Child-on-Child Abuse, Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Procedure

1. Introduction

1.1 South Thames Colleges Group recognises that children can abuse other children, and that child-on-child abuse can occur both inside and outside of college, including online.

1.2 The Group is committed to maintaining safe, inclusive and supportive environments where students feel respected, experience a sense of belonging and can achieve positive educational outcomes. Safeguarding, inclusion, wellbeing and educational participation are intrinsically linked and form the foundation of the Group's approach to managing child-on-child abuse.

1.3 The Group adopts a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of child-on-child abuse. Abuse will never be dismissed as banter, part of growing up, horseplay, relationship issues or a normal part of adolescent behaviour.

1.4 The Group recognises that child-on-child abuse can have a significant impact on the safety, wellbeing, mental health, attendance, engagement and achievement of those affected. It also recognises that children who display harmful behaviours may themselves have experienced abuse, exploitation, trauma, neglect or other adverse experiences.

1.5 This procedure should be read alongside the Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy and supports the Group's wider safeguarding arrangements in accordance with Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026.

2. Purpose

2.1 The purpose of this procedure is to provide a clear framework for the prevention, identification, assessment and management of child-on-child abuse.

2.2 The procedure seeks to:

- promote the safety and wellbeing of all students;
- ensure reports of child-on-child abuse are taken seriously and responded to appropriately;
- support timely intervention and effective safeguarding practice;
- provide a framework for risk assessment and decision making;
- support educational participation wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so; and
- ensure appropriate action is taken to protect victims and manage risk.

2.3 The procedure supports a safeguarding-led, trauma-informed and relational approach that recognises the individual circumstances, lived experiences and support needs of the students involved.

3. Scope

3.1 This procedure applies to all students under the age of 18 enrolled at the Group.

3.2 The procedure applies where incidents occur:

- on college premises;
- within Group activities;
- during work experience or work-based learning;
- whilst travelling in connection with college activity;
- online; or
- outside college where there is an impact upon the safety, wellbeing or educational experience of students within the Group.

4. Understanding Child-on-Child Abuse

4.1 Child-on-child abuse is behaviour by a child towards another child that is abusive, harmful or likely to cause significant physical, emotional or psychological harm.

4.2 Child-on-child abuse may present in a variety of forms including:

- bullying;
- discriminatory behaviour;
- physical violence;
- intimidation;
- sexual violence;
- sexual harassment;
- harmful sexual behaviour;
- abuse within intimate personal relationships;
- image-based abuse;
- online abuse;
- coercion or exploitation; and
- initiation or hazing behaviours.

4.3 The Group recognises that many incidents involve both online and offline elements and that technology can facilitate, amplify or prolong abuse.

4.4 The Group also recognises that behaviour exists on a spectrum and that safeguarding responses should be informed by professional judgement, the nature of the behaviour, the impact on those affected, the age and developmental stage of those involved and the wider context in which the behaviour occurred.

5. Safeguarding Principles

5.1 The welfare of the child is paramount.

5.2 All reports of child-on-child abuse will be considered on their individual circumstances and investigated appropriately.

5.3 The wishes, views and lived experiences of the victim will be central to decision making.

5.4 Victims will be supported, listened to and kept safe.

5.5 The Group recognises that an alleged perpetrator may also require safeguarding support and intervention.

5.6 Decisions will be evidence-based, proportionate and informed by safeguarding and safety risk assessments.

5.7 The Group will work collaboratively with parents, carers and external agencies where appropriate.

6. Reporting Concerns and Initial Response

6.1 Any report, disclosure, allegation or concern relating to child-on-child abuse must be treated seriously and referred immediately through the Group's safeguarding reporting arrangements.

6.2 Staff should listen carefully, avoid leading questions and reassure students that they have done the right thing by reporting their concerns.

6.3 Staff must not promise confidentiality and must explain that information may need to be shared due to safety concerns.

6.4 The initial response will focus on:

- protecting those involved;
- assessing immediate risk;
- securing appropriate support;
- preserving evidence where appropriate; and
- determining whether external agency involvement is required.

6.5 Where concerns relate to sexual violence, serious assault, exploitation, significant safeguarding concerns or incidents likely to constitute a criminal offence, the matter will be escalated immediately to the College Designated Safeguarding Lead and considered in accordance with the Serious Incident Protocol where appropriate.

7. Risk Assessment and Safeguarding Planning

7.1 Where child-on-child abuse is reported, the College Designated Safeguarding Lead or Deputy Safeguarding Lead will consider the need for a safeguarding and safety risk assessment.

7.2 The purpose of the assessment is to identify, evaluate and manage any actual or potential risks to:

- the victim;
- the alleged perpetrator;
- other students;
- staff; and
- the wider college community.

7.3 The assessment will consider:

- the nature and seriousness of the concerns;
- safeguarding and vulnerability factors;
- any known history or previous concerns;
- contextual safeguarding considerations;
- educational participation;
- the views of those involved;
- external agency advice; and
- whether risks can be effectively managed within the college environment.

7.4 Risk assessments are dynamic documents and will be reviewed whenever circumstances change or significant new information becomes available.

8. Decision Making Following a disclosure or report

8.1 Following receipt of a report, the College Designated Safeguarding Lead (or Deputy) will determine the most appropriate response.

8.2 The Group recognises that child-on-child abuse exists on a spectrum and that responses should be informed by the nature, seriousness and context of the behaviour, the wishes of the

victim, the age and developmental stage of those involved, safeguarding considerations and any identified risks.

8.3 In determining the most appropriate response, consideration will be given to:

- the nature and seriousness of the allegation;
- whether there is evidence of sexual violence, sexual harassment or harmful sexual behaviour;
- the impact upon the victim;
- whether there may be other victims;
- any actual or perceived imbalance of power;
- safeguarding vulnerabilities;
- whether the behaviour forms part of a wider pattern;
- contextual safeguarding considerations;
- whether a criminal offence may have occurred;
- ongoing risks to the victim, other students or staff; and
- the views and wishes of those involved where appropriate.

8.4 The Group may determine that concerns can be managed internally where:

- the behaviour does not indicate that a child has suffered, or is likely to suffer, significant harm and the circumstances suggest that the concerns can be appropriately addressed through internal safeguarding, educational and behavioural interventions.
- no criminal threshold appears to have been reached; and
- appropriate support and educational interventions are considered sufficient.

In such circumstances, support may include pastoral intervention, educational measures, restorative approaches, safeguarding monitoring or action under the Student Code of Conduct and Student Disciplinary Policy.

8.5 Early Help

The Group may determine that a student would benefit from Early Help where concerns indicate emerging needs that are unlikely to require statutory intervention, but where coordinated support may reduce vulnerability and prevent escalation.

8.6 Children's Social Care

The Group will make a referral to Children's Social Care where a child:

- has suffered significant harm;

- is at risk of significant harm; or
- requires statutory assessment or protection.

8.7 Police Referral

The Group will normally involve the Police where there is reasonable cause to believe that a criminal offence may have been committed.

This will normally include allegations involving:

- rape;
- assault by penetration;
- sexual assault;
- serious violence;
- coercive or exploitative behaviour;
- image-based offences;
- threats involving weapons; or
- other matters which may constitute a criminal offence.

The decision to refer a matter to the Police will normally be made by the College Designated Safeguarding Lead following consultation with the Group Designated Safeguarding Lead, Children's Social Care and other relevant agencies as appropriate.

8.8 Serious Incidents

Where the nature, seriousness or potential impact of an incident meets the threshold of a Serious Incident, the Group may activate the Serious Incident Protocol in parallel with this procedure.

Activation of the Serious Incident Protocol does not replace safeguarding processes, and this procedure will continue to operate alongside any incident management arrangements.

9. Managing Ongoing Risk

9.1 The Group will seek to implement proportionate safeguarding measures that allow students to remain safely engaged in education wherever reasonably possible.

9.2 Measures may include safeguarding plans, supervision arrangements, timetabling adjustments, restricted access to specific areas, pastoral interventions, wellbeing support or other reasonable measures designed to reduce risk.

9.3 The Group recognises that each case is different and therefore safeguarding arrangements will be determined according to individual circumstances rather than prescribed responses.

10. Police and External Agency Involvement

10.1 The Group will work closely with Police, Children's Services, MASH, health services and other relevant agencies where appropriate.

10.2 Reports of rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault will normally be referred to the Police.

10.3 The Group recognises that safeguarding responsibilities continue whilst police investigations or criminal proceedings are ongoing.

10.4 The existence of a police investigation will not prevent the Group from undertaking safeguarding risk assessments, implementing safeguarding plans or making decisions regarding educational participation and student safety.

10.5 The Group will ensure that its actions do not prejudice any police investigation or criminal proceedings.

11. Educational Participation, Suspension and Reintegration

11.1 The Group recognises the importance of maintaining educational participation wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so. Decisions regarding attendance, suspension, temporary exclusion, timetable adjustments and reintegration will be informed by safeguarding considerations, welfare needs and an ongoing safeguarding and safety risk assessment.

11.2 In reaching a decision regarding attendance and participation, the Group will seek to balance:

- the safety and wellbeing of the victim;
- the safety and wellbeing of the alleged perpetrator;
- the rights of all students to access education;
- safeguarding and welfare duties;
- educational outcomes;
- external agency advice; and
- the safety of the wider college community.

11.3 The Group will not normally use a suspension or any other measure that removes a student from education as an immediate or default response to a report or allegation of child-on-child abuse, sexual violence or sexual harassment. The primary response must focus on safeguarding, risk assessment, support, protection and the implementation of proportionate measures to manage any identified risks whilst maintaining educational participation wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so.

11.4 A victim should not be asked or expected to leave college or be suspended solely because they have made a disclosure, report or allegation. Any decision affecting the victim's educational participation must be based on their wishes, wellbeing, safety and individual circumstances and only where this is considered necessary as part of a safeguarding plan.

11.5 Where consideration is being given to the temporary suspension of an alleged perpetrator, the decision must be consistent with the suspension criteria contained within the Student Disciplinary Policy and Procedure. Suspension will only be considered where there is a reasonable belief that the student's continued presence presents a risk to the health, safety or welfare of themselves or others, a serious risk of disruption, a serious risk to property, or a risk of prejudicing the Group's ability to investigate and manage the matter.

11.6 Any decision to suspend an alleged perpetrator in connection with a child-on-child abuse, sexual violence or sexual harassment concern must be agreed by the College Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) or Deputy DSL and informed by a safeguarding and safety risk assessment. The rationale for the decision, alternative measures considered, and the arrangements for ongoing safeguarding and educational participation must be clearly recorded.

11.7 Where risks can be effectively managed through safeguarding plans, supervision arrangements, timetable adjustments, restricted movement, pastoral support or other reasonable measures, these should ordinarily be considered before suspension.

11.8 The Group recognises that a suspension should not be maintained solely because a Police investigation remains ongoing. Decisions regarding continued suspension will be informed by an ongoing safeguarding and safety risk assessment and consideration of whether identified risks can be effectively mitigated.

11.9 Where risks can be appropriately managed, the Group will seek to maintain educational participation through reasonable safeguarding measures and support arrangements.

11.10 Where the Group concludes that risks cannot be effectively mitigated within the college environment despite reasonable safeguarding measures and support arrangements, consideration may be given to temporary exclusion, permanent exclusion or alternative educational arrangements in accordance with the Student Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

12. Supporting Students

12.1 Students affected by child-on-child abuse will be provided with appropriate support, advice and intervention taking account of their individual circumstances and needs.

12.2 Support may include safeguarding intervention, wellbeing support, mental health support, pastoral support, safety planning, academic support or referral to specialist agencies.

12.3 The Group recognises that support may be required for victims, alleged perpetrators, witnesses and other students affected by an incident.

13. Outcomes

13.1 Following conclusion of safeguarding enquiries, external investigations, disciplinary investigations or criminal proceedings, the Group will review all available information and determine any ongoing safeguarding, educational or disciplinary actions required.

13.2 Possible outcomes may include:

- safeguarding support;
- Early Help;
- risk assessment and support plans;
- disciplinary action (Application of the Student Disciplinary Policy)

Importantly:

13.3 The Group may make safeguarding and educational decisions independently of the outcome of criminal proceedings. The fact that criminal proceedings do not result in a conviction does not in itself determine the Group's assessment of risk.

14. Unsubstantiated, Unfounded, False or Malicious Reports

14.1 The Group recognises that reports of child-on-child abuse may result in a range of outcomes. Following investigation, concerns may be determined to be substantiated, unsubstantiated, unfounded, false or malicious.

14.2 Where a report is determined to be unsubstantiated or unfounded, the Group will continue to consider whether any student involved requires safeguarding, pastoral, wellbeing or other support.

14.3 The fact that an allegation cannot be substantiated does not necessarily mean that it did not occur. The Group will continue to assess any identified safeguarding risks and support needs and may implement appropriate safeguarding, wellbeing or educational interventions where required.

15. Monitoring and Review

15.1 The Group Designated Safeguarding Lead will maintain oversight of child-on-child abuse concerns across the Group.

15.2 Child-on-child abuse trends, themes and learning will be reviewed annually and aligned to the Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy through established safeguarding governance arrangements.

15.3 Information relating to child-on-child abuse will contribute to safeguarding quality assurance, staff training, student awareness activity and continuous improvement.

16. Related Policies, protocols and procedures

This procedure should be read in conjunction with:

- Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy;
- Student Disciplinary Policy and Procedure;
- Student Code of Conduct;
- Serious Incident Protocol;
- Online Safety, Digital Safeguarding and Appropriate Use Policy;
- Fitness to Study Policy;
- Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy.