

South Thames Colleges Group

Fitness to Study Policy

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026

1. Introduction

South Thames Colleges Group (“the Group”) is committed to providing a safe, inclusive and compassionate learning environment where all students are supported to succeed.

The Group recognises that students may experience periods of distress, ill health or difficulty that can affect their ability to engage in learning. This policy provides a structured and supportive framework to respond where a student’s wellbeing significantly impacts their ability to study safely.

“Fitness to Study” refers to a student’s capacity, with reasonable adjustments and appropriate support, to engage in their programme without creating significant risk to their own wellbeing or that of others.

2. Purpose

This policy aims to:

- Provide a framework to guide decision making in complex applicant or student wellbeing cases
- Ensure students are supported to study to the best of their ability, and to successfully progress
- Support students experiencing significant wellbeing challenges
- Enable early, supportive intervention wherever possible
- Ensure risks are assessed and managed in a proportionate and compassionate way
- Balance individual support needs with the safety and wellbeing of the wider community

3. Scope and Threshold

This policy applies only where concerns reach a defined level of seriousness.

It should be invoked where there is a marked deterioration in mental health / wellbeing affecting safe participation in college.

This may include:

- When there is a disruption to teaching, learning and support of other students or where the level of distress, dependency, or support required significantly exceeds what can reasonably be provided through routine pastoral and academic support processes and presents a wellbeing or safety concern.
- Where participation in a programme-related activity or assessment may jeopardise the long-term health and wellbeing of a student.
- Behaviour or distress indicates complex or escalating needs beyond routine support and that the learner requires an enhanced and coordinated response.

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026

- Concerns cannot be effectively managed through standard pastoral, academic, or support processes.
- Behaviour which would usually be dealt with as a disciplinary matter where serious underlying mental health concerns are present.
- Academic performance or attendance significantly affected by emotional wellbeing or mental health difficulties.

3.1 Relationship to Other Policies

This policy sits alongside:

- Student Disciplinary Policy and Procedure
- Academic Performance and Attendance Policy and Procedure
- Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy

Each policy addresses different primary concerns:

Policy	Primary Focus
Disciplinary	Behaviour / conduct
Academic Performance	Attendance, engagement, progress
Fitness to Study	Wellbeing, mental health and associated risk
Safeguarding	Safety, welfare and associated risk

Fitness to Study should only be used where wellbeing, mental health and associated risk are the primary concern, and where these factors underpin or significantly impair a student's academic performance, attendance or behaviour. In all other cases, concerns relating to attendance, academic engagement or progress will be managed in line with the Academic Performance and Attendance Policy.

3.2 Use of Fitness to Study Policy in Place of Academic Performance and Attendance Policy

The Academic Performance and Attendance Policy is the primary route for managing attendance and academic concerns, including where wellbeing factors are present at an early stage.

Transfer to Fitness to Study will normally only occur where there is clear evidence that mental health or wellbeing considerations have become the primary concern and that there is an associated risk or need for coordinated intervention.

4. Principles

This policy is underpinned by a trauma-informed approach:

- The Group recognises that emotional distress, dysregulation, or changes in behaviour do not in themselves indicate a lack of motivation and should be understood within the context of the students' experiences, support needs, relationships and environment.
- All outcomes are intended to promote the student's wellbeing, sustained engagement and future success, with a focus on enabling appropriate support and positive re-engagement wherever possible.
- Students will be treated with dignity, compassion and respect.
- Staff seek to build relational safety and respond in ways that reduce shame, threat or traumatisation and consider a student's experiences and circumstances.
- Decisions will be proportionate, evidence-based and transparent.
- Students and where appropriate parents / carers and external support such as social workers will be involved in decisions wherever possible.
- Support and reasonable adjustments will be prioritised.
- Action will balance individual needs and community safety.
- Information sharing will be lawful, proportionate and limited to the 'need to know'.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

- Director of Student Services: Strategic oversight
- College Principal: Final oversight and chairing formal panels
- Head of School: Case lead and coordination
- Mental Health Coordinator: Specialist support and input
- College Designated Safeguarding Lead /Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead: Safeguarding advice and oversight
- Executive Principal for Skills and Learning: Ultimate authority and final determination regarding any appeal.
- Director Inclusive Learning – all Inclusion SEND / HNS

6. Process

In all cases, the informal identification and initial management of concerns relating to attendance, engagement, or performance sit within the Academic Performance and Attendance Policy Stage 1 process.

Referral to a Fitness to Study Review Panel should only occur where:

- mental health or wellbeing concerns have become the primary factor affecting the student; and
- informal support at Stage 1 has not been sufficient; and
- the level of concern indicates emerging or actual risk, or complexity beyond routine academic and pastoral management.

A formal diagnosis or external medical evidence is not required for supportive intervention, safeguarding action, or Fitness to Study processes to be initiated where there are clear concerns regarding wellbeing, risk, or a student's capacity to engage safely.

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026

This stage is invoked where:

- Informal support has not been sufficient, and behaviour or distress indicates complex or escalating needs beyond routine support for mental health and wellbeing concerns
- Or**
- There may be significant risk to a student or others due to a serious and critical deterioration in the wellbeing / mental health of a student
- The situation is serious enough to require immediate structured review.
- Emergency Action (section 6) has been taken due to an immediate or serious risk to the student or others.

A **Fitness to Study Review Panel** will be convened and chaired by a College Principal who will liaise with the College Designated Safeguarding Lead and in their absence the Director of Student Services. The panel will normally include the Director for Student Services (Group), and the College Mental Health Coordinator. For a panel meeting involving a student who is SEND, the Director of Inclusive Learning attends.

The Head of School or designated curriculum manager will share a summary of the concerns, support already in place, and the factors that have led to this stage being reached. This will include consideration of the student's experiences, context, and any known support needs.

Evidence may include:

- Support plan
- Medical/professional reports
- Attendance data

The student and their parents/guardian, sponsor/employer, local authority where appropriate will be informed in writing of the date, place and time of the meeting at least five working days before the meeting. A parent/guardian, trusted member of staff, advocate, or other supportive adult identified by the student can attend the meeting.

A student can also ask for a relevant person to attend who can provide additional information or available documentary evidence, for example: crisis plan, care plan, any fit note evidence /information from GP, CAMHS or Adult MH /Recovery team, Care Coordinator, Local Authority EHCP Coordinator for High Needs.

During the meeting the Chair (or appropriate member of staff designated by the Chair) will keep notes.

Attending the Panel Meeting - Adjustments

Where attending a formal panel may be distressing or overwhelming—particularly when meeting multiple unfamiliar staff—reasonable adjustments will be made on a case-by-case basis.

Students may instead opt to meet with a single appropriate practitioner in a supportive, informal setting to share their views safely. The practitioner will provide a summary to the Fitness to Study Review Panel, which will consider this as key evidence, ensuring the student is not disadvantaged by this option.

Approach

The process will be:

- Supportive and non-punitive.
- Transparent and clearly communicated.
- Sensitive to the student's circumstances.

The student will be:

- Supported to understand the concerns that have led to the review and invited to share their perspective.
- Given the opportunity to describe their experiences, needs, and what support they feel would be helpful.
- Encouraged (but not required) to submit relevant information informed of the concerns.

Panel Purpose

The panel will:

- Consider current strengths, protective factors, and existing sources of support that may contribute to positive engagement and wellbeing.
- Consider what support, adjustments and interventions may enable the student to participate in their studies in a safe, sustainable and meaningful way.
- Consider whether the student's needs can be safely and appropriately supported within the college environment.
- Identify appropriate and proportionate actions.

Possible Outcomes

a.) Continue in Study with a completed Risk Assessment

- A student wellbeing risk assessment is a structured, safeguarding-focused process undertaken where there are significant concerns regarding a learner's safety or wellbeing. Its purpose is to identify, evaluate, and effectively manage potential risks of harm to the student or others, ensuring that the College fulfils its duty of care.
- All concerns and relevant information must be accurately recorded on CPOMS and reviewed promptly by the College Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) or Deputy DSL and Mental Health Coordinator. The DSL (or Deputy) will oversee the assessment process, ensuring appropriate actions are coordinated and implemented.
- The risk assessment process draws on information from a range of sources, including relevant staff, the learner, and external agencies where appropriate. It considers what support, adjustments and interventions may enable the student to participate in their studies in a safe, sustainable and meaningful way.
- Risk assessments are dynamic in nature and must be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect any changes in circumstances.

b.) Managed Break in Study

- A managed break in study is a time-limited supportive measure intended to provide the student with an opportunity to access appropriate support and interventions. A temporary pause in study may help the student to stabilise their wellbeing and prepare for a successful return and re-engagement with learning.
- A managed break will only be agreed where there is clear evidence that a student's current circumstances:
 - present a risk to their own wellbeing and/or the wellbeing of others; and/or
 - significantly limit their ability to participate in learning in a safe, meaningful, and sustainable way; and/or
 - would result in unreasonable expectations for the student to recover missed learning within appropriate timeframes.
- In most cases, a managed break should not exceed **15 days of absence** from planned college activity. This reflects the expectation that students should remain engaged in education wherever it is appropriate to do so.
- In exceptional circumstances, where it is in the student's best interests and appropriate to the programme of study, flexible arrangements (including supported or remote learning) may be put in place. Where this happens, the duration of the managed break may be extended. However, the total period of absence from timetabled activity must not exceed **25 days**.
- The panel will review the student's progress at least once during the managed break. This review will consider:
 - a. the student's engagement with support strategies.
 - b. any changes in risk.
 - c. readiness to return to study; and
 - d. the effectiveness of current interventions.
- Where concerns remain following review—particularly in relation to safeguarding risk, wellbeing, or the student being able to participate in their studies in a safe, sustainable and meaningful way—the panel will take further action.

This may include:

- a. adjustment of the student's programme.
 - b. escalation to additional support services; or
 - c. consideration of withdrawal, deferral, or alternative pathways in line with college policy.
- All decisions will be evidence-based, proportionate, and centred on the best interests, safety, and educational progress of the student.

c.) Temporary withdrawal from study (Fitness to Study)

- Where ongoing safeguarding, wellbeing, or engagement risks remain, the panel may recommend a temporary withdrawal of study where the College is unable to safely and appropriately meet the student's needs within the learning environment despite reasonable adjustments and enhanced support.
- This is distinct from the managed break in study and would require the student to withdraw from college and re-apply for the next or future academic year.
- Decisions will be evidence-based and focused on protecting the student and others, with appropriate support and signposting provided for next steps.

All outcomes are intended to promote the student's wellbeing, sustained engagement and future success, with a focus on enabling appropriate support and positive re-engagement wherever possible.

The Panel will communicate the outcome of the meeting in a letter to the student and where appropriate, their parent, guardian, local authority) within five working days of the meeting.

A copy of this letter will be placed in the student file and noted on pro-monitor and CPOMS.

Where a student is temporarily withdrawn or stops attending the college which leads to withdrawal during a Formal Fitness to Study process any future application to re-enrol will be reviewed by a Fitness to Study Panel. This review will consider what support, adjustments and interventions may enable the student to participate in their studies in a safe, sustainable and meaningful way, in line with the Groups safeguarding responsibilities.

7. Emergency Action

- Where there is an immediate or serious risk to the student or others, the College will take prompt safeguarding action, which may include requiring the student to take an immediate temporary break in learning.

Emergency action may be taken where there is evidence of:

- risk of significant harm to the student or others.
- a safeguarding concern requiring urgent intervention.
- serious deterioration in mental health or wellbeing impacting safety.
- behaviour that poses a risk to the learning environment or college community; or
- circumstances where the student is unable to engage safely in college activity.

Safeguarding procedures and emergency responses will take precedence in all cases. Any such action will be reviewed within three college days by the College Principal (or nominee), Head of Student Services (or delegate), and Head of School. The College will undertake an immediate

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026

welfare check and attempt to maintain appropriate contact with the student and relevant parties.

A formal Fitness to Study Review Panel will follow the same process set out in section 5 and will be arranged as soon as practicable. During the temporary break in learning, the student will be encouraged to remain in contact with identified College staff.

8. Data Protection and Confidentiality

Information relating to a student's health and wellbeing is highly sensitive.

- It will be shared on a strict need-to-know basis
- Managed in accordance with data protection legislation and safeguarding duties
- Confidentiality will only be overridden where necessary to protect the student or others

9. Appeals

Students have the right to appeal decisions involving:

- **Temporary Withdrawal**

Appeals must:

- Be submitted in writing within 10 working days to the Executive Principal for Skills and Inclusion.
- Be based on:
 - New evidence that was not available and could have been expected to have materially affected the outcome.
 - Procedural irregularity – that the original decision, or panel meeting was not conducted fairly.
 - Disproportionate outcome – unreasonable and disproportionate outcome given the circumstances and or mitigating factors.

The outcome of the appeal is final.

10. Movement Between Procedures

This Policy and Procedure sit alongside the Group's:

- Student Disciplinary Policy
- Academic Performance and Attendance Policy
- Safeguarding and Adults at Risk Policy

Fitness to Study will not be used as an alternative to disciplinary procedures solely on the basis that behaviour may be associated with mental health or well-being concerns. Where behaviour is the primary issue, the Student Disciplinary Policy will apply.

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026

Where a case has commenced under the Academic Performance and Attendance Policy, the Group may determine that it is more appropriately managed under another.

This may include:

- Moving from Academic Performance and Attendance to Fitness to Study when
 - Informal support has not been sufficient, and behaviour or distress indicates complex or escalating wellbeing and Mental Health needs beyond routine support
- OR**
- There may be significant risk to a student or others due to a serious and critical deterioration in the wellbeing / mental health of a student
- The situation is serious enough to require immediate structured review.

In such cases:

- The original procedure will be ceased
- The matter will be transferred
- The student will be informed in writing, including:
 - The reason for the transfer from one policy to another
 - The policy to be followed
 - The next steps

The Group will determine the appropriate policy and procedure, and this decision will be final.

11. Related Policies

This policy should be read in conjunction with:

- Academic Performance and Attendance Policy
- Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy
- Student Disciplinary Policy
- Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy
- SEND and Inclusive Learning procedures

Policy Title: Fitness to Study Policy	Staff Member Responsible: Director – Student Services
Version: Final	Approval Date: September 2026