Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure

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Recognised unions have been consulted on this document via the Unity Schools Partnership Joint Consultation and Negotiation Committee. It was accepted by Unity Schools Partnership on:		**Date:** September 2026
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DOCUMENT CONTROL

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3.0	September 2022	Director of HR	5.2 Clarification of disclosures in writing and via social media 7.1 Re-wording regarding procedure 8 Rewording regarding procedure
4.0	September 2023	Director of HR	Annual review – no change
5.0	September 2024	HRBP	Annual review – no change
6.0	September 2025	HRBP	Annual Review – Addition of changes in relation to early years statutory framework and addition of Executive Headteacher
7.0	April 2026	Director of HR	Statutory legislation change – Quick guide added for staff. Section 1 updated to include dignity and respect at work. 4.2 updated to include sexual harassment.
8.0	September 2026	HR Business Partner	Annual review, updated to reflect changes to job titles. Correction of numbering error.

Authorisation (Responsible Owner)

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Approval (Accountable Owner)

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Name	Method
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Equality Analysis

Unity Schools Partnership's vision is to provide the highest standards of education in our primary, secondary and special schools. In support of this vision, with due regard to the Equality Act 2010 and our equality duties, an equality analysis has been undertaken on this policy, and any outcomes have been considered in the development of this policy.

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Quick guide (for staff)

- **Use this policy** if you reasonably believe something is wrong and it is in the **public interest** (for example: a criminal offence, breach of a legal obligation, miscarriage of justice, health and safety risk, environmental damage, or deliberate concealment). **This can include sexual harassment-related concerns** where you reasonably believe the matter is in the public interest (for example, systemic issues, repeated conduct, failures to take reasonable preventative steps, or mishandling of complaints).
- **Do not use this policy** for concerns about your own employment or personal treatment (use the **grievance** procedure instead, unless the matter meets the whistleblowing criteria).
- **If a child is at immediate risk**, follow the Trust's **safeguarding procedures** straight away and report to the **Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)** (and emergency services where required). You can also raise safeguarding-related whistleblowing concerns under this policy.
- **How to report**: raise your concern with the appropriate senior leader (Headteacher/Executive Headteacher for a Trust school/provision, or relevant Director for central services). If that is not appropriate, raise it with the **Chief People Officer**,or **CEO** (or the Trust Board where the concern is about the CEO).
- **What happens next**: the Trust will acknowledge your disclosure (normally within 10 working days if made in writing), decide next steps (e.g., investigation, audit referral), and keep you informed where it can.

1. Policy Statement

Unity Schools Partnership ("the Trust") is underpinned by a set of shared values, principles, and operational processes which promote high-quality education for all our pupils and fair, consistent treatment of all our employees.

The Trust aims to be a fulfilling and supportive place to work. Staff are our greatest resource, and the professionalism, commitment, and expertise they bring are fundamental to the Trust's effectiveness and ongoing success.

The Trust recognises that senior leaders within its schools and central services have a responsibility to ensure that all Trust activity is conducted to the highest standards of probity, integrity, and accountability. Decision-making and administration must therefore be carried out in a way that is transparent, fair, and beyond any reasonable suspicion of malpractice, improper conduct, or behaviour that could undermine dignity and respect at work.

Clear policies, standards, and procedures for decision-making — particularly where decisions involve significant expenditure or have a material impact on employment — are essential to creating and sustaining a culture of openness and trust. Such a culture supports effective governance and helps reduce the risk of misunderstanding or complaint.

Workers who raise concerns about malpractice or wrongdoing in the workplace are afforded statutory protection against victimisation under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013. To qualify for protection, the worker must reasonably believe that the disclosure is made in the public interest and meets the criteria of a protected disclosure (see section 4 for further detail).

This procedure has been subject to consultation with all recognised trade unions.

1.1 Liability

Unity Schools Partnership understands that if someone raises a whistleblowing concern, the Trust may be held responsible if that person suffers a disadvantage or unfair treatment as a result.

This applies where the disadvantage is caused by:

- another member of staff acting in the course of their work, or
- someone acting on behalf of the Trust,
  even if the Trust was not aware of what happened at the time.

However, the Trust may be able to defend itself if it can show that it took all reasonable steps to prevent such treatment from happening. This includes:

- having a clear whistleblowing policy in place,
- making sure staff know about the policy, and
- applying it properly and consistently when concerns are raised.

Individual members of staff can also be personally responsible if they treat a whistleblower unfairly. An individual may only avoid liability if they can show that they acted in line with clear guidance or instructions from the Trust, and that it was reasonable for them to rely on that guidance.

1.2 Policy and Procedure

The Trust is committed to promoting and maintaining the highest standards in the management, administration and conduct of its affairs across all its schools and Trust-run provision.

Academy trusts, as charitable companies, are required to maintain effective systems of internal control and sound governance. The requirement for academy trusts to have clear and effective whistleblowing arrangements in place is set out in the Academy Trust Handbook, compliance with which is a condition of the Trust's funding agreement with the Secretary of State for Education. The Department for Education also provides guidance on whistleblowing disclosures relating to academies and academy trusts.

The adoption and effective operation of a whistleblowing procedure is a key element of accountability, transparency, and probity, and underpins public confidence in the Trust's governance and decision-making.

By adopting and publishing this procedure, the Trust demonstrates its commitment to high standards of conduct and provides a clear framework through which any worker may raise concerns in an appropriate manner and without fear of detriment to their personal position.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all Trust workers, including those employed in Trust schools, central services, and any other Trust-run provision.

An employee working within a Trust school/provision or central services but employed on another organisation's terms and conditions of employment should have the matter managed under their appropriate policy/procedure.

3. Purpose of the procedure

The purpose of this procedure is to encourage any worker who has a concern that practices in their school, service, or elsewhere in the Trust do not meet the required standards of probity to raise that concern at an appropriate level and in an appropriate manner.

This procedure is also intended to guide any worker who has a disclosure to make about malpractice in their school, service or elsewhere in the Trust in making that disclosure. It sets out to whom malpractice (or suspected malpractice) should be reported, and how it should be reported.

The procedure also sets out the safeguards and protections that the Trust will offer to any worker who makes a disclosure in the recommended way.

Before initiating the procedure, employees should consider the following:

- the responsibility for expressing concerns about unacceptable practice or behaviour rests with all employees;

- employees should use line manager or team meetings and other opportunities to raise questions and seek clarification on issues which are of day-to-day concern;

- whilst it can be difficult to raise concerns about the practice or behaviour of a colleague, employees must act to prevent an escalation of the problem and to prevent themselves being potentially implicated.

4. Definitions and exclusions

For the purposes of this policy: "the Trust" means Unity Schools Partnership; "school" means any academy/school or provision within the Trust; and "central services" means Trust-wide functions/teams that operate across or on behalf of Trust schools.

4.1 Who do the protections apply to?

Whistleblowers do not need a qualifying period of service to bring a claim of unfair dismissal: in other words, staff are protected as soon as they join the organisation.

Protection is afforded to workers as well as employees; this includes staff on casual contracts, freelance workers, seconded workers, trainees and agency workers.

Protection from detriment also applies to ex-employees making disclosures after the termination of their employment.
The law relating to whistleblowing continues to be reviewed and may be subject to future change. The Trust will update this policy as necessary to reflect any changes in legislation or statutory guidance.

4.2 What should a concern be about, in terms of the criteria for qualifying disclosures?

The term "malpractice" may cover a broad range of acts, omissions, or practices. Workers will usually report specific instance(s) of wrongdoing by individual(s). In certain circumstances, workers may report bad practice which, if it were to continue, would be likely to lead to wrongdoing.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 protect workers who make qualifying disclosures from any detriment as a result of making a disclosure.

A qualifying disclosure must relate to:

- a criminal offence;
- a failure to comply with any legal obligation;
- a miscarriage of justice;
- danger to health and safety of any individual;
- damage to the environment;
- an attempt to cover up any of these.

In a Trust school or Trust-run provision (including central services), concerns may often (but by no means always) centre upon appropriate use of funds.

For instance, the following would normally be an inappropriate use of budget:

- disregard of proper tendering procedure for contracts;
- manipulation or falsification of accounting records;
- making decisions for personal gain;

- inappropriate (e.g. private) use of Trust funds, Trust property, or school/academy assets

Other, non-financial, concerns may include:

- sexual harassment, or failures to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment, including concerns about systemic issues, institutional culture, or the handling of sexual harassment complaints, where the worker reasonably believes the matter is in the public interest;
- inappropriate use of Trust or school/academy premises,
- unauthorised disclosure of confidential information,
- examination fraud,
- inappropriate professional relationships which potentially affect the good management of a Trust school/provision or the Trust.

The Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act introduces the need for disclosures to be "in the public interest", removing the need for them to have been made in good faith.

However, as there is no legal definition of "public interest", it will remain to be decided in individual cases. Disclosures relating to the worker's own contract will usually fall outside of whistleblowing and should instead be followed up via grievance procedures.

A disclosure does not need to be made "in good faith" to qualify for legal protection. However, if a tribunal believes a protected disclosure was made in bad faith, any compensation awarded can be reduced by up to 25%. The Trust expects concerns to be raised honestly and responsibly; knowingly false or malicious allegations may be addressed under the Trust's disciplinary procedures (see section 7).

To be afforded protection, workers must also raise their concerns in the proper way (see section 5 for specific guidance on process). Usually, in the first instance, this should be via internal processes. In certain cases, the Act also protects disclosure to "prescribed persons" (prescribed regulators). An up-to-date list of prescribed persons is available via GOV.UK.

The Act only protects wider disclosure (e.g., to the media, an MP, etc.) if:

- the worker reasonably believed they would be victimised if they had raised the matter internally or with a prescribed regulator;
- there was no prescribed regulator and they reasonably believed the evidence would be concealed;
- the concern had already been raised with the employer or prescribed regulator;
- the concern was exceptionally serious;
- and no payment was accepted for the story.

4.3 What kinds of detriment are workers protected from?

The kinds of detriment that could be suffered by whistleblowers will depend on whether they are job applicants, existing members of staff, or ex-members of staff. Some examples of detriment linked to a protected disclosure are:

- harassment and bullying,
- inappropriate disciplinary action,
- loss of work or pay,
- damage to career prospects,
- providing poor references,
- defamation,
- inappropriately referring them to external organisations for audit or scrutiny,
- not considering them for a role if they re-apply,
- dismissal or selection for redundancy because of making a qualifying disclosure.

4.4 Other relevant guidance and procedures

Complaints by workers about their personal treatment or the way in which employment policies and practices have been applied to them should be raised via the grievance procedure or other appropriate procedure. **If your concern relates to safeguarding or the protection of children, follow the Trust's safeguarding procedures immediately and report to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)** (and emergency services where required). You can also raise safeguarding-related concerns under this policy where you reasonably believe the matter is in the public interest.

In line with the EYFS statutory framework, employees are encouraged to raise their concerns in line with this policy.

5. Procedure for making a disclosure

The means of making a disclosure will depend to some extent on the nature and seriousness of the concern, the sensitivity of the issues and the individual(s) thought to be involved in the malpractice reported.

5.1 Lines of reporting

As a general rule, a worker wishing to make a disclosure should raise the concerns in the first instance with the appropriate senior leader for the area concerned (for example, the Headteacher/Executive Headteacher for a Trust school/provision, or the relevant Director for central services). This is appropriate where the concern is about the conduct or practice of colleagues, or a concern that local policies and procedures are not being properly or fairly applied. This enables the issue to be addressed at the appropriate level within the Trust.

Where a whistleblower believes that they cannot approach the Headteacher or Executive Headteacher, the concern should be raised with the Director of Education. If the disclosure concerns the conduct of the Governing Body or Director of Education, or if a disclosure has already been made and no discernible or timely action has been taken, the concern should be raised with the Chief People Officer or the CEO. If the concern is about a member of the Trust's central team, it should be raised with the Chief People Officer, or CEO. If the concern is about the CEO, then it should be raised with a member of the Trust Board.

In exceptional circumstances a whistleblower may approach the Secretary of State, who may refer the matter within the Department for Education (DfE) or to another relevant body. This will normally only be appropriate if they reasonably believe that the Trust or sponsor is involved in the malpractice or would for some other reason be unwilling to investigate it.

5.2 Process of disclosing

Any concerns should be raised in writing to the appropriate person. The employee should set out the background and history of the concerns, giving names, dates and places where possible, and the reasons why they are particularly concerned about the situation. If an employee does not feel able to put the concern in writing, they should telephone or meet the appropriate person. It is important that, however the concern is raised, the employee makes it clear that they are raising the issue via the whistleblowing procedure. The Trust also needs to consider whether concerns raised should be treated as whistleblowing concerns and advice may be sought from the HR team.

What to include: what happened (or what you believe is likely to happen), when and where; who is involved (names/roles if known); what evidence you have or where it can be found; whether the issue is ongoing; and any immediate risk (for example to children, staff, the public, or Trust funds).

The whistleblower may be accompanied by a trade union representative or appropriate workplace colleague at meetings that are held for the purpose of formally discussing or investigating the disclosure.

It is not necessary for a whistleblower to produce conclusive evidence to support their disclosure. Suspicion may be valid grounds for raising a concern. However, the whistleblower should normally have direct information about, or knowledge of, the malpractice alleged or know where such evidence is located. The whistleblower's concern should be based on more than hearsay, gossip, or the reports of others. The disclosure should explain the basis for the concern and usually include specific examples of unacceptable behaviour.

Disclosures should not be made to the press, radio, television or other media, including social media channels. The recommended internal reporting channels should be used. Workers have certain rights to report malpractice to specified external agencies, e.g. a worker who suspects that a criminal act has been committed may inform the police. However, it is expected that whistleblowers make disclosures following the reporting lines set out above.

5.3 Responding to a disclosure

The response to a whistleblower's disclosure will depend on a number of factors such as the seriousness and complexity of the allegations made.

Allegations may be:

- investigated within the relevant Trust school/provision or central service;
- referred to the internal or external auditors;
- referred to the police;
- referred to another independent form of enquiry;
- or any combination of the above.

The Trust may consider using external independent investigators, though this will in part depend on the complexity of the case.

In line with the EYFS statutory framework, safeguarding concerns raised in line with the whistleblowing policy will be responded to promptly and appropriately.

Disclosures will be subject to initial enquiries in order to decide whether a full investigation is necessary and, if so, what form it should take, who should conduct it, and whether any reference to another agency is necessary or desirable. Some concerns may be resolved through agreed action without the need for further investigation.

If the whistleblower's concern falls within the scope of an alternative procedure, they will be advised to pursue it through that procedure.

A whistleblower who presents their disclosures in writing will, wherever possible within ten working days, receive:

- an acknowledgement that the concern has been raised;
- an indication of how the Trust proposes to deal with the matter;
- an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response;
- an indication of any initial enquiries that have been made; and
- an indication of whether further investigations will take place and, if not, why not.

The whistleblower will be informed of the outcome of any investigation insofar as this is compatible with any duty of confidentiality on the employer. The extent of the information given to whistleblowers will depend upon a number of factors, e.g. whether the investigation is referred to the police and leads to criminal prosecution. Where an investigation is protracted, it is recommended that the Trust keeps the whistleblower updated on the progress of the investigation, as silence may lead them to become suspicious of inaction, and make a disclosure externally.

Where a whistleblower is unwilling to identify themselves, any person receiving a complaint about malpractice should log the incident and seek advice from the Trust's HR Team, to consider whether any investigation should be undertaken.

6. Safeguards for whistleblowers (see also section 4.3)

6.1 Internal procedures

The decision to report malpractice can be a difficult one for staff, who may possibly fear subsequent victimisation or harassment. No action will be taken against staff who follow the correct procedure to raise a concern, and which they reasonably believe to be in the public interest, even if that concern is subsequently discovered to be unfounded after investigation.

However, whistleblowers who are already the subject of investigation or action under a formal procedure (e.g. discipline, capability or harassment) should not expect the procedure to be discontinued as a result of the disclosure, unless there is good reason for doing so.

6.2 Other protections

To harass, bully, or otherwise subject a person to detriment because they have made a whistleblowing disclosure, or assisted in the investigation of one (for example as a witness), will be considered a disciplinary offence.

Where whistleblowers do not wish to be identified to others in the course of an investigation, that wish will be respected so far as it is reasonably practicable. However, confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed. For example, it may be necessary to disclose information to investigate properly, to comply with safeguarding duties, to cooperate with the police or a regulator, or to ensure a fair process for those involved. In serious cases, whistleblowers may be required to give evidence, either by the Trust or the police. Any person subject to disciplinary action or prosecution has access to relevant evidence.

The Trust will take all reasonable steps to minimise any difficulties whistleblowers may experience as a result of raising a concern. The Trust will consider sympathetically requests from whistleblowers for special leave, counselling or other support.

7. Improper disclosures

No action will be taken against a whistleblower if the correct procedure is followed to raise a concern, which the whistleblower reasonably believes to be in the public interest. However, if allegations are not raised in the proper way, and/or the whistleblower cannot show that they reasonably believe it to be in the public interest, disciplinary sanctions may occur. This is particularly likely if it is believed that the disclosure was also malicious, vexatious, or made for personal gain.

8. How the matter can be taken further

This procedure is intended to provide individuals with an avenue to raise concerns within their Trust school/provision or with the Trust. If the whistleblower is not satisfied, and feels it is right to take the matter further, the following are possible contact points:

- Unity Trust Board – contactable via Lisa Taylor, Trust Secretary ltaylor@unitysp.co.uk
- Prescribed persons (regulators): see the up to date GOV.UK list of prescribed people and bodies (whistleblowing).
- Recognised trade union
- The Health and Safety Executive 0300 003 1747
- Information Commissioner 0303 123 1113

- The Pensions Regulator 0345 600 0707
- Local Government Ombudsman 0300 061 0614
- Ofsted 0300 123 4666
- NSPCC Whistleblowing Advice Line 0800 028 0285
- A solicitor
- The Police

If the matter is taken outside the Trust, the whistleblower must take all reasonable steps to ensure that confidential or privileged information is not disclosed (i.e. confidential information, in whatever format, must not be handed over to a third party).

Protect (formerly Public Concern at Work) is a whistleblowing charity that workers can contact for independent, confidential advice on raising concerns about wrongdoing at work.
Website: https://protect-advice.org.uk/

9. Advice

If any staff, contractor or visitor requires any further information regarding this policy or support they should either ask their Headteacher **or** contact the HR Helpdesk at hrhelpdesk@unitysp.co.uk or telephone 01440 333400 (option 2)