Summerhill General Policy Statement (Community life)

This document arose from the need to define certain practices which are necessary parts of the Summerhill philosophy, but which might be considered contrary to some traditional childcare customs outside the school.

When A.S. Neill was writing about *community life*, he was describing the experience of living at Summerhill. The hours beyond lessons - the evenings, weekends and all the time that nobody had organised for the children - were not something added to the Summerhill experience; they were an essential part of the life he was describing. Boarding has therefore never required a separate philosophy. This Community Life statement, together with the *General Policy Statement (A.S. Neill)* and the *Summerhill General Policy Statement*, expresses the aims and principles of Summerhill as a whole, but it is through the continuous shared life of the boarding community that those principles find their fullest expression.

One of the unique and valuable experiences, which Summerhill offers its students is living as equal members in a democratic community. This includes staff, boys and girls. The Summerhill experience enables pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds to grow in a family environment; free from the usual social prejudices found in most other schools, in particular, gender-based prejudices. The result of this is that throughout the school there is a marked confidence and friendship between the sexes, and between all age groups.

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Freedom for the individual is considered of primary importance at Summerhill. There is a clear definition between “Freedom” and “Licence”. Members of the community are free to do as they like, provided it does not interfere with the freedom of somebody else. Thus, you can wear what you like, eat what you like, attend lessons if you like – but you cannot play your drum kit at three in the morning or pee on the lounge floor. The school laws (at present about four hundred!) protect individuals and also protect the welfare of the school, the property, the school’s reputation etc.

Self-government at Summerhill covers all areas of everyday life at the school. It does not cover:

- Staffing
- Pupil intake and expulsion
- Finances
- Some safety issues

Community members may bring up businesses pertaining to any of the above in the school meetings for discussion. Changes will frequently be implemented following such discussion. The community has occasionally carried motions in the meeting which demanded the expulsion of a particular child or staff. This event would be taken very seriously and the Principal would take the community’s opinions into full account.

Any member of the community, pupil, or staff, has the right to charge another or bring up a business in the General Meeting or call a Special Meeting about anything they wish to. Thus, both pupils and staff are answerable to the whole community. Nobody in the school is exempt from this, and no subject is beyond

the community's discussion. There is an appeal process available in all Meetings.

Since Summerhill was established in 1921 it has been the policy to allow the younger children, in the 'San' to share mixed sex accommodation, just as they would within their own families. This lays the foundation for a more natural and equal relationship between the sexes, which will last throughout their school years and on into adult life. The rest of the school have single sex rooms but in mixed sex corridors.

The accommodation arrangements are an important part of the Summerhill experience in which students live as equal members of a democratic, self-governing community. Naturally, where children share a bedroom, they are able to express a preference with whom they share. This is usually done via an informal conversation with the house-parent or the adult with whom they feel most comfortable. Further, the presence of girls on the same corridor as boys brings a greater equilibrium to the whole area and, as A.S.Neill wrote: 'One sex will not grow up with any illusions or delusions about the other sex.' Staff accommodation may be situated within the children's sleeping areas, regardless of sex. Any conflicts, which may arise within these areas, are resolved through ombudsmen or the school meeting.

All toilet and washing areas in the school can be used by either sex, or by staff. Rules covering this subject are open to change in the General Meeting. If one sex or age group in the school want to be exempt from sharing, then it can be passed by democratic vote. There have been several occasions in the past when certain groups have carried proposals excluding other groups from the use of their toilet area, mainly due to boys peeing on the seats!

Summerhill has a different attitude towards physical contact and friendships between staff and pupils to that of other schools. Hugging, sitting on laps and other physical displays of affection are an accepted and much valued part of community life.

Summerhill pupils have freedom to take part in what may be considered by some as risky pastimes, such as climbing trees, building dens, racing on bicycles, etc.

The school has many safety laws such as a ban on younger children having knives or matches, no climbing on roofs, only supervised use of the swimming pool, laws governing who can go downtown (visit the local shops), when and at what age etc. These safety laws, in one form or another, often come up for discussion in the school meeting with the result that the meetings are a risk assessment forum. This makes risk assessments not an abstract, adult driven concept but something which is very real for the pupils and adults alike. Some risk taking, both emotional and physical, is considered an important part of discovering one's own, and other people's boundaries.

Summerhill School has a long history of not filtering the internet and allowing children to make their own choices about what is and what is not appropriate with guidance from the school meeting when problems or issues arise. However, in the school meeting on March 24, 2017, the community decided to introduce an electronic filtering system. This system, which operates in conjunction with our school law, is policed by

the whole community through the school meeting. (For more information, see *Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy*)

Summerhill is a place where children can be left alone. Staff are available and supportive when children want to talk, but they will not pursue children and offer assistance unless this is an action decided in a staff meeting. The staff at Summerhill are practical care-workers – they are not counsellors, social workers, or agony aunts. Although we believe that children should be responsible for finding their own answers whenever possible, the adults at Summerhill are sensitive and responsive to the children's needs. (See section 4 – *General Policy Statement*)

The care described above forms part of Summerhill's unique community life, which is itself a core protective mechanism. The School Meeting, Ombudsmen and other elected committees provide practical ways to address harmful behaviour, uphold individual rights and ensure accountability throughout the community. Living together across ages and backgrounds creates familiarity, trust and mutual understanding, while an open, non-judgemental culture encourages children to speak freely, share difficulties and seek help. Equal democratic rights and the everyday experience of genuine choice also strengthen children's ability to recognise unfairness, resist coercion and stand up for themselves and others. Houseparents and teachers bring together their knowledge of individual children through ongoing observation, staff discussions and regular reviews, taking appropriate pastoral and professional safeguarding action as needed. Together, these community and professional safeguards form an essential part of the principles and practice of boarding at Summerhill.

Summerhill is a non-religious community. It does not preach for, or against, any religion. Important values such as tolerance, understanding, compassion etc are learned through living as equal members of a self-governing community.

The school policy is to be supportive and to offer advice and information about sex and sexuality whenever it is needed. The school aims for children to feel comfortable and supported so that if sexual problems arise, they will be able to talk openly to the adults and seek help. Parents may be informed if we have concerns, though we will try to comply with a child's wish for confidentiality when possible. Although it is legal for children over the age of 16 to have sexual intercourse, it is of course not allowed whilst they are at school.

The smoking of cigarettes is not permitted on the school premises. Neither is vaping. The rule applies to adults and pupils. Any sanction for breaking this rule is decided by the community in the school meeting.

There is a rule of no drinking among pupils, though 18-year-olds can have a small drink at the pub or in staff's rooms with Meeting permission. We have mild alcoholic punches from time to time on special occasions such as our Christmas mulled wine, or when we lick the government in court, celebrate our 100th birthday, etc. - served age appropriately – e.g. the little ones mostly get just lemonade with perhaps a sniff of the alcohol so that they do not feel left out!

Of course, drug taking of any sort is not allowed. We do not have a drug problem at Summerhill – any incidents are dealt with easily and it is very rare.

The usual penalty for drinking or drug taking is being sent home for a minimum of four weeks and past experience has shown that being excluded from the place you love is a successful sanction. However, individual circumstances are taken into account so the penalty may vary, and we always reserve the right to permanently exclude a child. Under normal circumstances, no refund is given on time spent at home. Still on the subject of sanctions etc., the school is required to provide written confirmation that it rejects, (and indeed has always rejected), the use of corporal punishment.

There is no restriction on the use of language at Summerhill, though swearing outside the school is prohibited by the school meeting. Of course, this, like all other issues, can be changed in the General Meeting by majority vote.

Child-on-child abuse (bullying), both online and offline is dealt with by the school meeting. Ombudsmen are available instantly to mediate and provide support between meetings. Special Meetings can always be called at any time, day or night. These community processes form part of Summerhill's wider anti-bullying strategy, alongside pastoral care, online-safety arrangements and opportunities for children to raise concerns privately with houseparents, trusted staff or safeguarding leads. Where bullying or other child-on-child abuse requires safeguarding action, staff follow the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, with particular attention to the continuing safety and wellbeing of boarders, whose shared lives extend through evenings, nights and weekends.

At Summerhill we have a very ‘open’ attitude to our bodies, nudity and bodily functions, and strongly separate nudity from sexuality. We pride ourselves on being prepared to talk about anything. As Neill wrote: ‘At Summerhill, nothing is unmentionable, and no one is shockable.’ Having an ‘open’, unrepressed, approving attitude to these things is very important for a child’s emotional development. This positive attitude to our bodies is becoming ever more important as we live in a society obsessed with body image; a society in which most people, especially teenagers, don’t feel positive about the way they look and often engage in forms of self-harm because of it.

The freedom to attend lessons or otherwise is genuine. There are no hidden pressures from the adults in the community. There are always times during the course of their stay at Summerhill when students will be non- attenders. This depends very much on their experiences in other schools prior to joining Summerhill. If staff have concerns about the motives for not attending (possible classroom phobia, shyness, etc.) the child will remain on the Special Attention list for regular monitoring and will be offered support. However, non-attendance of classes on its own would not be considered a problem but more often a sign that emotional development is following the usual route. (See *General Policy Statement)* We recognise that some children have special needs, and we provide appropriately for them.

Summerhill does not send school reports to parents. If they are needed for college entrance etc., they can be sent upon request, with the pupil’s involvement. The Principal will answer any queries about general welfare, or particular worries which parents may have, but the children’s lives at school are considered their own business

– to share, or not with their parents as they wish. The pupils at Summerhill value this aspect most highly, it gives them a feeling of responsibility to themselves and of independence. (See policy on *assessment, record-keeping and report writing)*

The principles of freedom, self-determination and shared responsibility that underpin boarding at Summerhill also guide decisions about a child's fitness to board. This involves considering whether the child can, with support appropriate to their needs and development, exercise the freedoms and meet the shared responsibilities that boarding at Summerhill entails, and participate meaningfully in its distinctive residential life. It also requires an assessment of how effectively the school's existing care arrangements and community safeguards meet the child's needs, what additional support or reasonable adjustments may be necessary, and whether these can be provided safely and maintained reliably over time, with due regard for the rights and wellbeing of others. The Fitness to Board Criteria in Appendix A provide the framework for these individual decisions, whether a child is beginning, continuing or returning to boarding.

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Summerhill recognises that its approach might be considered unusual and that some people may look upon it with disapproval. However, these things are part of the philosophy of freedom and self-government, which is considered essential to the development of the pupil’s emotional growth and well-being, and which for 100 years has proved to be successful.

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Document history

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Appendix A

Summerhill School’s Fitness to Board Criteria

1. Purpose and Scope of the Criteria

Boarding is at the heart of the Summerhill experience. Much of what children gain from living in a democratic, self-governing community emerges through the ordinary, shared experiences of daily life: forming friendships across ages, resolving difficulties together, making decisions, respecting one another's freedom and taking real responsibility for the community. This experience deepens as children grow from the San through to the Carriages, developing greater independence within a community to which they belong and contribute.

Boarding also brings responsibilities that extend beyond the school day, including overnight care, supervision and the management of shared living spaces. These particular demands of residential life mean that a pupil's suitability for boarding must be considered in its own right. The Fitness to Board Criteria therefore apply to prospective pupils seeking a boarding place, existing day pupils wishing to board, and current boarders when a review is necessary.

The **Fitness to Board Criteria** consider:

1. **Whether boarding is in the pupil's best interests**, taking account of their physical and emotional wellbeing, individual needs and wishes, and the rights and wellbeing of others in their boarding area and the wider community.
2. **Whether Summerhill's boarding provision can adequately meet the pupil's health, behavioural and pastoral needs**, through its staffing, supervision, facilities, professional care and community safeguards, with additional support and reasonable adjustments where required.
3. **Whether the pupil can, with support appropriate to their age and development, recognise and communicate their needs and concerns**, and engage with essential medical, personal care and safety arrangements.
4. **Whether the pupil can, with support appropriate to their developing independence, engage with and respond to Summerhill's democratic community systems**, including the School Meeting, Ombudsmen, community laws, decisions and arrangements for resolving difficulties and maintaining accountability.

5. **Whether the care, support and safeguards required can be provided while preserving a meaningful experience of Summerhill's distinctive boarding life**, as described in the Summerhill General Policy Statement, including its commitment to individual freedom, self-directed development and shared responsibility within a self-governing community.

6. **Whether, where health, behavioural or safeguarding risks have been identified, these can be addressed through appropriate medical, community, pastoral or safeguarding arrangements**, and whether the circumstances raise a separate question under other school policies and procedures.

The assessment draws on the information available about the individual pupil. For prospective pupils, this may include information provided by parents and, where relevant, previous schools, local authorities, other agencies or professionals, together with observations from previous visits to Summerhill. For existing pupils, the school's direct knowledge of their needs and participation in community life provides further evidence. Where an individual pupil risk assessment is required, this is made in line with the school's *Individual Pupil Risk Assessment Framework* which includes within it the *Effectiveness of Community Engagement.* This will also help to establish how effectively the community's safeguards and responsibilities function for that pupil.

Safeguarding matters are addressed under the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy; health-related needs are considered alongside the Medical Conditions Policy and any Individual Healthcare Plans; and reasonable adjustments are considered in accordance with the SEN Policy, Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy and Accessibility Plan.

2. Fitness to Board Criteria

The criteria below identify matters requiring individual consideration. However, none is an automatic bar to boarding.

A. Health

The central question is whether the pupil's physical and mental health needs can be met safely within Summerhill's residential provision, including at night and during less structured periods of community life.

In making this assessment, the school considers:

- **The nature and severity of any health concerns**, including significant or fluctuating medical needs, emotional distress, self-harm or suicidal ideation, eating difficulties or disorders, and substance-related health risks.
- **The care and support required in practice**, including medication, supervision, monitoring, access to medical or specialist services, and arrangements for emergencies. Any relevant Individual Healthcare Plans or safety plans are taken into account.
- **The pupil's ability to engage with essential care and safety arrangements**, including recognising and communicating their needs, seeking help when necessary and following agreed plans, with support appropriate to their age and development. Consideration is also given to the school's ability to provide the necessary assistance consistently.

The presence of a condition or difficulty does not, by itself, determine the outcome of a fitness to board assessment. The assessment considers its current effects, professional advice where relevant, and whether appropriate care and reasonable adjustments can be maintained.

B. Community

Fitness to board is also considered in relation to the freedoms and responsibilities of living in Summerhill's self-governing community, recognising that pupils develop their understanding of its laws, democratic processes and shared responsibilities through experience and appropriate support.

In making this assessment, the school considers:

- **Freedom and the rights of others:** Whether the pupil can, with appropriate support, exercise their freedom while respecting the equal rights, safety, privacy and wellbeing of others sharing the community.
- **Personal safety and developing independence:** Whether the pupil can safely exercise the freedom and independence associated with their boarding area, together with the responsibilities these bring, taking account of their individual needs and the supervision and support available. This includes awareness of essential safety laws, whereabouts arrangements and knowing when and how to seek help.
- **Democratic processes and accountability:** Whether the pupil can, with appropriate guidance, engage with and respond to the community's established processes, including the School Meeting, school laws and decisions, Ombudsmen and other committees, both in exercising their own rights and in being accountable for actions that affect others.

- **Effectiveness of community safeguards:** Whether these community arrangements, together with houseparent care, professional safeguarding and any necessary reasonable adjustments, can effectively resolve difficulties, maintain accountability and protect the pupil and others.

These considerations take account of the pupil's age, development, individual needs and experience of Summerhill. Ordinary disagreements, mistakes, challenges to community decisions and the exercise of personal choice are not, in themselves, indications of unsuitability for boarding.

3. Individual Assessment, Reasonable Adjustments and Decision-Making

Fitness to Board decisions are made by the Principal, after consultation with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), Deputy DSL, Senior Management Team and the relevant houseparent. The Houseparent contributes an understanding of the pupil's residential needs and the practical arrangements available within their boarding area. Safeguarding leads and senior staff contribute their knowledge of the pupil's welfare, any additional needs and the school's capacity to provide appropriate care.

As stated above, where particular concerns or identified needs require closer examination, an individual pupil risk assessment is undertaken or reviewed in accordance with Summerhill's *Individual Pupil Risk Assessments Framework*. This considers the risks involved, the effectiveness of existing safeguards and any additional measures required. The *Effectiveness of Community Engagement* and the separate risks ratings inform this process, but neither rating determines fitness to board independently.

The pupil's views are considered in accordance with their age and understanding, and parents are consulted throughout the process as appropriate. Relevant medical or other professional advice is sought where necessary. Before reaching a decision, the school considers reasonable adjustments and additional support, including whether the staff, resources and any specialist arrangements required can be reliably provided and maintained in practice.

The Principal reaches a decision having considered the available evidence, the views of those involved and the effectiveness of the proposed arrangements. **A decision that a pupil cannot currently board does not constitute exclusion from Summerhill.** Where the circumstances also raise questions about the pupil's continued place at the school, these are considered separately under the school's behaviour or admissions and exclusions arrangements and the school's Terms and Conditions.

4. Immediate Safety Concerns

Where an immediate concern arises about a pupil's safety or the safety of others, protective action may be necessary before a full Fitness to Board assessment can be completed. Staff act in accordance with Summerhill's safeguarding and medical procedures, involving the DSL or Deputy DSL and the Principal as appropriate. Depending on the circumstances, this may include increased supervision, urgent medical or safeguarding intervention, or temporary changes to boarding arrangements.

Any immediate measures must be proportionate to the circumstances and remain in place only for as long as necessary. Where a pupil needs to leave boarding temporarily, parents are consulted and suitable arrangements for the pupil's safe care and handover will be established before departure.

The reasons for the action taken and the arrangements put in place are recorded. Interim measures are reviewed promptly, and the full Fitness to Board assessment is completed once the necessary information is available.

5. Assessment Outcomes, Review and Return to Boarding

A Fitness to Board assessment may confirm that a pupil is suitable to begin or continue boarding under existing arrangements, or that additional support or reasonable adjustments are required. Where appropriate and practicable, these may include a gradual introduction or return to boarding, reduced boarding such as weekly boarding or an agreed number of nights, or modified boarding such as changes to supervision or care arrangements.

Where boarding cannot safely begin or continue at present, the school may postpone its commencement or require a temporary absence from school, with the pupil returning to the care of their parents or other suitable arrangements made by them. Such decisions are made with a view to reviewing the pupil's circumstances and considering whether boarding can subsequently begin or resume.

Where the assessment concludes that a pupil's existing boarding arrangements cannot safely continue on an ongoing basis, the school may consider an alternative pattern of attendance, including a change to day-pupil status, according to the pupil's individual circumstances and the arrangements Summerhill can reasonably provide.

The decision and its reasons are communicated to the pupil and parents and recorded in writing, together with any agreed support or adjustments. Where circumstances may change, a review date is established. For pupils returning after a period away from boarding, the school identifies what arrangements or

improvements are necessary before their return and, where appropriate, seeks updated medical or other professional advice. The decision to resume boarding is made following a review of the pupil's circumstances and the school's ability to provide the necessary care and support.