Guidelines for Learners and those supporting them when they want to Raise and Escalate Concerns (Whistleblowing) in Healthcare and Social Work Settings

Introduction:

Oxford Brookes University and our placement partners want service users, learners and staff to have safe and positive experiences. The Safe Learning Environment Charter provides information about the roles and responsibilities for this within the practice setting. https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/safe-learning-environment-charter/

There may be instances where you encounter concerns or issues within the practice setting that threaten the quality of the service provision and/or violate ethical standards and codes of practice. This document aims to provide Healthcare and Social Work learners with guidance on how to raise concerns and where necessary escalate these. The importance of process, and potential challenges associated with speaking up about concerns are explored with suggestions for where and when to seek support. As learner professionals in Healthcare and Social Work, it is essential to prioritise the well-being and safety of those under your care and the wellbeing and safety of yourself and your colleagues. The university and our placement partner organisation staff will listen and aim to resolve the situation as soon as possible.

What should I do if something doesn't look or feel right in placement?

You can speak up about anything that gets in the way of service user care or affects your experience in placement. This could be something which doesn't feel right to you: for example, a way of working or a process that isn't being followed; you feel you are being discriminated against; or you feel the behaviours of others is affecting your wellbeing, or that of your colleagues or service users (NHSE 2022: Freedom to Speak Up policy for the NHS Version 2, June 2022.)

Why is it important to Raise Concerns?:

Raising concerns within the practice setting is not only an ethical responsibility but also a professional obligation. By speaking up about issues that compromise service user safety, you contribute to a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. Failure to address concerns promptly can result in harm to individuals, damage to professional and organisational reputation, and in some cases have legal repercussions. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the significance of raising concerns and the potential impact of remaining silent.

You are advised to seek support at the earliest opportunity in the interest of public protection, and to see through any process to its conclusion. **If there is an immediate risk of harm, it is important that you report your concerns without delay to an appropriate person.**

What should I consider when Raising Concerns about the practice setting?:

Witness it, Question it, Resolve it

- **Are you worried that what you are witnessing or involved in is a matter for concern?** Sometimes the practice and/or behaviours you witness may be confusing or concerning. You may not be sure if they constitute safe practice or you may be very clear that what you are witnessing is unsafe and/or inappropriate. It is important to find your voice and question these actions/behaviours to ensure that

professional standards are met.

- **At the time:** Where possible raise the concern locally and at the time of the incident in a constructive manner with the person or people who you believe are practising or behaving inappropriately. They may be able to provide good rationale for their actions that is within professional standard practice. However, if the situation isn't resolved you will need to consider the next steps and there are many factors that can influence this. However, there are situations where you should act immediately for example: **Urgent and critical circumstances or safeguarding the vulnerable person i.e. someone is likely to be harmed.**

  Safeguarding concerns/allegations must be reported immediately so that actions can be taken in accordance with safeguarding responsibilities and duties of care. You must report in accordance with the safeguarding processes of the placement organisation eg to the designated safeguarding lead for the placement organisation.

  Consider who is available for **immediate support** and contact them or **Soon after the event:** If you were not able to raise the concern at the time you should raise it as soon as possible after the event.
  - You may decide to reflect on the situation and seek guidance before raising the concern
  - You may decide to seek advice from the university team and ask them to help you raise the concern.

  We respect these decisions however we would recommend raising the concern as soon as possible. We do not want the situation to remain unresolved for any longer than necessary - and urgent concerns need reporting immediately.

- **Document Your Concerns:** Securely keep detailed records of any incidents, observations, or conversations related to the concern. Include dates, times, individuals involved, and specific details of what occurred. Where the concern is serious you are likely to be asked to write a statement. This information will help when verbally reporting but also when writing up the timeline and detail of the events that took place. Do not consult others involved in the situation when writing your recollections as you do not want to be influenced by or influence their recollections. The document 'Guidance for students: writing a statement about an incident or issue in practice' may help you write your statement.

- **Seek Support for the professional aspects of the situation:** Raising concerns can be professionally challenging. Seek support to navigate the process and maintain professionalism with any potential challenges. Ensure you follow local placement policy :
  - Practice supervisor/assessor/educator,
  - Placement organisation senior colleagues e.g. Manager of the environment, Learning Environment Lead
  - Designated Safeguarding Officers/Leads
  - Link Lecturer,
  - Academic Advisor,
  - Placement Lead/ Programme Director

- **Seek Support for the emotional and wellbeing aspects of the situation:** Raising concerns can be emotionally challenging. Seek support to navigate the process and any potential challenges whilst maintaining your well-being. You can seek support from:

  Within Oxford Brookes University
  - Link lecturer
  - Academic advisor
  - Placement lead
  - Programme Director
  - Student support co-ordinators
  - Student Union
  - Wellbeing services
  - Occupational health services

  Within the placement organisation:

- Practice supervisor/assessor/educator
- Service manager
- Learning environment lead
- Learner help/support services within the placement organisation
- Freedom to speak up guardian

External support:

- Professional union e.g. RCN, RCM, Unison

Reporting Channels:

- If the incident did not resolve locally, each placement has a raising concerns process that you should follow with the support of your link lecturer. If the incident has a wider impact the link lecturer will escalate it to the placement lead/programme director/head of practice education for advice.
- If the issue is a safeguarding concern/allegation and you do not think this has been managed appropriately within the placement area you can escalate to the organisations Designated Safeguarding Officer/Lead. In the case of children, if you do not think the matter has been dealt with by the placement process you can report to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

- Normally you will not be anonymous within the process however the information you provide will be confidential to the process. The people you report to and the investigating team will have your details and statement but these will be handled sensitively.

Exceptional and Rare External Reporting Options:

- Sometimes the concern involves serious violations of law or ethics. This may involve contacting regulatory agencies, professional licensing boards, or legal authorities. Be aware of the potential consequences and protections afforded by whistle-blower legislation in the UK.

What is Whistleblowing?:

Whistleblowing refers to the act of disclosing information about unethical, illegal, or unsafe practices within an organisation, sometimes to outside agencies. It is a critical mechanism for promoting accountability, transparency, and the protection of individuals' rights and safety. Whistleblowing UK legislation can encompass a wide range of concerns:

- *a criminal offence, for example fraud*
- *someone's health and safety are in danger*
- *risk or actual damage to the environment*
- *a miscarriage of justice*
- *a company is breaking the law, for example does not have the right insurance*
- *you believe someone is covering up wrong-doing*

Whistleblowing UK legislation does not cover personal grievances unless there is a particular public interest

UK Government website about Whistleblowing

Challenges and Considerations:

- **Fear of poor ongoing experience or being failed in the placement:** Balancing your own learning and assessment needs, loyalty to the people you are working with and the responsibility to protect individuals' rights and safety can present ethical dilemmas. Do not wait until the end of your placement to raise concerns. Raising a concern will not affect your placement assessment. On very rare occasions it may be

necessary to change your placement, with support from your placement lead. We look at each situation individually and make decisions accordingly.

Conclusion:

Raising and escalating concerns (and whistleblowing) within healthcare and social work settings is a critical aspect of professional practice. By adhering to ethical principles, following established procedures and seeking support when needed, you contribute to the promotion of service user, staff and learner safety. Remember that your actions have the potential to effect positive change and uphold the integrity of the profession.

Appendix 1: Flow chart for raising and escalating concerns about the practice environment

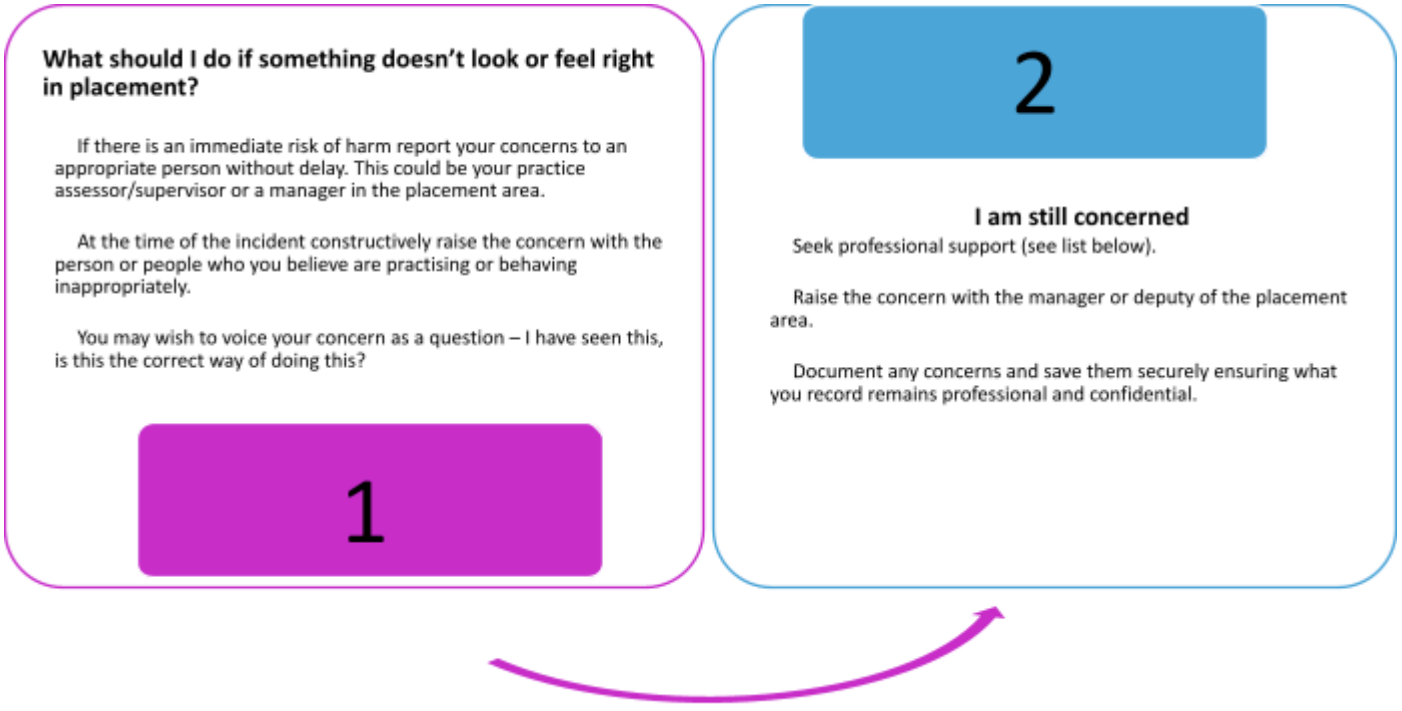
Why is it important to Raise Concerns?

It is an ethical and professional obligation

Are you worried that what you are witnessing or involved in is a matter for concern?

If so: You must follow the local placement area's policy for raising concerns/whistleblowing and also inform the university (e.g. Link lecturer)

Witness it … Question it … Resolve it



Professional support within Oxford Brookes University

Link lecturer	Placement lead
Academic advisor	Programme director

PEG July 2024

Emotional and wellbeing support within Oxford Brookes University:

Link lecturer
Academic advisor
Placement lead
Programme director
Student support co-ordinators
Student Union
Wellbeing services
Occupational health services

Support within placement organisation:

Practice supervisor/assessor/educator
Service manager
Learning environment lead
Learner help/support services within the organisation
Freedom to speak up guardian

Support within placement organisation:
External support:
Professional union e.g. RCN, RCM, Unison, HCPC

Appendix 2: Helpful links

NMC Raising concerns booklet

NMC overview links

RCN page with links to doc and poster flowchart

HCPC - reporting concerns

Freedom to Speak up policy NHSE