



Oakswood College

Empowering Through Education



Whistleblowing

Policy

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE • ENSURING COMPLIANCE
SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITY



GOVERNANCE



QUALITY



COMPLIANCE



EXCELLENCE



(Trading name of Oakswood Group Ltd)

Whistleblowing Policy

Document Control & Version History

Document Title	Whistleblowing Policy
Document Type	Governance Policy
Policy Owner	Head of Governance, Quality, Compliance & Information Systems
Accountable Officer	Chief Executive Officer
Approved By	Board of Governors
Approval Date	18 March 2026
Effective From	18 March 2026
Review Cycle	Triennial
Next Review Date	18 March 2029
Applies To	Board of Governors, Chief Executive Officer, Senior Leadership Team, all staff, agency workers, contractors, consultants, volunteers, students, and individuals associated with Oakswood College
Version	1.0
Supersedes	New Policy
Related Policies	Conflict of Interest Policy; Financial Fraud Policy; Ethics and Values Policy; Safeguarding Policy; Staff Code of Conduct; Procedural Integrity and Fairness Policy
Related Appendices	Appendix A: Whistleblowing Disclosure Form Appendix B: Whistleblowing Investigation Record Form Appendix C: Whistleblowing Concern Notification Form
Document Location	Oakswood College Policy Repository
Regulatory Reference	Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998; Employment Rights Act 1996; Office for Students (OfS) Conditions of Registration; UK higher education governance and accountability good practice

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1. Statement and Purpose

Oakswood College is committed to fostering a culture of openness, integrity, and accountability in all aspects of its work. We encourage everyone within our community to speak up when they have genuine concerns about wrongdoing, and we take all such concerns seriously. This policy exists to provide a clear, safe, and confidential route for raising concerns that are in the public interest.

- Oakswood College is committed to conducting its activities with honesty, transparency, and in accordance with the highest ethical standards. This policy reflects that commitment by providing a formal mechanism for raising serious concerns about wrongdoing within the College.
- All disclosures made under this policy will be handled confidentially, fairly, and in a timely manner, and in accordance with the procedures set out below.
- It is important to note that personal grievances and complaints are not covered by this policy or by whistleblowing law. Concerns of a personal nature, such as those relating to an individual's own employment, working conditions, or treatment, should be raised through the Staff Grievance Procedure. This policy is concerned only with disclosures made in the public interest.
- Any person who raises a concern in good faith under this policy will be protected from detriment or victimisation, even if the concern is subsequently found to be unsubstantiated. The College recognises that it takes courage to raise a concern and that individuals should not suffer any disadvantage as a result of doing so.
- Malicious or knowingly false disclosures will not be tolerated and may result in disciplinary action. The protections afforded by this policy apply only to those acting honestly and in good faith.
- Settlement agreements entered into with the College do not and cannot prevent any individual from making a protected disclosure in the public interest. Any clause purporting to do so has no legal effect under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998.

This policy supports disclosures relating to serious concerns including, but not limited to:

- Fraud, financial malpractice or corruption
- Breaches of legal or regulatory duties
- Criminal offences or suspected criminal activity
- Risks to health, safety or the environment
- Abuse of authority or unethical conduct
- Concealment of any of the above

1.1 Legal Framework

- The Employment Rights Act 1996, as amended by the Public Interest Disclosure Act (PIDA) 1998, provides the right for a worker to take a case to an employment tribunal if they have been victimised at work or lost their job because they have blown the whistle. Whistleblowing law protects workers who make qualifying disclosures in the public interest.
- The Bribery Act 2010 provides the legal framework for preventing, detecting and addressing bribery and corruption. Oakswood College is committed to compliance with the Bribery Act and operates a separate Anti-Bribery and Corruption Policy in support of this commitment.
- The Office for Students (OfS) initial condition of registration E7 requires registered higher education providers to have in place adequate and effective arrangements for identifying and managing risk, including appropriate whistleblowing arrangements. This policy is maintained in fulfilment of that condition, and in support of the overarching governance condition E1.
- Workers considering making a disclosure may wish to seek independent guidance from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) at acas.org.uk, or refer to the Government's guidance for whistleblowers gov.uk/whistleblowing.

2. Regulations

This policy is maintained in accordance with the following legislative and regulatory framework. Individuals are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the protections and obligations set out below.

- Workers may wish to refer to the Government's published guidance for whistleblowers at gov.uk/whistleblowing to understand what constitutes a protected disclosure and to verify that a personal grievance is not generally regarded as qualifying under whistleblowing law.
- Workers may also contact the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) for independent guidance on whistleblowing and grievances. ACAS can be reached at acas.org.uk or by telephone on 0300 123 1100.
- Where a disclosure relates to the conduct of an awarding body, qualification fraud, or matters regulated by Ofqual, individuals should refer to Ofqual's complaints and whistleblowing procedure at gov.uk/government/organisations/Ofqual.

- Where an individual believes that an internal resolution is not possible or appropriate, they may make a disclosure to a prescribed person. The relevant prescribed person for higher education matters is the Office for Students (OfS). A full list of prescribed persons and bodies is published by the Government at gov.uk/government/publications/blowing-the-whistle-list-of-prescribed-people-and-bodies.

3. Scope

This policy applies to all of the following individuals engaged with Oakswood College:

- All staff, including full-time, part-time and casual employees
- Members of the Board of Governors and its committees
- External examiners and assessors
- Consultants and contractors
- Casual workers including agency workers
- Volunteers

Students are not covered by this policy. Students who wish to raise concerns about wrongdoing or poor practice are directed to the Student Complaints Procedure. Where a student concern relates to a matter of serious public interest, the College will consider it under the most appropriate available procedure and will advise the student accordingly.

To be covered by this policy, the concern disclosed must be in the public interest. Information disclosed under this policy would usually relate to one or more of the following:

- A criminal offence
- Failure to comply with a legal obligation or the College's governing instruments
- A miscarriage of justice
- Danger to health and safety or the environment
- Attempts to deliberately conceal any of the above

This policy is not designed to provide a route through which individuals can question financial, or business decisions appropriately taken by the College. It also cannot be used to obtain a personal advantage or outcome for the individual raising the concern.

If an individual wants to raise a concern or bring a complaint or grievance that relates to their own personal position, they should use the Staff Grievance Procedure. If in doubt as to whether a concern falls under this policy or another procedure, individuals are encouraged to seek guidance from the Designated Officer before making a formal disclosure.

3.1 Definitions

- **Whistleblowing:** The disclosure of information which relates to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work, made in the public interest.
- **Protected Disclosure:** A qualifying disclosure made in the public interest, as defined under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, relating to one or more of the categories listed in the Scope section above.
- **Designated Officer:** The nominated senior member of staff responsible for receiving, assessing and overseeing the investigation of disclosures made under this policy. At Oakwood College, the Designated Officer is the Registrar.
- **Complainant / Whistleblower:** Any individual covered by this policy who raises a concern in good faith under these procedures. **Worker:** For the purposes of this policy and whistleblowing law, a worker includes employees, casual workers, agency workers, contractors and others engaged to perform work or services for the College.
- **Unethical conduct:** Behaviour that falls below the standards of integrity, honesty and professional conduct expected of all individuals within the Oakwood College community, including but not limited to misuse of authority, conflicts of interest, dishonesty, and conduct that brings the College into disrepute.
- **Abuse of authority:** The misuse of a position of power or trust within the College to gain personal advantage, to harm others, or to circumvent established policies and procedures.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

Oakwood College has designated the following escalation structure for the receipt and management of disclosures made under this policy. Disclosures should be directed to the most appropriate person at the relevant stage, as set out below.

Stage	Role	When to Use
First contact	Line Manager or Head of Department	First point of call for all concerns where appropriate
Designated Officer	Head of GQC and IS	Where the line manager is implicated, or informal resolution is not possible
Senior Escalation	CEO / Accountable Officer	Where the Registrar is implicated or unavailable
Highest Escalation	Chair of the Board of Governors	Where the CEO is implicated or unavailable
External	Office for Students, Police, or another prescribed person	Where internal routes are exhausted or inappropriate

Where a conflict of interest exists at any stage, the individual raising the concern must bypass that level and proceed directly to the next appropriate person in the escalation structure.

The Head of Governance, Quality, Compliance & Information Systems is the Designated Officer for the purposes of this policy and carries the following responsibilities:

- Receiving and acknowledging all formal disclosures made under this policy
- Determining whether a concern falls within the scope of this policy
- Appointing an independent investigator where a full investigation is required
- Communicating decisions and outcomes to the complainant in a timely manner
- Maintaining a confidential record of all disclosures, actions taken, and outcomes
- Reporting an anonymised summary of disclosures to the Board of Governors annually

Where the Designated Officer is unable for any reason to perform their functions in accordance with this Policy, the Chair of the Board of Governors will nominate an alternative individual to perform this role.

The Board of Governors is responsible for:

- Approving this policy and ensuring it remains fit for purpose
- Receiving the annual anonymised summary report from the Registrar
- Overseeing the College's commitment to a culture of openness and accountability
- Acting as the final internal escalation point where a concern involves the CEO

Whistleblowing Champion

The Chair of Board of Governors or alternatively, another Governor nominated by the Board of Governors, will act as Whistleblowing Champion for the College, with responsibility for visibly promoting the principles of this policy, supporting those who raise concerns, and ensuring the Board takes its oversight responsibilities seriously.

All line managers and Heads of Department are responsible for:

- Creating an open environment in which concerns can be raised without fear
- Receiving concerns appropriately and referring them promptly to the Designated Officer where they cannot be resolved informally
- Completing training on whistleblowing awareness and their responsibilities under this policy
- Never discouraging, penalising or victimising any individual for raising a concern in good faith

All staff covered by this policy are expected to:

- Raise concerns promptly where they reasonably believe wrongdoing has occurred or is likely to occur
- Cooperate with any investigation carried out under this policy
- Maintain confidentiality regarding any disclosure they become aware of

5. Assurances

5.1 Leadership and Governance

The Board of Governors of Oakwood College takes malpractice and wrongdoing extremely seriously and is fully committed to this policy. The Board expects all members of the College community to uphold the highest standards of conduct and to feel safe in raising genuine concerns without fear of consequence. The College's leadership team, at all levels, is expected to demonstrate through their behaviour and decisions that disclosures are welcomed and that a culture of openness and accountability is actively maintained.

5.2 Protections for Those Raising Concerns

Any individual who raises a genuine concern under this policy will not be at risk of suffering any detriment as a result of doing so. This protection applies whether or not the concern is subsequently substantiated, provided the disclosure was made honestly and in good faith.

- No individual will be subject to dismissal, disciplinary action, demotion, harassment, or any other form of disadvantage as a result of raising a concern under this policy.

- Any individual found to have victimised, penalised or subjected another person to detriment as a result of a disclosure made under this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, which may include dismissal.
- A finding that a concern was unsubstantiated following investigation does not automatically mean that the disclosure was made maliciously. The College will always consider the circumstances in which a concern was raised before taking any action against the individual who raised it.
- Any individual who abuses this policy by raising a concern they do not reasonably believe to be true may be liable to disciplinary action.

5.3 Support for Whistleblowers

The College recognises that raising a concern can be a stressful and difficult experience. Oakwood College is committed to supporting individuals throughout the process in the following ways:

- Access to confidential counselling and wellbeing support will be made available to any individual who raises a concern under this policy, upon request.
- The Designated Officer will ensure that the complainant's expectations regarding feedback, timescales and possible outcomes are clearly managed from the outset of the process.
- Where a disclosure has affected working relationships, the College will consider the use of mediation or other dispute resolution mechanisms to support the rebuilding of trust and positive working relationships.
- A written summary of any meeting held with the complainant will be produced and provided to the complainant for their records.

5.4 Confidentiality

The College encourages concerns to be raised openly where possible. However, the College recognises that individuals may wish to raise concerns in confidence and will take all reasonable steps to protect the identity of a complainant where this is requested.

- All individuals involved in the handling or investigation of a disclosure are required to treat information received in the strictest confidence and must not disclose it beyond those who need to know for the purposes of the investigation.
- Complainants should be aware that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in all circumstances. Where the nature of the investigation requires the disclosure of the complainant's identity, or where the College is required by law to reveal it, the College will inform the complainant in advance wherever possible.

- Complainants should also be aware that even where confidentiality is maintained by the College, colleagues may speculate about the identity of the person who has raised a concern. The College will take all reasonable steps to prevent this but cannot guarantee it will not occur.

5.5 Anonymous Disclosures

Anonymous disclosures are generally discouraged, as they make it significantly more difficult for the College to establish whether a concern is genuine, to investigate it effectively, and to provide feedback and protection to the individual concerned.

- The College will nonetheless give appropriate consideration to anonymous disclosures and will investigate where it is practicable to do so, having regard to the seriousness of the concern and the information available.
- Where a disclosure is made anonymously, the College's ability to provide feedback on the outcome of any investigation will be limited.
- Individuals who raise concerns anonymously should be aware that it may be more difficult for them to qualify for the legal protections afforded by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, as there would be no documentary evidence linking them to the disclosure.
- Individuals wishing to raise a concern anonymously may do so in writing to the Designated Officer.

5.6 Internal and External Disclosure

Internal Disclosure

Oakwood College hopes that this policy provides the reassurance needed for concerns to be raised internally in the first instance. Internal disclosure allows the College to investigate promptly, ask follow-up questions and take corrective action at the earliest opportunity.

External Disclosure

- The College recognises that there may be circumstances, including where criminal activity is involved, or where internal routes have been exhausted or are not appropriate, in which an individual may properly report concerns to an external body.

Relevant Prescribed Persons

- The primary prescribed person for higher education matters is the Office for Students (OfS). Other relevant prescribed persons may include the Police, the National Audit Office, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, and the Department for Education, depending on the nature of the concern.

- A full list of prescribed persons is available at:
[gov.uk/government/publications/blowing-the-whistle-list-of-prescribed-people-and-bodies](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/blowing-the-whistle-list-of-prescribed-people-and-bodies).

Disclosures to the media

- Individuals should be aware that disclosures made to the media will in most circumstances result in the loss of legal protections under whistleblowing law. Media disclosure should be considered only as an absolute last resort, and individuals are strongly advised to seek independent legal advice before doing so.

6. Procedures

6.1 Raising a Concern

Individuals are encouraged to raise concerns as promptly as possible. Early disclosure allows the College to investigate effectively and to take corrective action at the earliest opportunity. At the point of raising a concern, it is not necessary to have firm evidence. It is sufficient that the individual has reasonable grounds to believe that wrongdoing has occurred, is occurring, or is likely to occur.

- As a first step, individuals are encouraged to raise their concern informally with their Line Manager or Head of Department, where it is appropriate to do so. In many cases, concerns can be addressed and resolved at this stage without the need for formal procedures.
- Where informal resolution is not possible, or where the concern involves the individual's line manager, the concern must be reported formally to the Designated Officer (Head of Governance, Quality, Compliance & Information Systems). Concerns should wherever possible be submitted in writing, providing as much detail as possible including the nature of the concern, the individuals involved, relevant dates, and any supporting information available.
- Where the individual would prefer to raise their concern verbally in the first instance, they may request a meeting with the Designated Officer. A written summary of that meeting will be produced by the Designated Officer and a copy provided to the complainant.
- The complainant has the right to be accompanied by a trade union representative / work colleague / both at any meeting held in connection with their disclosure. The accompanying person must respect the confidentiality of the disclosure and any subsequent proceedings.

- Where the concern relates to the Designated Officer (Registrar), it must be reported directly to the CEO / Accountable Officer.
- Where the concern relates to both the Designated Officer and the CEO, it must be reported directly to the Chair of the Board of Governors.
- The College will acknowledge receipt of all formal disclosures within 5 working days.

6.2 The Investigation

Initial Review

Upon receipt of a formal disclosure, the Designated Officer will conduct an initial review to determine whether the concern falls within the scope of this policy or whether it should be directed to another procedure such as the Staff Grievance Procedure or Staff Disciplinary Procedure.

- The Designated Officer will be supported in this initial review by a member of administrative staff, normally from HR.
- The complainant will be informed of the Designated Officer's decision regarding eligibility within 10 working days of acknowledgement of their disclosure.
- If the concern does not fall within the scope of this policy, the complainant will be advised of the most appropriate alternative procedure and directed accordingly.

Full Investigation

Where the Designated Officer determines that the concern falls within the scope of this policy, they will determine the appropriate course of action, which may comprise an initial review only, an internal audit, or a full investigation, having regard to the nature and seriousness of the concern.

- The Designated Officer will nominate an independent investigator to conduct the investigation. The investigator must have had no prior involvement in the matters under investigation and must have no personal interest in the outcome.
- The scope and timescale of the investigation will be determined by the Designated Officer with reference to the nature of the concern and other relevant factors. The College will aim to complete all investigations within 30 working days of the decision to proceed. Where this is not possible, the complainant will be notified in writing with a revised timescale and the reasons for the extension.
- The complainant will receive a progress update at least every 10 working days throughout the investigation.
- The complainant is expected to cooperate fully with the investigation, including providing evidence, answering questions, and attending meetings as required.

- The subject or subjects of the disclosure will be informed that a concern has been raised and will be provided with the opportunity to respond to the evidence. In circumstances where there are wellbeing or evidential reasons to delay such notification, the Designated Officer may exercise discretion as to the timing of this step.

Investigation Report

Upon conclusion of the investigation, the investigator will produce a written report setting out their findings and recommendations, which will be submitted to the Designated Officer. Based on this report, the Designated Officer will determine the appropriate outcome, which may include one or more of the following:

- A finding of no case to answer
- Further investigation by the Designated Officer or nominees
- An internal investigation by the College's responsible committee
- A report to the Office for Students, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, the Department for Education, the National Audit Office, or another relevant public authority
- A report to the Police

The complainant will be informed of the outcome of the investigation in writing, subject to any legal constraints on the disclosure of information.

6.3 Appeals

Where the Designated Officer determines that there is no case to answer and the complainant believes that due process has not been followed, they may appeal the decision in writing to the Chair of the Board of Governors within 10 working days of receiving written notification of the outcome.

- The appeal will be considered by an independent person who has had no prior involvement in the investigation at any stage. Where necessary, this may include a Governor or an external independent party nominated by the Chair.
- The role of the appeals reviewer is to determine whether due process has been followed, not to re-investigate the substance of the original concern.
- Where the appeals reviewer finds that due process has not been followed, they will report their findings to the Audit and Risk Committee for close scrutiny, or directly to the full Board of Governors with recommendations for further action, as deemed appropriate by the appeals review given the circumstances of the case.

- Where a complainant believes they have been unfairly treated as a result of raising a disclosure, they may seek resolution through the ACAS Early Conciliation service prior to making any claim to an Employment Tribunal. ACAS can be contacted at acas.org.uk/conciliation or on 0300 123 1100.
- Independent persons must be involved at each stage of the process. Any person who has been involved at an earlier stage must not participate in a subsequent stage of the same case.

6.4 Appeal Timeframe Commitments

Stage	Timeframe
Acknowledgement of disclosure	Within 5 working days
Initial review decision communicated	Within 10 working days of acknowledgement
Full investigation completed	Within 30 working days (extendable with written notification)
Progress updates during investigation	At least every 10 working days
Appeal outcome communicated	Within 10 working days of appeal submission

7. Communication

Having a policy in place is only effective if those it is intended to protect are aware of it and know how to use it. Oakwood College will therefore regularly take steps as outlined below to ensure that this policy is widely known, clearly understood, and easily accessible to all individuals covered by it.

This policy will be communicated through the following channels:

Publication

- This policy is a public document and will be published on the Oakwood College website, where it can be accessed by all staff, governors, contractors and other relevant parties at any time.

Staff Induction

- All new staff will be introduced to this policy as part of their induction programme.
- A summary of the policy and the procedure for raising a concern will be included in the Staff Handbook, which all staff are issued with and required to confirm they have read within 2 weeks of commencing their post at Oakwood College.

Training

- General awareness training on whistleblowing, the protections available, and the College's procedures will be provided to all staff. This training will be refreshed on an annual basis as part of the College's compliance and governance calendar to ensure it remains current and to capture any new starters.
- Additional training will be provided to all line managers, Heads of Department and the Designated Officer on how to receive, handle and escalate disclosures appropriately. This training will give designated contacts the knowledge and confidence to respond to disclosures professionally and sensitively. Whistleblowing awareness will also be incorporated into the College's disciplinary and grievance training for managers.

Awareness Initiatives

- Line managers and Heads of Department are expected to hold team-level briefings to communicate the key principles of this policy to their teams, particularly following any update or review of the policy.
- Promotional notices highlighting the College's commitment to openness and the availability of this policy will be displayed on campus in appropriate locations.

Whistleblowing Champion

- Whistleblowing Champion: Chair of Board of Governors or nominated Governor will play an active role in promoting a culture in which concerns are welcomed, and individuals feel safe to speak up, modelling the behaviours expected across the College community.

7.1 Monitoring and Review Arrangements

- This policy will be reviewed every three years by the Designated Officer in consultation with the Board of Governors, legal advisors, and operational leaders. A review may be triggered earlier where there are changes to relevant legislation, OfS requirements, or sector guidance that necessitate an update.
- The Designated Officer will maintain a confidential record of all concerns raised under this policy, including the nature of each disclosure, the action taken, and the outcome. This record will be used to identify trends, areas of risk, and opportunities to strengthen the College's procedures.
- An anonymised summary of all disclosures received, actions taken, and outcomes will be reported to the Board of Governors on an annual basis. This report will inform the Board's oversight of the policy's effectiveness and the College's broader governance and risk management arrangements.
- The College will periodically seek to understand the experience of individuals who have raised concerns under this policy, in order to assess whether the process worked well and to identify improvements.

- Updates to this policy will be made in consultation with legal advisors, the Board of Governors, and operational leaders, and will be communicated to all staff promptly following approval.

8. Associated Policies

This policy should be read in conjunction with the following College policies and procedures. Where a concern does not fall within the scope of this policy, individuals will be directed to the most appropriate alternative procedure.

- **Staff Grievance Procedure:** for concerns of a personal nature relating to an individual's own employment, working conditions or treatment.
- **Student Complaints Policy:** for concerns raised by students that fall outside the scope of this policy.
- **Staff Disciplinary Procedure:** which may be engaged where an investigation under this policy identifies conduct warranting disciplinary action, or where a disclosure is found to have been made maliciously.
- **Conflict of Interest Policy:** which sets out the College's expectations regarding the declaration and management of conflicts of interest, relevant where a conflict arises in the handling or investigation of a disclosure.
- **Anti-Bribery and Corruption Policy:** which should be read alongside this policy where a disclosure relates to bribery or corrupt practice.
- **Prevent & Safeguarding Policy:** which should be referred to where a concern involves the welfare or safety of a vulnerable individual.

9. Contact Information

All formal disclosures under this policy should be directed to the Designated Officer in the first instance. Where a concern involves the Designated Officer, the alternative contacts below should be used.

Role	Contact
Designated Officer	Registrar [: generic role email]
Senior Escalation	CEO / Accountable Officer [: generic role email]
Highest Escalation	Chair of the Board of Governors [: contact details]
External: Higher Education	Office for Students: enquiries@officeforstudents.org.uk
External: Independent Advice	ACAS: acas.org.uk / 0300 123 1100
External: Prescribed Persons	gov.uk/government/publications/blowing-the-whistle-list-of-prescribed-people-and-bodies

9. Related Appendices

Appendix A: Whistleblowing Disclosure Form

Appendix B: Whistleblowing Investigation Record Form

Appendix C: Whistleblowing Concern Notification Form