Introduction

Atomix Educational Trust is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment we expect employees, sub-contractors and others that we deal with to inform senior managers if they are concerned about serious malpractice, fraud or corruption in the Trust.

This policy document makes it clear that you can do so without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. It is intended to encourage and enable employees and others to raise issues of serious concern within the Trust.

The policy applies to all employees and those contractors working for the Trust, for example, agency staff and builders. It also covers suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Trust in their own premises.

The Central Executive Team is responsible for the prevention, detection and investigation of irregularities. To discharge this responsibility, they must ensure that an adequate system of internal control is in place. The work of Internal Audit in reviewing the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control system will help management to prevent and detect fraud or bribery.

Aims and Scope of this Policy

There are existing procedures in place to enable employees to lodge a grievance relating to their employment, or students of the Trust to complain about the quality of service provided. This policy on fraud, anti-bribery and whistle blowing is intended to cover major concerns that fall outside the scope of other procedures. These include:

- Conduct, which is an offence or a breach of law.
- Disclosures related to miscarriages of justice.
- Serious health and safety risks, including risks to the public as well as other employees.
- Damage to the environment.
- The unauthorised use of public funds.
- Abuse of students.
- Other unethical conduct.

In accordance with the **Employment Rights Act**, sexual harassment is a **'qualifying disclosure'** under whistleblowing law. This means that any employee or worker making a sexual harassment disclosure is protected from detriment and unfair dismissal. While this legal status formally changes on **6 April 2026**, the Trust adopts this protection with immediate effect as part of its commitment to a safe and inclusive culture.

In relation to fraud, the purpose of this policy is to define authority levels, responsibilities for action and reporting lines in the event of a suspected fraud or irregularity. The use of the policy should enable the Trust to:

- Prevent further loss.
- Inform the Police at the appropriate time and establish lines of communication with them.
- Establish and secure evidence necessary for criminal and disciplinary action.
- Notify the funding body, if the circumstances are covered by the mandatory requirements of the Academy Trust Handbook.
- Recover losses.
- Deal with requests for references for employees disciplined or prosecuted for fraud.
- Review the reasons for the incident, the measures taken to prevent a recurrence and any action

needed to strengthen future responses of fraud.
- Keep all personnel with a need to know suitably informed about the incident and the Trust's response.
- Assign responsibility for investigating the incident.
- Establish circumstances in which external specialists should be involved.

Any serious concerns about any aspect of service provision; or the conduct of employees of the Trust; or members/other acting on behalf of the Trust can be reported under this policy.

Safeguards

Atomix Educational Trust are committed to good practice and high standards and wants to be supportive of its employees. Any employee who raises a concern with senior managers will have the right to have the matter treated confidentially.

The Trust does not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect individuals who raise a concern in good faith.

Any investigation into allegations of potential malpractice will not influence, or be influenced by, any disciplinary or redundancy procedures that might already affect individuals who raise a concern.

In line with the Academy Trust Handbook 2025, the Trust ensures that no confidentiality clauses (often found in staff severance or settlement agreements) will ever prevent an individual's right to make disclosures in the public interest (whistleblowing) under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The Trust will not use such clauses to prevent the DfE or ESFA from obtaining information required for their regulatory roles.

Anonymous Allegations

This policy encourages individuals to put their name to an allegation whenever possible. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the Trust.

In exercising this discretion, the factors to be taken into account will include:

- The seriousness of the issues raised.
- The credibility of the concern.
- The likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources.

Malicious Allegations

If an allegation is made in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against the individual reporting the issue. If, however, an allegation is proved to have been made frivolously, maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action will be taken against the individual raising the concern. Wilful misuse of this procedure could constitute an act of gross misconduct and may lead to your dismissal.

The Responsible Person

The CEO, as Accounting Officer, has overall responsibility for the operation of this policy. The Accounting Officer has a personal responsibility to Parliament, and to the ESFA's accounting officer for the trust's financial resources. Accounting officers must be able to give assurance of high standards of probity in the management of public funds, particularly regularity, propriety and value for money.

Whistle Blowing

How to Raise a Concern

As a first step, the whistle blower will normally raise their concerns with their immediate line manager who will share the concern with the Head of Centre or Head Teacher. This depends, however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice. If the line manager is not the appropriate person for any reason, concerns should be raised directly with the academy

Head of Centre or Head Teacher who will be the designated officer. Where allegations of malpractice are made against an academy Head of Centre or Head Teacher, the CEO will deal with the concerns and be the designated officer. If an individual has a concern about malpractice within the Central Executive Team as a whole they may contact the Chair of Trustees via the Clerk to the Trust Board.

Initial concerns may be raised verbally but this will need to be supported by written documentation. This will normally have the following format:

- The background and history of the concern (giving relevant dates).
- The reason why individuals are particularly concerned about the situation.
- Where the concern of malpractice is related to Safeguarding, this must be raised and dealt with under the Safeguarding Policy.

The whistle blower is not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation. He/she will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for concern.

A trade union representative or a friend may be invited to be present during any meetings or interviews with the whistle blower, off site if so desired, in connection with the concerns that have been raised.

On receiving an allegation of serious malpractice from an employee or other individual connected to the trust, the designated officer will send a written acknowledgement of the concern to the whistle blower at his/her home address within 5 working days.

The designated officer will inform the CEO and Chair of Trust Board if an allegation has been received.

Having made initial enquiries, the designated officer will decide whether an investigation is appropriate and what form it should take. The overriding principle that the Trust will have in mind is the public interest. Investigations may be:

- Conducted by Trust management through the disciplinary process.
- Referred to the Audit Committee who will decide whether to commission Internal Audit Services or others to undertake a special investigation.
- Referred to the Police.
- Form the subject of an independent inquiry.

The designated officer will report back to the whistle blower in writing as to whether an investigation is appropriate, the progress of any investigation and when it is likely to be concluded.

The Trust will take steps to minimise any difficulties to an whistle blower raising a concern. The anonymity of the whistle blower may not always be preserved, particularly where the disclosure might lead to disciplinary action. If the whistle blower is required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the Trust will arrange for advice to be provided on the procedures involved.

How the Matter can be Taken Further

- If the whistle blower is not satisfied that the designated officer is properly dealing with the concern, they may raise the concern in confidence with the Chair of Trust Board or Chair of Finance & Audit Committee via the Clerk to the Trust Board.
- If the Trust Board finds the allegation to be unsubstantiated the whistle blower may have right of access to an appropriate external body to take the matter further. This recourse should only be used when internal procedures have been exhausted. An appropriate outside body might be internal or external auditors, the ESFA, a trade union or relevant professional body.

Understanding Low Level Concerns

Concerns regarding adult's behaviour may exist on a continuum from 'low-level' concerns which are concerns regarding adults that do NOT meet the threshold of harm through to allegations of harm that do meet the threshold. This does not mean that behaviours by adults towards children that cause any concern, are in any way insignificant or acceptable. However, clear evidence of harm and disclosure are often required to meet that harm threshold. It is therefore imperative that information regarding any level of concern that exists on this continuum is shared quickly and effectively.

It is also necessary that the same route of intervention is applied across the continuum and that **any** and **all** concerns are always shared directly to the Headteacher/Principal immediately. If concerns are regarding the Headteacher/ Principal this should be shared directly to the CEO.

Prevention of Low-level concerns / creating a safe culture

As part of a trust-wide approach to safeguarding, Atomix Educational Trust will ensure that our academies promote an open and transparent culture in which all concerns about all adults working in or on behalf of the school or college (including supply teachers, volunteers and contractors) are dealt with promptly and appropriately. Creating a culture in which all concerns about adults (including allegations that do not meet the harms threshold) are shared responsibly and with the right person, recorded and dealt with appropriately, is critical. If implemented correctly, this should encourage an open and transparent culture; enable our academies to identify concerning, problematic or inappropriate behaviour early; minimise the risk of abuse; and ensure that adults working in or on behalf of the academies are clear about professional boundaries and act within these boundaries, and in accordance with the ethos and values of the institution.

A safe and effective response to concerns of any nature, demonstrates a culture of taking safeguarding seriously. It also empowers and encourages the workforce to continue sharing and seeking advice from the Headteacher/Principal across the continuum of concerns and thus hopefully leading to a reduction of serious incidents.

Describing Low-Level Concerns

A low-level concern is any concern – no matter how small, and even if no more than causing a sense of unease or a 'nagging doubt' - that an adult working in or on behalf of the school or college may have acted in a way that:

- is inconsistent with the Staff Code of Conduct/Staff Behaviour Policy, including inappropriate conduct outside of work/online;

and

- does not meet the allegations threshold or is otherwise not considered serious enough to consider a referral to the LADO.

Examples of such behaviour could include, but are not limited to:

- being over friendly with pupils/students;
- having favourites;
- taking photographs of pupils/students on their mobile phone;
- engaging with a pupils/students on a one-to-one basis in a secluded area or behind a closed door

or,

- using inappropriate sexualised, intimidating or offensive language.

As stated, such behaviour can exist on a wide spectrum, from the inadvertent or thoughtless, or behaviour that may look to be inappropriate, but might not be in specific circumstances, through to that which is ultimately intended to enable abuse.

It is crucial that any such concerns, are shared responsibly and with the right person and recorded and dealt with appropriately (by the Headteacher/Principal). Ensuring they are dealt with effectively should also protect those working in or on behalf of the school/college from potential false allegations or misunderstandings.

Sharing low-level concerns

Low-level concerns about a member of staff, supply staff, volunteer or contractor should be reported directly to the Headteacher/Principal via the staff module of CPOMS. Reports about supply staff and contractors should be notified to their employers, by the Headteacher/Principal, so any potential patterns of inappropriate behaviour can be identified.

It is critical that in our academies, staff feel there is a safe environment where they are encouraged and feel confident to self-refer, where, for example, they have found themselves in a situation which could be misinterpreted, might appear compromising to others, and/or on reflection they believe they have behaved in such a way that they consider falls below the expected professional standards outlined in the Staff Code of Conduct/Staff Behaviour Policy.

Recording low-level concerns

All low-level concerns will be recorded in writing, following our Trust's recording policy and agreed system: staff module of CPOMS. The record will include details of the concern, the context in which the concern arose, and action taken. The name of the individual sharing their concerns will also be noted, if the individual wishes to remain anonymous then this will be respected as far as reasonably possible. These records will be kept confidential, held securely and comply with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) (see paragraph 109 for more information). Records will be reviewed so that potential patterns of concerning, problematic or inappropriate behaviour can be identified. Where a pattern of such behaviour is identified, the academy will decide on a course of action, either through disciplinary procedures or, where a pattern of behaviour moves from a concern to meeting the harms threshold, it will be referred by the Headteacher/Principal to the LADO. Consideration will be given to whether there are wider cultural issues within the academy that enabled the behaviour to occur and, where appropriate, policies will be revised or extra training delivered to minimise the risk of it happening again. The academy will retain the information at least until the individual leaves their employment.

References

The school/college should only provide substantiated safeguarding allegations in references. Low level concerns will not be included in references unless they relate to issues which would normally be included in a reference, for example, misconduct or poor performance. It follows that a low-level concern which relates exclusively to safeguarding (and not to misconduct or poor performance) will not be referred to in a reference. However, where a low-level concern (or group of concerns) has met the threshold for referral to the LADO and found to be substantiated, it will be referred to in a reference.

Responding to low-level concerns

It is the responsibility of the Headteacher/Principal to fact find, following the reporting of a low-level concern. If the concern has been raised via a third party, the Headteacher/Principal will collect as much evidence as possible by speaking either directly to the person who raised the concern, (unless it has been raised anonymously) or to the individual involved and any witnesses. The information collected will help to categorise the type of behaviour and determine what further action may need to be taken. All of this will be recorded on the staff module of CPOMS along with the rationale for the decisions and action taken.

Learning from Low-Level concerns

As stated, following any reports of low-level concerns our academies will review any necessary changes to policy and practice to minimise the chance of a further concern being reported and ensure that the member of staff who reported the concern has been fully supported and empowered to share future concerns. Any changes to policy or practice will be shared with all members of the workforce via either a staff meeting or enhanced training.

Dealing with Fraudulent Matters

Fraud is defined as a wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain.

Bribery is defined as giving or receiving a financial or other advantage in connection with the improper performance of a position of trust, or a function that is expected to be performed impartially or in good faith.

The academy trust must be aware of the risk of fraud, theft and irregularity and address it by putting in place proportionate controls. The trust must take appropriate action where fraud, theft or irregularity is suspected or identified.

References for Employees Disciplined or Prosecuted for Fraud

Any request for a reference for a member of staff who has been disciplined or prosecuted for fraud shall be referred to the Trust's independent employment advisor. The independent employment advisor shall prepare any answer to a request for a reference having regard to employment law.

Fraud Response Plan

The purpose of this fraud response plan is to define authority levels, responsibilities for action and reporting lines in the event of suspected fraud, corruption or other irregularity.

Fraud, bribery or irregularity occurs unpredictably, in any part and at any level in an organisation. Once a fraud is suspected, prompt action is needed to safeguard assets, recover losses and secure evidence for effective legal and disciplinary processes.

Initiating Action

All actual or suspected incidents should be reported without delay to the Chief Finance Officer (CFO). The CFO should, within 5 working days, hold a meeting with some or all of the other members of the following group to decide on initial response:

- CEO
- Chair of Finance & Audit Committee
- A Senior Representative of Internal Audit
- Academy Principal or Head Teacher

The above will from the Project Group and will decide on the action to be taken. This will normally be an investigation, led by internal audit. The decision by the group to initiate a special investigation shall constitute authority to internal audit to use time provided in the internal audit plan for special investigations, or contingency time, or to switch internal audit resources from planned resources.

Prevention of Further Loss

Where initial investigation provides reasonable grounds for suspecting a member or members of staff of fraud, the project group will decide how to prevent further loss. This may require the suspension, with or without pay, of the suspects. It may be necessary to plan the timing of the suspension to prevent the suspects from destroying or removing evidence that may be needed to support disciplinary or criminal action.

In these circumstances, the suspect(s) should be approached unannounced. They should be supervised at all times before leaving the Trust premises. They should be allowed to collect personal property under supervision, but should not be able to remove any property belonging to the Trust. Any security passes and keys to; premises, offices and furniture should be returned.

Advice should be obtained on the best means of denying access to the Trust while suspects remain suspended and access permissions to the Trust's computer systems should be withdrawn without delay.

Internal audit shall consider whether it is necessary to investigate systems, other than that which has given rise to suspicion, through which the suspect may have had opportunities to misappropriate the Trust assets.

Establishing and Securing Evidence

The Trust will follow disciplinary procedures against any member of staff who has committed fraud. The Trust may also initiate prosecution procedures against any such individual.

Internal Audit will:

- Maintain familiarity with the Trust's disciplinary procedures, to ensure that evidence requirements will be met during any fraud investigation.
- Establish and maintain contact with the Police where appropriate.
- Establish whether there is a need for audit staff to be trained in the evidence rules for interviews under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.
- Ensure that staff involved in fraud investigations are familiar with and are following rules on the admissibility of documentary and other evidence in criminal proceedings.

Recovery of Losses

Recovering losses is a major objective of any fraud investigation. Internal audit shall ensure that in all fraud investigations, the amount of any loss will be quantified. The Trust will seek repayment of losses in all cases.

Reporting to Board of Trustees and ESFA

The Accounting Officer has responsibility to advise the board of trustees and ESFA of instances of irregularity or impropriety, or non-compliance with the funding agreement or Academy Trust Handbook.

In accordance with the Academy Trust Handbook, the board of trustees must notify the ESFA, as soon as possible, of fraud, theft and/or irregularity exceeding £5,000 individually, or £5,000 cumulatively in any financial year. Unusual or systematic fraud, regardless of value, must also be reported.

The board acknowledges that the DfE may take action to recover funds where there is evidence of financial irregularity or fraud. The Trust will cooperate fully with any DfE or National Audit Office (NAO) investigation into such matters

Any variation from the approved fraud, anti-bribery and whistleblowing policy, together with reasons for the variation, shall be reported promptly to the Chairs of both the Trust Board and Finance & Audit Committee.

On completion of a special investigation, a written report, normally prepared by internal audit, shall be submitted to the Finance and Audit committee containing:

- A description of the incident, including the value of any loss, the people involved, and the means of perpetrating the fraud.
- The measures taken to prevent a recurrence.
- Any action needed to strengthen future responses to fraud, with a follow-up report on whether or not the actions have been taken.

Reporting Lines

The project group shall provide a confidential report to the Chair of the Trust Board and the Chair of the

Finance & Audit Committee, the CEO and the external audit partner at least monthly, unless a request is made for less frequency. The scope of the report shall include:

- Quantification of losses.
- Progress with recovery action.
- Progress with criminal action.
- Estimate of resources to conclude the investigation.
- Actions taken to prevent and detect similar incidents.

Responsibility for Investigation

All special investigations shall normally be led by internal audit. Special investigations shall not be undertaken by senior management, although they should co-operate with requests for assistance from internal audit.

Some special investigation may require the use of technical expertise which Internal Audit does not possess. In these circumstances, the Project Group may approve the appointment of external specialists to lead or contribute to the special investigation.

This policy should be read in conjunction with:

Staff Behaviour Policy/Code of Conduct

This policy template has been developed and supported by the following documentation from the DfE, effective from September 2025:

Keeping Children Safe in Education 2025
Academy Trust Handbook 2025

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