



Allegations Against Staff including Low-Level Concerns Policy

Version	Date	Summary of changes
1.0		First published version
2.0	January 2024	Responsibility of Headteacher expanded to include Designated safeguarding lead New section 6 low-level concerns Section 7 amendments to harm threshold

Approved by Governors: January 2024

Review Date: January 2027

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Scope	3
3. General Principle	3
4. Procedure – All staff	4
5. Initial Considerations by Headteacher (or the Designated Safeguarding Lead)	5
6. Action relating to low level concerns	5
7. Action relating to allegations that meet the harm threshold	7
8. Oversight and monitoring	7
9. Information sharing	8
10. Suspension	8
11. Investigation process	9
12. Timescales	10
13. Supporting those involved	10
14. Confidentiality	11
15. Investigation Outcomes	11
16. Managing the situation and exit arrangements	11
17. Record and Information Retention	12
18. References	12
19. Specific Action	12
20. Monitoring and review	13

1. Introduction

- 1.1 All students and staff have a fundamental right to be protected from harm.

The Governors of Cotham School have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and create and maintain a safe learning environment. The school should identify where there are safeguarding concerns and take action to address them, in partnership with other organisations where appropriate and in accordance with local inter-agency procedures.

- 1.2 Cotham staff have a positive role to play in Safeguarding and Child Protection as their position often allows them to be able to observe outward signs of abuse and changes of behaviour in students.

Because of their role, however, they are also open to accusations of abuse. Such allegations may be true, but they may also be false, misplaced or malicious.

- 1.3 To fulfil its commitment to the safeguarding of children, Cotham has a procedure for dealing with allegations of abuse against members of staff and volunteers.

The procedure aims to ensure that all allegations are dealt with fairly, consistently and quickly and in a way that provides protection for the student, whilst supporting the staff member who is the subject of the allegation.

In the event that a member of staff does not wish to report an allegation directly, or they have a general concern about malpractice at Cotham, reference can also be made to Cotham's Whistle Blowing Policy.

The procedure complies with the framework for managing cases of allegations of abuse against people who work with children, as set out in relevant guidance and in the local inter-agency procedures.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>

2. Scope

- 2.1 The procedure applies to all adults who are currently working at Cotham, including volunteers, regardless of whether the school is where the alleged abuse took place. Serious allegations against members of staff should be referred to the police.

3. General Principle

- 3.1 The following procedures should be used in respect of all cases in which it is alleged that a member of staff or a volunteer in the school has:

- Behaved in a way that has harmed a child or may have harmed a child.
- Possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child, or
- Behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children
- Behaved inappropriately towards a child which may indicate that he or she is unsuitable to work with children.

- 3.2 The procedures may also be used:

- If a concern arises about a member of staff in their life outside of school which indicates that they may be unsuitable to work with children (known as transferable risk).

- If there has been a recommendation from a strategy discussion that consideration should be given to the risk posed to children they work with, or
 - When an allegation is made about abuse that took place some time ago and the accused person may still be working with or have contact with children.
- 3.3 It is imperative that everyone who deals with allegations of abuse maintains an open and enquiring mind. Even allegations that appear less serious must be followed up and taken seriously. The procedure aims to provide effective protection for the child and support for the person who is the subject of the allegation.

4. Procedure – All staff

4.1 **What should I do if I am concerned about the behaviour of a member of staff towards a child?**

If there is a concern that a person may have behaved inappropriately or the school receives information that may constitute an allegation, the following action should be taken:

- All allegations should be reported to the Headteacher immediately unless the allegation is about the Headteacher in which case it should be reported to the Chair of Governors or the Deputy Chair in the Chair's absence. If the Headteacher is unavailable, Domini Leong (Deputy Head Teacher and Designated Safeguarding Lead) should be approached.
- Allegations should also be recorded on CPOMS, along with any statements or supporting documents. The Senior Safeguarding and Mental Health Lead will re-categorise the log as 'Allegations Against Staff' on CPOMS so that viewers of this record are restricted and confidentiality is maintained.
- Maintain confidentiality for all concerned and guard against publicity. Follow the information-sharing protocols explained later in this document.

You should:-

- NOT Attempt to deal with the situation yourself;
- NOT Make assumptions, offer alternative explanations or diminish the seriousness of the behaviour or alleged incidents;
- NOT Keep the information to yourself or promise confidentiality;
- NOT Take any action that might undermine any future investigation or disciplinary procedure, such as interviewing the alleged victim or potential witnesses, or informing the alleged perpetrator or parents or carers.

N.B If a child has clearly been injured and/or there is clear evidence of significant harm or risk of significant harm, immediate referral to the police or social care or emergency services must be considered in accordance with child protection procedures. Your Designated Child Protection Officer should be informed as soon as possible afterwards. Remember that the safety and welfare of the child is your overriding concerns.

5. Initial Considerations by Headteacher (or the Designated Safeguarding Lead)

- 5.1 The procedure for dealing with allegations needs to be applied with common sense and judgment. Many cases may either not meet the criteria set out or may do so without warranting consideration for either a police investigation or enquiries by the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). In these cases, local arrangements should be followed to resolve cases without delay.
- 5.2 Under the changes to KCSIE 2022, a determination needs to be made as to whether the allegation meets the harm threshold or does not meet the harm threshold. Staff do not need to be able to determine in each case whether their concern is a low-level concern, if it is not serious enough to consider a referral to the LADO, or whether it meets the harm threshold. Once staff share what they believe to be a low-level concern, that determination should be made by the Headteacher or the Designated Safeguarding Lead.
- 5.3 Allegations which meet the harm threshold are where it is alleged that a person who works with children has:
- behaved in a way that has harmed a child or may have harmed a child; and/or
 - possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child; and/or
 - behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children; and/or
 - behaved or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children
- 5.4 Allegations which do not meet the harm threshold are classed as 'low-level concerns'. A low-level concern is any concern – no matter how small, and even if no more than causing a sense of unease or a 'nagging doubt' – that an adult may have acted in a way that:
- is inconsistent with an organisation's staff code of conduct, including inappropriate conduct outside of work, and
 - does not meet the allegation threshold, or is otherwise not serious enough to consider a referral to the LADO – but may merit consulting with and seeking advice from the LADO, and on a no-names basis if necessary.
- KCSIE 2022 lists examples of such behaviour that could include, but are not limited to:
- being over friendly with children;
 - having favourites;
 - taking photographs of children on their mobile phone;
 - engaging with a child on a one-to-one basis in a secluded area or behind a closed door; or,
 - using inappropriate sexualised, intimidating or offensive language.

6. Action relating to low level concerns

- 6.1 The Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead will:
- (a) speak to the person who raised the concern (unless it has been raised anonymously), regardless of whether a written summary has been provided;

- (b) speak to any potential witnesses (unless advised not to do so by the LADO/other relevant external agencies, where they have been contacted);
- (c) speak to the individual about whom the low-level concern has been raised (unless advised not to do so by the LADO/other relevant external agencies, where they have been contacted);
- (d) review the information and determine whether the behaviour
 - (i) is entirely consistent with the school's staff code of conduct and the law,
 - (ii) constitutes a low-level concern,
 - (iii) is not serious enough to consider a referral to the LADO – but may merit consulting with and seeking advice from the LADO, and on a no-names basis if necessary,
 - (iv) when considered with any other low-level concerns that have previously been raised about the same individual, could now meet the threshold of an allegation that should be referred to the LADO/ other relevant external agencies, or
- (e) where they are in any doubt whatsoever, seek advice from the LADO - on a no-names basis if necessary;
- (f) make appropriate records of:
 - all internal conversations – including with the person who initially shared the low-level concern (where this has been possible), the adult about whom the concern has been shared (subject to the above), and any relevant witnesses (subject to the above);
 - all external conversations – for example, with the LADO/other external agencies (where they have been contacted, and either on a no-names or names basis);
 - the determination of the Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead as to whether it constitutes a low level concern;
 - the rationale for their decision; and
 - any action taken.

6.2 If it is determined that the behaviour is entirely consistent with the organisation's staff code of conduct and the law:

- (a) it will still be important for the Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead to update the individual in question and inform them of the action taken as above;
- (b) in addition, the Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead should speak to the person who shared the low-level concern – to provide them with feedback about how and why the behaviour is consistent with the organisation's staff code of conduct and the law;
- (c) such a situation may indicate that:
 - the staff code of conduct is not clear;
 - the briefing and/or training on the staff code of conduct has not been satisfactory; and/or
 - the low-level concerns policy is not clear enough.

6.3 If it is determined that the behaviour constitutes a low-level concern:

- (a) it should also be responded to in a sensitive and proportionate way – on the one hand maintaining confidence that such concerns when raised will be handled promptly and effectively whilst implementing a low-level concerns policy. Any investigation of low-level concerns should be done discreetly and on a need-to-know basis;

(b) most low-level concerns by their very nature are likely to be minor. Some will not give rise to any ongoing concern and, accordingly, will not require any further action. Others may be most appropriately dealt with by means of management guidance and/or training;

(c) in many cases, a low-level concern will simply require a conversation with the individual about whom the concern has been raised.

- 6.4 We are required to retain all records of low-level concerns (including those which are subsequently deemed by the Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead to relate to behaviour which is entirely consistent with the staff code of conduct) in a restricted category on CPOMS. Where multiple low-level concerns have been shared regarding the same individual these will be kept in chronological order as a running record on CPOMS. These records will be kept confidential and held securely, with access afforded only to a limited number of individuals such as the Headteacher and Designated Safeguarding Lead, and the individual they report to; and the senior HR officer, and the individual they report to (e.g. Business Manager).

7. Action relating to allegations that meet the harm threshold

- 7.1 Some rare allegations may require immediate intervention by social care and / or the police. In these cases, the Headteacher (**or the Designated Safeguarding Lead**) will contact the LADO within one working day by telephone and/or submitting a LADO referral form as appropriate. **The Local Authority Designated Officer is Nicola Laird on 0117 903 7795; email childprotection@bristol.gov.uk**
- 7.2 It is important that you report the issue to the Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead before speaking to anyone else about the matter, including the child, as any further action/investigation by the school may impede any subsequent police investigation and could limit the outcomes available.
- 7.3 The purpose of an initial discussion is for the LADO and the head teacher / designated safeguarding lead / governor to consider the nature, content and context of the allegation and agree on a course of action. The LADO may ask for additional relevant information.
- 7.4 There may be situations when the head teacher will want to involve the police immediately. Where there is no such evidence, the head teacher will discuss the allegations with the LADO in order to help determine whether police involvement is necessary.

8. Oversight and monitoring

- 8.1 The LADO has overall responsibility for the oversight of the procedure for dealing with allegations that meet the harm threshold, and will provide advice and guidance to schools on the course of action as appropriate.
- 8.2 The LADO will also monitor the progress of cases and liaise with the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), the police and other agencies to ensure that cases are dealt with as quickly as possible, consistent with a fair and thorough process.
- 8.3 Reviews should be conducted at fortnightly or monthly intervals, depending on the complexity of the case.

- 8.4 Police forces should also identify officers who will be responsible for liaising with the LADO, participating in the strategy discussion or initial evaluation and subsequently reviewing the progress of those cases in which there is police involvement. The police person responsible will also share information, consulting with Crown Prosecution Service about whether to: charge the individual; continue to investigate; or close the investigation. Wherever possible, that review should take place no later than four weeks after the initial evaluation. Dates for subsequent reviews, ideally at fortnightly intervals, should be set at the meeting if the investigation continues.

9. Information sharing

- 9.1 During an initial evaluation of the case, or strategy discussion (see Procedure section), the agencies concerned should share all the relevant information that they have about the person who is the subject of the allegation and about the alleged victim.
- 9.2 If applicable and where possible, the police and social care should obtain consent from the individuals concerned to share the statements and evidence they obtain during the course of the investigations with the school for disciplinary purposes. This should be done as the investigation proceeds rather than after it is concluded. When considering further action, the school should therefore take account of any relevant information obtained in the course of those enquiries.
- 9.3 The initial sharing of information and evaluation may lead to a decision that no further action is to be taken in regard to the individual facing the allegation or concern; in which case this decision and a justification for it should be recorded by both the head teacher and the LADO and an agreement reached on what information should be put in writing to the individual concerned and by whom. The head teacher should then consider with the LADO what action should follow both with respect to the individual and those who made the initial allegation.
- 9.4 The head teacher, or the designated safeguarding lead, should inform the accused person about the allegation as soon as possible after consulting the LADO. It is extremely important that the head teacher, or designated safeguarding lead, provides them with as much information as possible at this time. However, where a strategy discussion is needed, or police or social care need to be involved, the head teacher or designated safeguarding lead should not do that until those agencies have been consulted, and have agreed what information can be disclosed to the accused.
- 9.5 If there is cause to suspect a student is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, a strategy discussion should be convened in accordance with Working Together to Safeguard Children. If the allegation is about physical contact, the strategy discussion or initial evaluation with the police should take into account that teachers and other school staff are entitled to use reasonable force to control or restrain students in certain circumstances, including dealing with disruptive behaviour.

10. Suspension

- 10.1 The school must consider carefully whether the circumstances of a case warrant a person being suspended from contact with children at the school or whether alternative arrangements can be put in place until the allegation or concern is resolved. All options to avoid suspension should be considered prior to taking that step.

- 10.2 Suspension should not be seen as an automatic response to an allegation. A person must not be suspended without careful consideration, taking into account the seriousness and plausibility of the allegation and the risk of harm to the student concerned. Suspension should therefore be intended as a safeguard for both the student making the allegation and the member of staff against whom the allegation has been made.
- 10.3 In general, suspension should only be considered in any case where there is cause to suspect a student is at risk of significant harm, it is necessary to allow any investigation to continue unimpeded or is so serious that if proven it might be grounds for dismissal.
- 10.4 If the initial suspension meeting takes place prior to the strategy discussion, care should be taken in relation to the amount of information given to the member of staff.
- 10.5 The school should also consider whether the result that would be achieved by suspension could be achieved by alternative arrangements such as paid leave of absence; additional supervision; redeployment with the school so that the individual does not have direct contact with the child or children; moving the child or children to classes where they will not come into contact with the member of staff making it clear that this is not a punishment and parents/ carers have been consulted; temporarily redeploying the member of staff to another role in a different location. If the LADO, police and Social Care have no objections to the member of staff continuing to work during the investigation, the headteacher should be as inventive as possible to avoid suspension.
- 10.6 A decision to suspend can be made at any stage during the investigation process, reviewed in the light of new evidence and should be carried out in accordance with the procedure set out in the school Disciplinary Policy. A rationale and justification for suspension should be agreed and recorded by both the head teacher and the LADO, including what alternatives to suspension have been considered and why they were rejected.
- 10.7 Written confirmation of suspension should be sent within one working day, giving as much detail as appropriate for the reasons of the suspension. The person should be informed at the point of suspension who their named contact is within the organisation and provided with contact details.
- 10.8 Power to suspend is vested in the Headteacher and will notify the Chair of Governors of the suspension. However, where an initial evaluation concludes that there should be enquiries made by the police and social care, the LADO should seek guidance from the police and social care about whether the individual should be suspended in order to inform the school. Police involvement does not make it mandatory to suspend a member of staff. This decision should be taken on a case-by-case basis.

11. Investigation process

- 11.1 For low-level concerns, investigations should be conducted within the parameters of the school's code of conduct and, if relevant, disciplinary policy..
- 11.2 For allegations that meet the harms threshold but where it has been made clear by the LADO that an investigation by the police or social care is unnecessary, or the strategy discussion or initial evaluation decides that is the case, the LADO should discuss the next steps with the headteacher or the Designated Safeguarding Lead. In those circumstances, the options open to the school depend on the nature and circumstances of the allegation and the evidence and information available. Where further enquiries will be needed and the complexity of the

allegation warrants it, an internal investigation should be commenced and an independent investigator may be considered appropriate and used.

12. Timescales

- 12.1 It is in everyone's interest to resolve cases as quickly as possible, consistent with a fair and thorough investigation and avoid unnecessary delay. The time taken to investigate and resolve individual cases depends on a variety of factors including the nature, seriousness and complexity of the allegation.
- 12.2 For allegations that escalate to a disciplinary process please refer to the Disciplinary Procedure and Policy.

13. Supporting those involved

- 13.1 Parents or carers of a child or children involved should be told about the allegation as soon as possible having sought advice and agreement from relevant external agencies especially when part of a strategy discussion. They should also be kept informed about the progress of the case including suspension and told the outcome where there is not a criminal prosecution. This also includes the outcome of any disciplinary process. Deliberations of a disciplinary hearing and the information taken into account in reaching a decision, cannot normally be disclosed but the parents or carers of the child should be told the outcome in confidence.
- 13.2 Parents and carers should also be made aware of the prohibition on reporting or publishing allegations about teachers. If parents wish to apply to the court to have reporting restrictions removed, they should be told to take some legal advice.
- 13.3 In cases where a student may have suffered significant harm, or there may be a criminal prosecution, social care or the police as appropriate, should also consider what support the child, children and their parents/ carers may need.
- 13.4 Cotham has a duty of care to their employees. They should act to manage and minimise the stress inherent in the allegations and disciplinary process. Support for the individual is key to fulfilling this duty. The Headteacher should appoint a named representative to keep the person who is subject to the allegation informed of the progress of the case and consider what other support is appropriate. This support may include occupational health or employee welfare arrangements. Particular care needs to be taken when employees are suspended. They should be informed of concerns or allegations as soon as possible and given an explanation of the likely course of action, unless there is an objection by social care or the police. The individual should be advised to contact their trade union representative if they have one or a colleague for support. They should also be given access to counselling or medical advice where this is provided by the employer. Social contact with colleagues and friends should not be prevented unless there is evidence to suggest that such contact is likely to be prejudicial to the gathering and presentation of evidence.
- 13.5 Depending on the circumstances of the alleged abuse, support for others at the school, both staff and students might also need to be considered.
- 13.6 If the allegations are unfounded and no action is to be taken against the member of staff, the Headteacher / Chair of Governors should still consider whether counselling and / or informal professional advice might be appropriate for all parties, to help rebuild confidence where

necessary. A phased return on full pay for the member of staff could be considered. A meeting with the employee and their union representative to discuss such matters would also be helpful.

14. Confidentiality

- 14.1 Whilst an allegation is being investigated, every effort should be made to maintain confidentiality and guard against any unwanted publicity while an allegation is being investigated or considered. The Education Act 2011 introduced reporting restrictions preventing the publication of any material that may lead to the identification of a teacher who has been accused by, or on behalf of, a student from the same school (where that identification would identify the teacher as the subject of the allegation).
- 14.2 The headteacher should take advice from the LADO and other external agencies to agree the following:
- Who needs to know and, importantly, exactly what information can be shared?
 - How to manage speculation, leaks and gossip
 - What, if any information can be reasonably given to the wider community to reduce speculation; and
 - How to manage press interest if and when it should arise.

15. Investigation Outcomes

- 15.1 Following investigation the outcome will range from taking no further action to dismissal or a decision not to use the person's services in future.
- 15.2 The following definitions should be used when determining the outcome of allegation investigations:

Substantiated: there is sufficient evidence to prove the allegation.

Malicious: there is sufficient evidence to disprove the allegation and there has been a deliberate act to deceive;

False: there is sufficient evidence to disprove the allegation.

Unsubstantiated: there is insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation. The term, therefore, does not imply guilt or innocence.

16. Managing the situation and exit arrangements

16.1 Resignations / Compromise Agreements

The fact that a person tenders their resignation must not prevent an allegation being followed up in accordance with these guidelines. **A referral to the DBS and TRA (if applicable) must be made, if the criteria are met i.e. anyone who has harmed, poses a risk or harm, to a child or if there is reason to believe the member of staff has committed one of a number of listed offences, and who has been removed from working (paid or unpaid) in regulated activity, or would have been removed had they not left.** If the accused person

resigns or their services cease to be used and the criteria are met it will NOT be appropriate to reach a settlement/compromise agreement.

A settlement/compromise agreement which prevents the school from making a DBS referral when the criteria are met would likely result in a criminal offence being committed as the school would not be complying with its legal duty to make the referral

It is important that every effort is made to reach a conclusion in all cases, including any in which the individual concerned refuses to cooperate with the process. Wherever possible, it is important to reach and record a conclusion wherever possible. The accused should be given a full opportunity to answer the allegations and make representation about it.

Compromise agreements by which a person agrees to resign if the school agrees not to pursue disciplinary action and both parties agree a form of words to be used in any future reference, should not be used in cases of refusal to cooperate or resignation before the person's notice period expires. Such an agreement will not prevent a thorough police investigation where that is appropriate.

17. Record and Information Retention

- 17.1 Details of allegations that are found to have been malicious should be removed from personnel records. For all other allegations, it is important that a clear and comprehensive summary recording the outcome of any allegations is kept on a person's file and a copy provided to the individual. We must ensure this is always done in writing.
- 17.2 The purpose of the record is to enable accurate information to be given in response to a reference request and will help provide clarity where a future DBS disclosure reveals police information that an allegation was made but did not result in a prosecution or conviction. Such a record also serves to protect the employee from unnecessary reinvestigation if allegations resurface after a period of time. The record should be retained at least until the accused has reached normal retirement age or for a period of 10 years from the date of the allegation if that is longer.

18. References

- 18.1 Cases in which an allegation was proven to be false, unsubstantiated or malicious should not be included in employer references. A history of repeated concerns or allegations which have all been found to be unsubstantiated, malicious etc... should also not be included in any reference.

19. Specific Action

19.1 **Following a criminal investigation or a prosecution**

The police should inform the employer and LADO immediately following the completion of a criminal investigation and any subsequent trial or it is decided to close an investigation without charge or not to continue to prosecute the case after the person has been charged. In those circumstances, the LADO should discuss with the headteacher whether any further action, including disciplinary action, is appropriate and if so how to proceed. Police and social care should inform the decision.

19.2 **On conclusion of a case (and the outcome is dismissal or a resignation takes place)**

If an allegation is substantiated and the person is dismissed or the person resigns, the LADO should discuss with the head teacher and their HR advisor whether the school will decide to make a referral to the DBS for consideration of inclusion on the barred lists is required. In the case of a member of the teaching staff whether to refer the matter to the Teaching Regulation Agency (TRA) to consider prohibiting the individual from teaching.

There is a legal requirement for employers to make a referral to the DBS where they think that an individual has engaged in conduct that harmed (or is likely to harm) a child; or if a person otherwise poses a risk of harm to a child.

At the conclusion of the case in which an allegation is substantiated, the LADO should review the circumstances of the case with the headteacher to determine whether there are any improvements to be made to the school procedures or practices to help prevent similar events in the future.

19.3 **In respect of malicious or unsubstantiated allegations**

When it is decided on the conclusion of a case that a person who has been suspected can return to work, the headteacher should consider how best to facilitate that. Depending on the circumstances, a phased return and/or the provision of a mentor to provide assistance and support in the short term may be appropriate. The headteacher should also consider how the person's contact with the child who made the allegation can best be managed if they are still a student at the school.

If an allegation is determined to be unsubstantiated or malicious, the LADO should refer the matter to Social Care to determine whether the child concerned is in need of services or may have been abused by someone else. If an allegation is shown to be deliberately invented or malicious, the head teacher should consider whether any disciplinary action is appropriate against the student who made it; or whether the police should be asked to consider if action might be appropriate against the person responsible, even if he or she was not a student at the school.

20. Monitoring and review

This policy will be reviewed **every three years and** approved by Governors.

Any incidents occurring during the school year will be evaluated and where necessary appropriate action will be taken to amend the policy accordingly.