



LOW LEVEL CONCERNS POLICY

Safe Working Practices for the Protection of Children and Staff

The Laurels School understands the importance of acknowledging, recording and reporting all safeguarding concerns, regardless of their perceived severity. We understand that, while a concern may be low-level, that concern can escalate over time to become much more serious.

Our school prides itself on creating a safe and prosperous environment for students, and our staff are expected to adhere to high standards of behaviour when it comes to professional conduct regarding students. The school has clear professional boundaries of which all staff are made aware and to which they will adhere. We are committed to ensuring that any safeguarding concerns are dealt with as soon as they arise and before they have had a chance to become more severe, to minimise the risk of harm posed to our students and other children.

This policy operates in conjunction with the following school policies:

- Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Staff Code of Conduct
- Whistleblowing Policy
- Data Protection Policy
- Behaviour Policy

For the purposes of this policy, a low-level concern is defined as any concern about an adult's behaviour towards, or concerning, a child that does not meet the harms threshold (see below) or is otherwise not serious enough to consider a referral at the time of its reporting. Low-level concerns refer to behaviour on the part of a staff member towards students that is considered inappropriate in line with statutory safeguarding advice, the Staff Code of Conduct, and the 'Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour' subsection of this policy.

Low-level concerns are differentiated from concerns that can cause harm. The harms threshold is the point at which a concern is no longer low-level and constitutes a threat of harm to a child. This threshold is defined as accusations that an adult 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.
- Behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children.
- Behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children, including behaviour that has happened outside school.

While low-level concerns are, by their nature, less serious than concerns which meet the

harms threshold, the school understands that many serious safeguarding concerns, e.g., child sexual abuse, often begin with low-level concerns, e.g., being overly friendly with children. The school will ensure that all staff are aware of the importance of recognising concerns before they escalate from low-level to serious, wherever possible.

Roles and responsibilities

The Governing Board is responsible for:

- Ensuring that the school complies with its duties under child protection and safeguarding legislation.
- Ensuring that policies, procedures and training opportunities with regard to reporting safeguarding concerns are compliant and effective.
- Guaranteeing that there is an effective Staff Code of Conduct that outlines behavioural expectations.
- Ensuring that a suitably trained DSL has been appointed, alongside deputy DSLs where appropriate.
- Ensuring that there are robust reporting arrangements, including inter-agency collaboration.
- Ensuring that there are appropriate procedures in place to handle allegations and low-level concerns reported against members of staff.

The Headmistress is responsible for:

- Being a point of contact for all staff when they have safeguarding concerns, whether serious or low-level.
- Assessing whether safeguarding concerns about staff members meet the threshold for being termed an allegation, or whether they are low-level concerns.
- Implementing this policy, and all related policies, throughout the school, and ensuring that staff adhere to it at all times.
- Safeguarding students' wellbeing and maintaining public trust in the teaching profession and in the school's reputation.
- Ensuring that all staff have undertaken safeguarding training.
- Ensuring that all staff have an ongoing awareness of low-level concerns and reporting procedures.

The DSL is responsible for:

- Being a point of contact for all staff when they have safeguarding concerns, whether serious or low-level.
- With the Headmistress, assessing whether safeguarding concerns about staff members meet the threshold for being termed an allegation, or whether they are low-level concerns.
- Following all procedures outlined in this policy for acting upon low-level concerns.
- Liaising with the Headmistress, staff members, HR, the governing board and all relevant agencies to act upon concerns, where necessary.
- Keeping detailed, accurate and secure records of all low-level concerns and any actions taken.

Staff are responsible for:

- Adhering to all the relevant policies and procedures, including acting within the Staff

Code of Conduct at all times.

- Interacting with students in a way that is respectful and appropriate for their level of authority and has due regard to the power imbalance between students and staff members.
- Understanding the importance of reporting low-level concerns.
- Reporting all safeguarding concerns they may have about students immediately.
- Reporting all safeguarding concerns they may have about the behaviour of a member of staff immediately.

Prevention among staff

Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour

The school will ensure that all staff members are aware of the standards of appropriate behaviour expected towards students.

Staff will ensure that they pay due regard to the fact that:

- They are in a unique position of trust, care, responsibility, authority and influence in relation to students.
- There is a significant power imbalance in the student-staff dynamic.
- There are more stringent expectations on their behaviour with regard to students due to their position as a professional adult with a duty of care.

Staff will remain aware of the fact that all students under the age of 18, regardless of the phase and year group they are at within the school, are children by law – as a result, staff will ensure that they do not assume maturity on behalf of a student and do not engage with students as they would with their own peers. Staff will be aware that where there is any doubt regarding whether the behaviour of another adult is appropriate this should be reported to the DSL immediately.

Recognising a low-level concern

Inappropriate behaviour can exist on a wide spectrum, from inadvertent or thoughtless behaviour to behaviour which is ultimately intended to enable abuse. Examples of inappropriate behaviour that would constitute a low-level concern that should be reported to the DSL include:

- Being overly friendly with children – this could include, but is not limited to, communicating with a child through personal social media or allowing inappropriate conversations or enquiries to occur with students, e.g., conversations that are about a staff member's personal life or are of a sexual nature.
- Having favourites – this could include, but is not limited to, calling students by pet names or terms of endearment or buying students gifts.
- Taking photographs of children on a personal mobile phone or device.
- Engaging with a child on a one-to-one basis in a secluded area.

Staff will be aware that some of the above low-level concerns may meet the harms threshold depending on certain factors, e.g., the age or needs of the child or the content of exchanged messages, and that some of the above incidents may not be concerns in context, e.g., a pre-approved, one-to-one meeting with a child behind a closed door between the child and a school counsellor who has received all appropriate safety checks.

Staff will also be made aware that behaviour which raises concerns may not be intentionally inappropriate, and that this does not negate the need to report the behaviour. Staff members who engage in low-level inappropriate behaviour in relation to students inadvertently will be made aware and supported to correct this behaviour in line with the Staff Code of Conduct. The Headmistress and DSL will also evaluate whether additional training would be beneficial for any staff members exhibiting concerning behaviour, or the staff cohort as a whole where low-level concerning behaviour is seen more widely.

School culture

The school understands that spotting the early signs of harmful behaviour towards children can be difficult, and that many will be hesitant to report concerns they have about their colleagues' behaviour, particularly the behaviour of their superiors. Staff are encouraged to maintain an attitude that recognises that abuse can happen anywhere, in any setting, and that anyone can be a perpetrator regardless of their age, sex, level of authority, personality, etc.

The school will ensure that all staff members have received training as part of their induction that outlines appropriate behaviour towards students. All staff will read, understand and adhere to the 'Appropriate and inappropriate behaviour' subsection of this policy, as well as the Staff Code of Conduct and the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy.

Staff will address any questions they have regarding safeguarding to the DSL. The school will work to foster an environment where personal and professional boundaries are clearly set and respected for all individuals in the school community, e.g., students are not treated as friends and an appropriate professional distance is maintained by staff.

The school will ensure that all staff are sufficiently trained surrounding the reporting of safeguarding concerns as part of their induction, and that refresher training is conducted as necessary. The school will ensure that all staff understand how to recognise and report safeguarding concerns. Staff will be trained to identify concerning or problematic behaviour towards students that may indicate a safeguarding concern, and how to identify signs of abuse or harm in students.

Evaluating school culture following concerns

The school will ensure that appropriate consideration is given to the school's culture and whether or not it has enabled the inappropriate behaviour to occur. The Head Mistress will review whether any changes need to be made to relevant policies or training programmes in light of any evaluations of the school's culture, in order to achieve an open and transparent culture that deals with all concerns promptly and appropriately.

Reporting concerns

The school will promote a culture in which safeguarding students is the uppermost priority, beyond any perceived professional loyalties to colleagues, ensuring that staff are actively encouraged to report concerns, regardless of their relationship with the staff member.

Staff will report all safeguarding concerns they have to the Head Mistress or DSL

immediately in line with the procedures laid out in the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy. Staff members will report concerns without undue delay. Where the report concerns a specific incident, staff members will report their concerns no later than 24 hours after the incident where possible. Staff members will be aware that concerns are still worth reporting even if they do not seem serious.

Staff members will report their concerns to the Head Mistress or DSL verbally, or by submitting a Low-level Concern Reporting Form (at the end of this policy). When submitting concerns, staff will take care to ensure that they observe the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and protect the identity of all individuals to which the concern pertains as far as possible.

Staff members may request anonymity when reporting a concern, and the school will endeavour to respect this as far as possible. The school will not, however, promise anonymity to staff members who report concerns in case the situation arises where they must be named, e.g., where it is necessary for a fair disciplinary hearing. In line with the Whistleblowing Policy, staff will be protected from potential repercussions caused by reporting a genuine concern.

Where a low-level concern relates to the Headmistress, it should be reported to the Chair of Governors.

Where a low-level concern relates to a person employed by a supply agency or a contractor to work in the school, staff will also be required to report this to the Headmistress, who will, in turn, inform the employer of the subject of the concern.

All concerns reported will be documented in line with the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy.

Self-reporting

On occasion, a member of staff may feel as though they have acted in a way that:

- Could be misinterpreted.
- Could appear compromising to others.
- They realise, upon reflection, falls below the standards set out in the Staff Code of Conduct and the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy

The school will ensure that an environment is maintained that encourages staff members to self-report if they feel as though they have acted inappropriately or in a way that could be construed as inappropriate upon reflection. The Headmistress and DSL will, to the best of their abilities, maintain a culture of approachability for staff members, and will be understanding and sensitive towards those who self-report.

Staff members who self-report will not be treated more favourably during any resulting investigations than staff members who were reported by someone else; however, their self-awareness and intentions will be taken into consideration.

Evaluating concerns

Where the Headmistress is notified of a safeguarding concern, she will use her professional judgement to determine if the concern is low-level or if it must be immediately escalated, e.g., where a child is at immediate risk of harm. When deciding if a concern is low-level, the Headmistress will discuss the concern with the DSL and will seek advice from external agencies where there is any doubt about how seriously to take the concern. When seeking external advice, the Headmistress will ensure they adhere to the Data Protection Policy, and the information sharing principles outlined in the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, at all times.

To evaluate a concern, the Headmistress and DSL will:

- Speak to the individual who raised the concern to determine the facts and obtain any relevant additional information.
- Review the information and determine whether the behaviour displayed by the individual about whom the concern was reported is consistent with the Staff Code of Conduct and the law.
- Determine whether the concern, when considered alongside any other low-level concerns previously made about the same individual, should be reclassified as an allegation and dealt with alongside the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, Section 15.
- Consult with, and seek advice from, external agencies when in doubt over the course of action to follow.
- Speak to the individual about whom the concern has been raised to inform them of the concern and to give them an opportunity to respond to it.
- Ensure that accurate and detailed records are kept by the DSL of all internal and external conversations regarding evaluating the concern, and any actions or decisions taken.

Acting on concerns

Where the concern is unfounded

If it is discovered upon evaluation that the low-level concern refers to behaviour that was not considered to be in breach of the Staff Code of Conduct, the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and the law, the Headmistress (or DSL) will speak to the individual about whom the concern was made to discuss their behaviour, why and how the behaviour may have been misconstrued, and what they can do to avoid such misunderstandings in the future. The Headmistress (or DSL) will also speak to the individual who shared the concern, outlining why the behaviour reported is consistent with school standards and the law. The Headmistress (or DSL) will take care to ensure that conversations with individuals who reported concerns that transpired to be unfounded do not deter that individual from reporting concerns in the future.

The Headmistress will discuss the concern with the DSL to discern whether the behaviour, and the reporting of this behaviour, is indicative of ambiguity in the school's policies or procedures, or the training it offers to staff. Where such ambiguity is found, the Headmistress and DSL will work together to resolve this with input from other staff members, as necessary.

Where the concern is low-level

Where the Headmistress, in discussion with the DSL, determines that a concern is low-level, the school will respond to this in a sensitive and proportionate manner. The following

procedure will be followed:

- The DSL holds a meeting with the individual about whom the concern was reported, during which they will:
 - o Talk to the individual in a non-accusatory and sympathetic manner.
 - o Inform them of how their behaviour was perceived by the individual who reported the concern (without naming them, where possible).
 - o Clearly state how their behaviour was inappropriate and problematic.
 - o Discuss the reasons for the behaviour with the individual.
 - o Inform the individual clearly why their behaviour needs to change.
 - o Discuss any support that the individual may require to achieve the proper standards of behaviour.
 - o Allow the individual the opportunity to respond to the concern in their own words.

The DSL asks the individual to re-read the Staff Code of Conduct depending on the nature of the concern.

The Headmistress and DSL will consider whether the individual should receive guidance, supervision or any further training.

Where considered appropriate in the circumstances, the DSL will develop an action plan, with input from the individual, that outlines ongoing and transparent monitoring of the individual's behaviour and any other support measures implemented to ensure the staff member's behaviour improves.

Where it is necessary to under-take an investigation into the behaviour, this will be done discreetly, and information will only be disclosed to individuals on a need-to-know basis.

Where any student or other individual has been made to feel uncomfortable by the individual's behaviour, they will be offered pastoral support, where appropriate.

The DSL will ensure that all details of the low-level concern, including any resultant actions taken, are recorded and securely stored in line with the Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy and the Data Protection Policy. The Headmistress will ensure that these records are kept organised and up to date and that it is easy to refer back to them if any other concerns are reported about the same individual.

The specific approach to handling low-level concerns will be adapted on a case-by-case basis. It is unlikely that a low-level concern will result in disciplinary procedures; however, individuals may be given warnings in line with the Disciplinary Procedure where behaviour does not improve once it is brought to their attention. Where behaviour does not improve over a longer period of time, the concerns will be escalated and dealt with in line with the Child Protection and Safeguarding , Section 15.

Where the concern is serious

The Headmistress may decide upon evaluation that a concern is more serious than the reporter originally thought, e.g., when viewed in conjunction with other evidence or other concerns made about the same individual. Where this decision is made, the concern will

be escalated, and dealt with as an allegation. The Headmistress will then follow the procedures laid out in the Child Protection and Safeguarding, Section 15.

Record keeping

The school will retain all records of low-level concerns, excluding those that were found to be unfounded. The DSL will ensure that all records include the most accurate and up-to-date information and will store them in the electronic low-level concerns file. The DSL will ensure that all low-level concerns are stored together, in an organised and consistent manner, to ensure they can be easily reviewed and analysed where necessary.

Records will include:

- A clear and comprehensive summary of the concern.
- Details of how the concern was followed up and resolved.
- A note of any action taken, decisions reached, and the outcome.
- The name of the individual sharing concerns – if the individual wishes to remain anonymous, this will be respected as far as reasonably possible.

The DSL will periodically review the recent low-level concerns made to ensure that they are being appropriately dealt with and to check for any concerning behaviour patterns amongst the staff cohort as a whole. The DSL will keep records of these reviews.

Where any concerning patterns of behaviour have been identified with regard to a member of staff, the DSL will consult with the Headmistress to decide on a course of action. Where a pattern of behaviour has become so concerning that it meets the harms threshold, this will be referred to the LADO as soon as practicable.

Records of low-level concerns will not be kept in the HR file of the individuals to whom the concerns pertain, unless there have been multiple low-level concerns made about the same individual. Where a concern is thought to be serious and is processed as an allegation, records of this will be kept in staff personnel files. Where multiple low-level concerns have been made about the same individual, these will be kept together, and in chronological order.

Where an allegation is made about an individual who has previously been subject to such allegations, or where a low-level concern is reclassified as a serious concern after meeting the harms threshold, all records of low-level concerns about that individual will be moved to the staff personnel file and kept alongside records of the allegation.

The DSL will ensure that all records are kept in a manner that is consistent with the Staff Data Protection Policy. Records will be confidential, kept password-protected, and managed correctly.

The school will only refer to concerns about a staff member in employment references where they have amounted to a substantiated safeguarding allegation, i.e., it has met the harms threshold and has been found to have basis through investigation, or where it is not exclusively a safeguarding issue and forms part of an issue that would normally be

included in a reference, e.g., misconduct or poor performance. Low-level safeguarding concerns will not be included in a reference, unless they have comprised a pattern of behaviour that has met the harms threshold.

Monitoring and review

This policy will be reviewed annually by the Headmistress and DSL, and in response to any new safeguarding requirements or concerns surrounding the wider cultural issues in the school.

Low-level concern reporting form

Thank you for reporting your concerns to the safeguarding team; we are grateful to you for taking the safety and welfare of our students seriously. Please fill in the below form, including as much detail as you can, and return it directly to the Head Mistress or DSL. Please refrain from discussing this concern with anyone other than the individuals named above until the matter has been investigated. We ask that you keep all details, including the name of the staff member to whom the concern pertains, confidential.

Your Details	
Name (optional)	
Role	
Date and time of completing this form	
Details individual of whom the concern is about	
Name	
Role	
Relationship to the individual reporting the concern, e.g., manager, colleague	
Details of concern	
<p>Please include as much detail as possible. Think about the following: What behaviour and/or incident are you reporting? What exactly happened? Why does the behaviour and/or incident worry you? Why do you believe the behaviour and/or incident is not consistent with our Staff Code of Conduct?</p>	

Details of any children or young people involved	
Name(s)	
Do you believe there is a risk of harm to the above children or young people, either now or in the future, as a result of the individual's behaviour? Explain your answer.	
Signature	
For use by safeguarding team upon receipt of concern	
Date and time concern received	
Signature of DSL	
Actions to be taken , e.g., no action, investigation, reclassification as allegation meeting the harms threshold.	

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