complaint is unclear). The use of AI will not affect how a complaint is considered, provided that it is honest, clear, and based on genuine concerns.

6. Timescales

Complaints should be made within three months of the incident, or, where a series of related incidents has occurred, within three months of the most recent. We will consider complaints made outside this timeframe where exceptional circumstances apply.

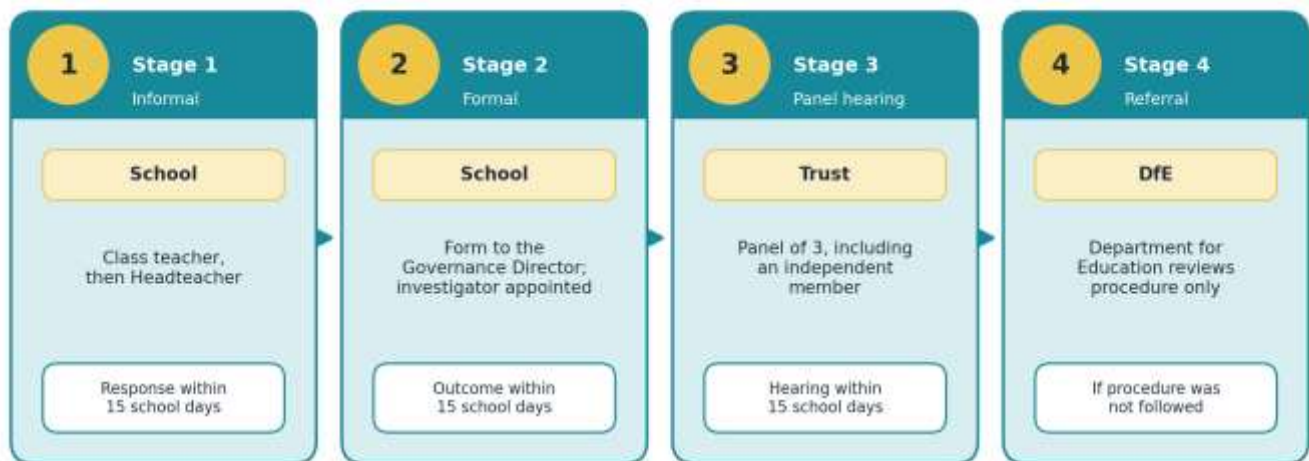
All references in this policy to "school days" mean days on which the school is open to pupils. We will keep you informed of progress at each stage. If a deadline cannot reasonably be met (for example during a school holiday or where further investigation is needed), we will tell you and set a new deadline.

7. The complaints procedure for parents and carers

There are four stages. Stage 1 is informal. Stages 2, 3 and 4 are formal. Stage 3 is the final stage of the trust's complaints procedure. We expect each stage to be completed before progression to the next; if a stage has been missed, we will refer you back to it.

How a complaint progresses

Most issues are resolved at Stage 1. Each stage builds on the last.



School days = days on which the school is open to pupils. Stages 2-4 are formal; Stage 1 is informal.

Stage 1: Informal: school

If you have a concern about any aspect of your child's education or welfare, please raise it first with the class teacher (or their line manager, or a senior leader). This is usually the quickest route to resolution. Contact may be made by phone, email, or by arranging a meeting through the school office.

If the concern is not resolved by the class teacher, please contact the Headteacher, who will investigate further and respond within fifteen school days of acknowledgment of the complaint.

Where your complaint is about the Headteacher, there is no requirement to discuss the matter with the Headteacher before raising a formal complaint. Please proceed directly to Stage 2; the Chair of the Local Governing Body's involvement in a complaint about the Headteacher is part of Stage 2, not Stage 1.

You have ten school days from receipt of the Stage 1 outcome to confirm whether you wish to escalate to Stage 2. If we do not hear from you within ten school days, we will deem the outcome accepted and close the case.

Stage 2: Formal investigation

If you remain dissatisfied after Stage 1, please complete the Complaint Form at Appendix 1 and email it to the Governance Director at debbie.tomkinson@cheshireacademiestrust.co.uk, marked Private and Confidential. The Governance Director is the single intake point for all formal complaints and will route yours to the correct person to manage Stage 2:

- for complaints about a member of staff or the school more broadly, the Chair of the Local Governing Body;
- for complaints about the Headteacher, a governor, the Chair, the Local Governing Body, the CEO, an individual Trustee or the Chair of Trustees, the appropriate person identified in Section 8.

On receipt of the form, the responsible person will:

- acknowledge receipt within five school days;
- consult with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), who acts only as an adviser at this stage and will not investigate, to identify the most appropriate investigator;
- confirm the investigator's identity in writing to you, the Headteacher and the CEO; and
- consider any reasonable representation from you that you would have difficulty engaging with a particular investigator, and identify an alternative if appropriate.

The investigator will:

- invite you to submit witness statements in support of your complaint;
- interview those involved (with the offer of being accompanied) and keep written notes;
- complete the investigation within fifteen school days of acknowledgment of the complaint
- provide a written outcome to you and the Headteacher, explaining the findings and any actions, and how to escalate to Stage 3 if you remain dissatisfied.

You have ten school days from receipt of the Stage 2 outcome to confirm whether you wish to escalate to Stage 3. If we do not hear from you within ten school days, we will deem the outcome accepted and close the case.

Stage 3: Trust Complaints Panel

If you remain dissatisfied after Stage 2, please write to the Governance Director at debbie.tomkinson@cheshireacademiestrust.co.uk, who will inform the CEO that you wish to progress to Stage 3.

Your escalation request will be acknowledged within five school days. A Complaints Panel will then be convened to hear the complaint ordinarily within fifteen school days. The Panel will:

- consist of at least three people, none of whom has had any direct involvement in the matter;
- include at least one member who is independent of the management and running of the school concerned; and
- ordinarily include at least one member of the Trust Board (subject to the exceptions in Section 8).

Neither the Headteacher, the member of staff complained about, nor the Chair of the Local Governing Body of the relevant school may sit on the Panel.

The Panel:

- considers the issues and merits of the complaint afresh, it does not simply check that procedure was followed at Stage 2;

- regulates its own procedure, appropriate to the nature of the complaint;
- will invite you to attend the hearing; you may be accompanied if you wish;
- is clerked, and you and the school may bring witnesses where appropriate; and
- will issue a written decision, with findings and recommendations, within ten school days of the hearing.

The decision is sent to you, to anyone who is the subject of the complaint, and to the Headteacher. Findings and recommendations are available for inspection on the school premises by the proprietor (the Trust) and the Headteacher.

Recording of meetings

Panel hearings are not audio- or video-recorded. This will be confirmed at the start of the hearing. If a complainant nevertheless records the meeting, the recording will not be considered as part of the complaint. We may, exceptionally, agree to a recording in advance as a reasonable adjustment.

Stage 4: Referral to the Department for Education

The Trust Complaints Panel is the final internal stage. If, having completed Stages 1 to 3, you believe your complaint was not handled in accordance with this published procedure, you may refer the matter to the Department for Education (DfE).

Important: what the DfE will and will not do

The DfE will consider whether the Trust has followed its published complaints procedure. The DfE will not:

- re-investigate the substance of the original complaint;
- overturn the Panel's decision;
- review the accuracy of minutes or documents;
- order an apology, compensation, discipline of staff or pupils.

The DfE will not consider complaints about fines or term-time leave, the absence of compensation or apologies, or the behaviour of school staff (other than as part of reviewing whether procedure was followed).

Online: GOV.UK – "Complain about a school" service.

By post:

Ministerial and Public Communications Division
Department for Education
Piccadilly Gate, Store Street
Manchester, M1 2WD

8. Complaints involving specific roles

Where a complaint concerns the Headteacher, a governor, the entire Local Governing Body, the CEO, a Trustee or the Board of Trustees, the procedure adapts so that the matter is not investigated or heard by the

people complained about. The table below sets out who manages each stage in those cases, it replaces the standard routes in Section 7 only for the role concerned.

Complaint is about...	Stage 2: Formal investigation	Stage 3: Panel hearing
The Headteacher	A suitably skilled governor (appointed by the Chair of the Local Governing Body in consultation with the CEO) carries out the investigation.	Standard Stage 3 Panel applies. Neither the Headteacher nor the Chair of the Local Governing Body may sit on the Panel.
An individual governor	The Governance Director in consultation with the CEO arranges for the investigation by a suitably skilled, impartial governor not connected with the matter.	Standard Stage 3 Panel applies. The governor concerned may not sit on the Panel.
The Chair, the Vice Chair (jointly), or the majority / entirety of the Local Governing Body	Escalated to the CEO, who appoints an appropriate investigator (which may be an independent person).	Heard by Trustees together with an independent panel member.
The CEO or an individual Trustee	Investigated by the Chair of the Trust Board (or the Vice Chair, where the complaint concerns the Chair).	Standard Stage 3 Panel applies, drawn so that no one with prior involvement sits on it.
Both the Chair and Vice Chair of Trustees jointly, or the majority / entirety of the Trust Board	Investigated by a wholly independent investigator commissioned by the Trust.	Heard by a wholly independent committee panel.

In all cases, the principle from Part 7 of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2014 is met: the Stage 3 Panel has at least three members, none of whom has had direct involvement in the matters complained about, and at least one of whom is independent of the management and running of the school.

9. Complaints from members of the public (non-parents and non-carers)

We welcome and take seriously concerns from people who are not the parent or carer of a pupil at the school. Anyone may raise a concern about the school or the Trust.

Please raise your concern with the Headteacher in the first instance, by contacting the school office. If you remain dissatisfied with the response, please write to the Chair of the Local Governing Body, marked Private and Confidential, via the school office. The Chair will:

- consult with the CEO on the most appropriate person to investigate;
- ensure an investigation is carried out; and
- respond in writing within fifteen school days.

There is no automatic right of internal appeal beyond this stage for non-parents. However, the Trust will handle all complaints from members of the public respectfully and expediently in line with the principles in Section 2 of this policy.

10. How we investigate

At each stage, the person investigating will:

- establish what has happened so far and who has been involved;
- clarify the nature of the complaint and what remains unresolved;
- contact you to clarify any uncertainty, and ask what outcome would put things right for you;
- interview those involved (offering them the opportunity to be accompanied);
- conduct interviews with an open mind, ask probing questions where appropriate, and keep written notes;
- consider all the evidence fairly before reaching a conclusion.

An acknowledgement that something could have been handled better is not the same as an admission of unlawful or negligent action. Investigators will take care to distinguish between the two.

11. How we try to resolve complaints

At each stage we will keep in mind that resolution is the goal. Where a complaint is upheld in whole or in part, an appropriate response may include one or more of the following:

- an apology;
- an explanation of why something happened the way it did;
- an acknowledgement that the situation could have been handled differently or better;
- an assurance that the matter complained of will not recur;
- an explanation of the steps already taken to prevent recurrence;
- a commitment to review the policy or practice in light of the complaint.

Our approach: listening with care

Our staff follow the CLEAR approach recommended in the DfE/Parentkind/Ofsted school guide:

- **Categorise:** is this feedback, a concern or a complaint?
- **Listen:** give time, ask open questions, reflect back what we have heard.
- **Empathise:** validate emotions without prejudging the issue.
- **Ask:** agree together what will happen next.
- **Respond:** document, deliver and close the loop.

This is how we will respond to you. We ask, in return, that communication with our staff is respectful, criticism of the issue is welcome; personal abuse or threats are not.

12. Serial, persistent and vexatious complaints

There may be occasions where, despite all stages of this procedure having been completed, a complainant remains dissatisfied and nothing further can reasonably be done. If a complainant then tries to re-open the same (or substantially the same) issue, the Trust may, in line with DfE guidance, conclude that the matter is closed and may restrict further correspondence on that subject.

A complaint or pattern of contact may be treated as serial, persistent or vexatious where it meets one or more of the criteria set out in the Trust's separate Policy for Managing Serial and Vexatious Complaints (available on the Trust website). Indicators include:

- repeated correspondence about a matter that has been answered through all stages of the procedure;
- insistence on pursuing unmeritorious complaints, or meritorious complaints in an unreasonable manner;
- complaints designed to cause disruption, annoyance or harm;
- threats or insulting personal comments towards staff;
- demands for redress that lack any serious purpose or value.

Exercising the right to refer a complaint to an MP or to the DfE is not, by itself, a basis for treating a complainant as serial or persistent.

How we restrict contact

The decision to apply restrictions is taken jointly by the Headteacher, the Chair of the Local Governing Body and the CEO, and only as a last resort. We follow a two-step approach:

- **Step 1:** we issue a written warning explaining that, if the behaviour continues, the matter will be deemed serial or vexatious and contact will be restricted.
- **Step 2:** if the behaviour continues, we apply tailored restrictions, for example: a single named point of contact; contact in writing only via a specified email address; meetings limited to two members of staff; calls directed to a specific person. We will continue to provide statutory information about your child.

Where correspondence becomes threatening or harassing, we will consider involvement of the police and may seek action under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. In serious cases, the Headteacher may bar an individual from school premises; that decision will be reviewed by the Chair of the Local Governing Body or a governors' committee.

13. Complaint campaigns

Occasionally the Trust or a school may receive a large volume of complaints on the same subject from individuals unconnected with the school. In those circumstances we may, in line with DfE guidance:

- send a template response to all complainants on the same subject; and / or
- publish a single response on the school or Trust website.

Complainants who remain dissatisfied will be signposted to the DfE, as set out at Stage 4.

14. Recording, confidentiality and data protection

We will keep a written record of all complaints made under Stage 2 and above, including:

- whether the complaint was resolved through the formal procedure or proceeded to a Panel hearing;
- the action taken as a result, regardless of whether the complaint was upheld.

All correspondence, statements and records relating to individual complaints are kept confidential except where the Secretary of State, or a body conducting an inspection under section 109 of the Education and Skills Act 2008, requests access to them.

Records are held in line with the Trust's Records Retention Schedule, and processed in accordance with the UK GDPR, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. You may request copies of records relating to your complaint, subject to any necessary redactions to protect third-party data.

15. Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, the Trust will consider reasonable adjustments to enable complainants to access and complete this procedure. Examples include providing information in alternative formats, supporting you to put a complaint in writing, holding meetings in accessible locations, and arranging for interpreters or advocates where helpful. Please let the school office know what would help you.

16. Publication and review

This policy is published on the Trust website and on the website of each school within the Trust, and is provided to anyone who asks for it in hard copy. It will be reviewed at least every two years, or sooner if new statutory guidance or legislation requires.

Next scheduled review: Autumn 2026.

Appendix 1: Formal Complaint Form (Parents and Carers)

This form is for use when a concern has not been resolved informally and you wish to raise a formal complaint at Stage 2, in accordance with this Complaints Policy.

Please complete and return to: debbie.tomkinson@cheshireacademiestrust.co.uk

Section 1: Informal resolution

To handle complaints fairly and effectively, each stage of this procedure must be completed before moving to the next. If a stage has been missed, your complaint will be returned to the appropriate stage and will not progress until the steps have been followed.

Stage 1: Meeting with the class teacher (or their line manager / senior leader)

Date of meeting and brief outline of the discussion:

Stage 1: Meeting with the Headteacher

Date of meeting and brief outline of the discussion:

If your complaint is about the Headteacher, this stage does not apply, please leave this section blank and proceed to Section 2. The Chair of the Local Governing Body's involvement is part of Stage 2, not Stage 1.

Section 2: Complainant details

Your name	
Your child's name and year group	
Address	
Telephone	
Email	
Preferred method of contact (please tick)	☐ Email ☐ Phone ☐ Post

Section 3: Formal complaint details

Please provide a clear description of your complaint. To help our investigation, please give as much detail as possible, including a timeline of events where relevant, and explain why you remain dissatisfied with the response received at Stage 1.

Section 4: Evidence

Please list and attach any documents or evidence you wish to be considered:

Section 5: Desired outcome

Please tell us what resolution or outcome you are seeking. This helps us focus our investigation.

Section 6: Declaration

I confirm that the information I have provided is accurate to the best of my knowledge, and that I submit this complaint in accordance with the Trust's Complaints Policy.

Signature	
Print name	
Date	

All processing of information under this complaints procedure is carried out in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000.