UCS Freedom of Speech Code of Practice for Higher Education

Our Mission

Raising Aspirations, Unlocking Potential, Advancing Futures

Our Values

Excellence, Passion, Team Work, Integrity, Innovation,

Sustainability, Valuing Others and Supportiveness

Sparsholt College Group

The Sparsholt College Group (the College Group) includes Sparsholt College, Andover College, University Centre Sparsholt, Sparsholt College Services, Westley Enterprises and Andover Town Football Club. College Group policies apply to each part of the group unless specified otherwise.

The UCS Freedom of Speech Code of Practice for Higher Education was approved by the Board of Governors in October 2026.

Originator:	Vice Principal & Dean of Higher Education
Located:	College Group Intranet College Website
Due for review:	Annually by UCS July 2029 by Board of Governors

UNIVERSITY CENTRE SPARSHOLT

FREEDOM OF SPEECH CODE OF PRACTICE

1. Introduction

University Centre Sparsholt (UCS) is committed to protecting and actively promoting lawful freedom of speech and academic freedom for all members of its community. Open discussion, challenge, and exposure to diverse ideas are central to higher education. This Code explains how UCS meets its legal duties in supporting a safe, respectful environment where lawful expression can take place while complying with UK legislation and Office for Students (OfS) requirements.

2. Who This Code Applies To

This Code applies to everyone involved in higher-education activity at University Centre Sparsholt and within the wider Sparsholt College Group, including:

- Students registered on any Higher Education course
- Staff and visiting lecturers
- Governors
- Individuals who have applied to become members of academic staff at UCS
- Contractors, delivery partners, and affiliates
- External speakers
- Guests and event attendees
- Researchers undertaking research at UCS, and any external or partner researchers linked to that research

3. Legal and Regulatory Framework

In taking reasonably practical steps to secure lawful freedom of speech and academic freedom within the law, UCS must comply with a number of legal and regulatory duties, including:

- Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 – Requires active promotion and protection of lawful free speech and academic freedom.
- Higher Education and Research Act 2017 – Establishes the OfS and protects academic freedom.
- Education (No.2) Act 1986 – Requires “reasonably practicable” steps to secure free speech on university premises.
- Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty – Requires prevention of unlawful discrimination and fostering of good relations while protecting lawful free expression.
- Human Rights Act 1998 (Article 10) – Protects freedom of expression within lawful limits.

- Prevent Duty (Section 26 of the Counterterrorism and Security Act 2015) – Requires proportionate steps to prevent people being drawn into terrorism while allowing lawful debate.

4. Key Definitions

- **Academic freedom** – The freedom of academic staff, within the law, to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without being adversely affected in their employment, privileges or prospects.
- **Freedom of speech** – The right to express lawful views, including controversial or unpopular ones.
- **External speaker** – Anyone from outside the wider College Group invited to contribute to an event.
- **Contentious or high-risk event** – An event likely to attract strong disagreement, media attention, safety and/or legal concerns.
- **Unlawful speech** – Expression that breaks UK law (eg inciting violence, unlawful harassment, support for proscribed groups).
- **Organiser** – The staff member, student, society or group arranging the event.
- **Premises** – Any physical or digital space used for UCS activity.
- **Extremism** – Vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values as defined in the government's Prevent Duty guidance.
- **Unlawful meeting** – An event that would involve unlawful activity or where identified legal or safety risks cannot reasonably be mitigated.

5. UCS Commitment to Freedom of Speech

UCS actively promotes and protects lawful freedom of speech. We aim to create an environment where a wide range of views can be expressed, heard and challenged.

UCS will:

- Encourage open and lawful debate, including on sensitive or challenging topics
- Support staff, students and groups to organise events that involve a wide range of lawful viewpoints
- Provide clear processes, training and guidance
- Offer practical arrangements, such as alternative venues, stewarding, or moderated discussions, to enable events to proceed
- Make impartial decisions based solely on lawful considerations
- Challenge attempts to silence lawful speech, including disruption or intimidation
- Promote awareness of free speech rights and responsibilities across the institution

UCS will not restrict lawful speech, even if some may find the views expressed offensive or unpopular.

5. Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs)

UCS will not use, request or enforce NDAs, confidentiality clauses or similar agreements, to prevent or discourage anyone, be they students, staff, speakers, or visitors, from raising concerns relating to freedom of speech, academic freedom, harassment, discrimination or matters of public interest.

6. Event Approval Process

All non-curricular events involving external speakers must be requested as set out in the UCS External Speakers & Events Procedure.

Organisers must provide:

- Event purpose and content
- Speaker information
- Expected audience
- Any practical, safety, legal or statutory issues requiring planning

A proportionate risk assessment is carried out for every event. Where concerns arise, reasonable mitigations will be considered before any decision is made to refuse, restrict or cancel an event.

7. Contentious Events

Events may be considered contentious if:

- Strong disagreement, protest, or media attention is likely
- Safety or security concerns may arise
- Prevent, equality or other statutory duties require specific consideration

Applications to UCS to hold contentious events must be submitted at least 20 working days before the event in accordance with the UCS External Speakers & Events Procedure. Late requests will be considered where there is enough time to assess risks and put appropriate mitigations in place.

8. Disturbance and Breaches

Disrupting a lawful event breaches this Code. Incidents must be reported immediately to a member of the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT). Students, staff or visitors who disrupt events may face disciplinary action or removal from premises. Peaceful protest is permitted within the law but must not prevent others from speaking or being heard.

9. Curriculum

UCS will ensure that decisions about curriculum content, approval, review and delivery protect academic freedom and lawful freedom of speech. Academic staff must be able to teach and communicate lawful ideas, including ideas that are controversial, unpopular or may be considered offensive, and students must not be denied exposure to lawful ideas solely on those grounds. Curriculum decisions may set legitimate academic standards and learning outcomes, but must not require staff or students to endorse a particular viewpoint or value judgement.

10. Research

UCS recognises research as including any form of intellectual inquiry. Staff and students are free to undertake academic research within the law. Research must not be restricted or compromised because its anticipated or actual conclusions, or the viewpoint it supports, are thought to conflict with UCS policies or values, or because of external pressure, including pressure from funding bodies or partners.

Research ethics review must:

- Focus on ethical issues and not impose requirements based on the perceived quality of the proposed research or reputational concerns;
- Have particular regard to academic freedom and the risk that a decision may unnecessarily restrict lawful research;
- Operate transparently, with reasons for material decisions recorded; and
- Be monitored for evidence of unnecessary suppression or restriction of research.

Where external funding or partnership conditions seek to influence or suppress particular lawful findings or viewpoints, UCS will consider reasonably practicable steps to protect the academic freedom of staff and students.

11. Complaints

Concerns about breaches of this Code can be raised initially through:

- The relevant student complaints process
- The staff grievance and HR procedures

After completing internal procedures those wishing to seek redress can do so as follows:

- Students may take eligible complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) after completing UCS complaints procedures.
- Members of staff and external speakers may submit an eligible complaint to the OfS at https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/freedom-of-speech/free-speech-complaints/how-to-make-a-free-speech-complaint/ . This includes:
    - a member or member of staff within the Sparsholt College Group
    - someone who has applied to become a member of academic staff of UCS or to teach on a higher education course, or
    - someone who was, or was invited to be, a visiting speaker.

12. Governance and Related Policies

The Code is UCS's definitive statement of its approach to lawful freedom of speech and academic freedom. Where other policies, procedures or codes may engage freedom of speech considerations, including those relating to student conduct, staff conduct, equality, harassment, fitness to practise and research ethics, they should be read in conjunction with this Code.

Decision-makers and committees exercising functions that may affect freedom of speech or academic freedom will have regard to this Code when carrying out those responsibilities.

13. Publication and Review

UCS will publish this Code prominently on its website, without password access. Staff and students will receive a clear written summary, including how to access the Code, at least annually. Relevant prospectuses, handbooks, policies and procedures will also include or prominently link to it.

UCS will review the Code annually to ensure it remains accurate and legally compliant.

Appendix A – UCS External Speaker & Events Procedure

APPENDIX A - EXTERNAL SPEAKER & EVENTS PROCEDURE

1. Purpose and scope

University Centre Sparsholt (UCS) welcomes external speakers, visitors and events that enrich learning, teaching, research, employability, public engagement and academic debate. This procedure applies to events involving people or organisations external to the Sparsholt College Group, whether held on campus, off site or online. It supports well-planned events, a positive and professional experience for speakers and guests, appropriate financial oversight, and compliance with relevant institutional requirements.

This procedure must be read alongside the UCS Freedom of Speech Code of Practice. Matters relating to lawful freedom of speech, academic freedom, contentious events, equality duties and the Prevent Duty must be considered under that Code.

2. Requesting an event or speaker

The organiser must submit an External Speaker and Event Request before confirming arrangements with a speaker or organisation. Requests should normally be submitted at least 10 working days before a standard event, or at least 20 working days before an event that may require consideration under section 7 (Contentious Events) under the UCS Freedom of Speech code of Practice. The request should be in writing and contain at least:

- Event title, purpose, format, date, venue and expected audience.
- Speaker or organisation details and the proposed contribution.
- Known accessibility, safeguarding, operational or security requirements.
- Proposed fees, expenses, hospitality and any other financial commitment.

Where an external speaker is invited to deliver part of the agreed curriculum as part of a routine timetabled class, this will normally be treated as standard curriculum delivery rather than a separate external speaker event. In these circumstances, no separate External Speaker and Event Request, risk assessment or approval is required, provided there are no additional event arrangements, payments, publicity, external attendees or identified safeguarding, health and safety, operational or freedom of speech matters to consider.

3. Approval and financial oversight

The approval route will reflect the nature and complexity of the event. Routine events may be approved by the relevant line manager. Events requiring additional operational, safeguarding or legal consideration must be referred to the appropriate Vice Principal/Dean. Events meeting the criteria for a contentious event must be referred to the Principal or their delegated representative.

Where costs are involved, the relevant budget holder must approve the commitment before arrangements are confirmed. This includes speaker fees, travel, accommodation, hospitality and related expenditure. Approval must confirm that funding is available and that procurement, payment and expenses arrangements are appropriate.

4. Risk assessment and event management

All events involving external speakers will receive a proportionate assessment of risk. The starting point is that lawful events should proceed wherever reasonably practicable. Where concerns arise, reasonable mitigations must be considered before refusal or cancellation, in accordance with the UCS Freedom of Speech Code of Practice. Measures may include staff supervision, registration or ticketing, moderated discussion, an alternative venue or format, stewarding, security, safeguarding or accessibility arrangements.

5. Organiser responsibilities

The organiser is responsible for obtaining all required approvals before confirming the event or speaker, providing complete and accurate information, and notifying approvers of any material changes. They must ensure that the speaker receives timely information, a clear point of contact and appropriate support, and that all practical arrangements are in place, including the venue, equipment, access requirements, hospitality, and any agreed payments or expenses. The organiser must also ensure suitable staff oversight during the event and report any incident, concern or breach promptly.

6. Records

Requests, decisions, risk assessments, financial authorisations and conditions must be retained in accordance with College Group procedures.