

PRACTICE PLACEMENTS POLICY/PROCEDURE DOCUMENT CONTROL SHEET

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WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY & PROCEDURE SOCIAL WORK

1. Introduction

The Social Work Degree Programme is committed to good practice in every aspect of the Programme, be it teaching, assessment, tutorial support or social work practice opportunities. The aim is primarily to better serve the needs of service users and carers, and therefore there is an expectation that tutors, students, support staff, practice assessors, link workers and all involved in the delivery of the programme will maintain standards in keeping with the aims of the programme and the professional Codes of Practice for Social Care Employers and Employees (GSCC, 2002).

The Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure aims to offer guidance to facilitate and support staff and students to safely raise complaints/concerns related to practice placements directly with appropriate individuals, who will then act on their behalf, to communicate the complaint/concern to key personnel.

An important aspect of the process is assuring and maintaining confidentiality which will be guaranteed at all times, however, due to the nature of some situations there are occasions where anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Whistleblowing is relevant to all organisations and the people who work or study in them. All staff and students have a role in highlighting or communicating issues or concerns that present risks to an organisation, its staff, service users or students on placement within the host organisation. All placement providers are at risk of things going wrong. When a risk occurs, often one of the first people to suspect or realise that something is wrong may be a student. However, the student may not feel they are the best person or in the best position to whistle blow, or they may lack confidence in raising the issue. It is the aim of this policy and procedure to enable and support staff/students in identifying and taking appropriate action should such situations arise.

2. Policy Statement

This policy and procedure applies to the BSc (Hons) Social Work programme, in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences which requires student allocation to a practice placement as part of a programme of study. The policy and procedures have been developed in collaboration with Placement Providers. The aim is to ensure that potential/identified risks are managed in a timely manner in order to minimise the risk and/or limit the potential for future risk.

As a public body, the University recognises responsibilities under the Public Interest Disclosure Act ('Whistleblowing' Act 1999) and the second report on Standards in Public Life (Nolan Committee 1996) that staff and students are permitted to speak freely without fear of disciplinary action, victimisation or discrimination. This extends to providing processes that facilitate and support staff and or students to raise legitimate concerns/issues related to practice placements.

In particular the University acknowledges the relative powerlessness and vulnerability of students who may be undergoing a process of assessment by work-based staff during their practice placement. The University takes seriously its responsibilities towards students and regards it as

important that students are able to voice their concerns and that their interests are safeguarded as far as possible.

This is particularly so for students who may be seconded from or employed by the host placement provider organisation. In such cases where a student raises a concern or issue related to their employing organisation, any subsequent investigation **MUST** be addressed from the perspective of the individual as a student undertaking a programme at Northumbria University Faculty of Health and Life Sciences and therefore this policy and procedure will apply, although it is acknowledged that the placement provider agency may require their own policy and procedure to be applied concurrently.

No detrimental action of any kind will be taken against an individual making a complaint/raising an issue, provided that it is done in good faith and without malice. A malicious or vexatious complaint, however, could result in disciplinary action.

3. Definitions of Whistleblowing

- “Bringing an activity to a sharp conclusion as if by the blast of a whistle”
Oxford English Dictionary
- “Raising a concern about malpractice within an organisation or through an independent structure associated with it”
UK Committee on Standards in Public Life
- “Giving information (usually to the authorities) about illegal or underhand practices”
Chambers Dictionary

In the context of this policy and procedure, Whistleblowing is defined as ***‘raising complaints or concerns about malpractice or wrongdoing in the workplace without fear or reprisal’***. The procedure is intended to cover concerns which are in the public interest and may involve any of the following (though this list is not exhaustive):

- Abuse of service users – patients, clients, pupils or their carers / legal guardians
- Theft, fraud, corruption
- Endangering health or safety or the environment
- Administrative malpractice (financial or non-financial)
- Other improper, unprofessional conduct or unethical behaviour
- Suppression or concealment of any information relating to any of the above

These concerns may be about something that: -

- Makes you feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, your experience or the GSCC Codes of Practice (2002) for both employers and employees; or
- Falls below established standards of practice

This is not intended to be a comprehensive list and any other matters raised under this policy will be considered seriously.

All organisations should ensure they are doing their “reasonable best” to manage themselves and their customers/service users against possible risk and harm. A student on placement and/or a

member of staff in the placement provider organisation may identify a situation or event, which has the potential to cause risk or harm to an individual(s) or the organisation.

For the purpose of this policy risk is defined as ***“any situation that the student is involved in which gives rise for concern for any of the parties involved”***.

The management of risk also aims to:

- Provide a rapid support system to students who have experienced an adverse event
- Reduce possible harm to client groups
- Reduce possible harm to the organisation
- Improve the learning environment
- Reduce possibility of harm to the student/employee

4. Procedure for managing a concern/complaint raised by a student, whilst on (or following) practice placement, or a member of university staff in relation to practice placement issues

4.1 Informal Procedure

Some situations which are of a minor concern can usually be dealt with either by direct challenging of the person concerned or by discussion with the student's immediate Practice Assessor, Link Worker or Guidance Tutor, or their line manager. If the issue is resolved at this stage, no further action is required, but even in such a case the individual should be satisfied that the issue has been properly addressed. This would mean that the person taking the report would have to record the substance of the concern and action/s taken to deal with the situation. Students should in all cases seek advice and guidance from their Guidance Tutor or the University Practice Learning Co-ordinator and ensure that their Guidance Tutor is aware of the outcome of the informal procedure.

4.2 If the issue is resolved at this stage, **no further action is required**. If the person raising the issue is not satisfied with the outcome of this procedure then the concerns should be put in writing in accordance with the formal procedure.

4.3 Formal Procedure

This procedure is intended to be used for any matter not satisfactorily dealt with by the informal procedure and for those serious matters outlined in the scope of this policy

Students should always take advice from their Guidance Tutor, or the BSc (Hons) Social Work Programme Manager, when they feel that formal procedures need to be invoked. A University member of staff raising concerns should take advice from their line manager. There will need to be an agreement made in relation to the interface of this policy and procedure and those of the placement provider agency.

4.4 The formal procedure is instigated by the completion of a written report using **FORM SWWB1 Whistleblowing Report** (see Appendix 1).

4.5 The report should be given, in the first instance, to the Guidance Tutor or, if this is inappropriate, to the Programme Manager. The person/s making the report must retain a copy. A copy of this report will also be sent to the University Practice Learning Co-ordinator, the agency placement Co-ordinator (or Manager within the agency identified by the Practice Assessor or Link Worker) and the Director of Practice Placements.

- 4.6 The University will respond to the concerns raised and it will be necessary to investigate these concerns, but this is not the same as accepting or rejecting them.
- 4.7 Within 5 working days of a concern being raised the University will send a written response:
- acknowledging that the concern has been raised
 - indicating how the University propose to deal with this matter
 - giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response
 - indicating whether you whether any enquiries have been made
 - providing information on relevant support mechanisms

The Associate Deans of Health Community and Education Studies and of Student and Staff Affairs will be sent a copy of this response.

- 4.8 Where appropriate, matters raised may:
- be investigated by management
 - be referred to the police or other statutory agencies
- 4.9 In order to protect individuals and those about whom concerns are raised, initial enquiries will be made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example Child Protection or Protection of Vulnerable Adult Procedures) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- 4.10 Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for investigation. If urgent action is required this will be taken before any investigation is conducted.
- 4.11 The amount of contact between the individual considering the issues and the person raising the concern will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the investigating officers will seek further information from the person raising the concern.
- 4.12 There may be the necessity for a meeting between the person reporting the concern and the Programme Manager. If this is the case a colleague of choice can accompany the student/member of staff to that meeting. The Guidance Tutor or Line Manager will also be able to offer support as appropriate.
- 4.13 Should a representative of a placement provider wishes to interview the person raising concerns, permission **MUST** be sought from the Programme Manager or the Director of Practice Placements as per the 'Request to Interview a Student of Northumbria University' Policy/Procedure (See Appendix 2) and complete **FORM SWWB 2 REQUEST TO INTERVIEW A STUDENT** (See Appendix 3). A formal response will be issued to all requests within 2 working days
- 4.14 The University accepts that we may not be notified until after the event has taken place (e.g. there may be occasion where a student needs to be interviewed immediately by a Police representative), however, should the Placement Provider need to take immediate action following a serious incident, then Northumbria University expect to be notified of this at the first available opportunity and no later than the next University working day.

- 4.15 The University will take steps to minimise any difficulties that students or staff may experience as a result of raising a concern. If for instance you are required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the University will arrange for you to receive advice about the procedure.
- 4.16 The University accepts that anyone raising concerns needs to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. The Programme Manager will monitor the progress of the concern and subject to legal constraints, will inform the person raising the concern of the outcome
- 4.17 The Director of Practice Placements will maintain the confidential records and monitor all risk incidents and report any trends/findings to the Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching.

5. Procedure for concern/complaint raised by a member of staff from the practice placement setting

There may be occasions when a Link Worker or Practice Assessor or other members of staff in the practice placement setting wishes to raise concerns regarding a student of Northumbria University.

- 5.1 If a member of the staff in the practice placement has a concern about the behaviour or conduct of a student on placement the agency must communicate this to the Guidance Tutor or the University Practice Learning Coordinator (if the Tutor is not available). If the situation is resolved at this stage **no further action is required**.
- 5.2 If the situation is not resolved at this stage, the University will initiate an investigation and will work together with the agency to determine an appropriate course of action. The Programme Manager will provide advice and guidance in line with the University Assessment Regulations and the Student Code of Conduct and the Social Work Termination of Training Procedures and where required will convene a Professional Suitability Panel.
- 5.5 The University will maintain confidential records and monitor all risk incidents and report any trends/findings to the appropriate senior manager of the placement provider. These will be reviewed annually with the Director of Practice Placements.