

Whistleblowing & "Freedom to Speak Up" Policy

At Nextsmartstep, we are committed to the highest standards of openness, integrity, and accountability. With over 20 years of experience in the housing and support sectors, we recognise that our staff and partners are often the first to realise when something may be wrong.

We foster a culture where everyone feels safe to "speak up" without fear of reprisal, in accordance with the Public Interest Disclosure Act (PIDA) 1998.

1. Scope of the Policy

Nextsmartstep provides high-quality supported housing. While we do not provide CQC-regulated "Personal Care," we maintain rigorous internal safeguarding standards. Whistleblowing relates to suspected wrongdoing or dangers, including:

- **Safeguarding Concerns:** Suspected abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation of a resident.
- **Health & Safety:** Risks to the safety of residents, staff, or the public within our properties.
- **Criminal Activity:** Fraud, theft, or mismanagement of resident or company funds.
- **Failure to Comply:** Breaches of the Care Act 2014 or local authority contract requirements.

2. Our "No Detriment" Promise

Nextsmartstep guarantees that any person who raises a genuine concern in the public interest will be protected. You will not suffer any professional disadvantage,

harassment, or victimisation. We operate a Zero Tolerance policy toward the bullying of whistleblowers.

3. How to Raise a Concern (Internal)

1. Stage 1: Report the concern to your Line Manager.

2. Stage 2: If the concern involves your manager, or you feel unheard, report it directly to the Senior Management Team via info@nextsmartstep.co.uk.

3. Confidentiality: We will make every effort to keep your identity confidential if requested.

4. External Reporting (Thurrock Local Authority)

If you feel a concern has not been addressed internally, or if it involves a serious safeguarding risk to a resident in the Thurrock area, you should contact the local authority directly:

- Thurrock Adult Safeguarding (MASH):
 - Phone: 01375 511000 (Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm)
 - Out of Hours/Emergency: 01375 372468
 - Email: safeguardingadults@thurrock.gov.uk
- Protect (National Whistleblowing Charity): 020 3117 2520

5. Investigation Process

Nextsmartstep will acknowledge any report within 24 hours, conduct an objective investigation, and provide a formal response to the whistleblower regarding the outcome.