

Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech

1. Scope and purpose

This Code of Practice (“the Code”) sets out St John’s College, Durham’s responsibilities and approach in relation to freedom of speech and academic freedom.

The Code explains:

- what is meant by freedom of speech and academic freedom
- the College’s values and commitments
- how meetings, events, and external speakers are approved and managed
- the boundaries of lawful expression
- how concerns or complaints may be raised
- how the Code is monitored and reviewed.

The Code applies to:

- all students, staff, and Senior Common Room members of St John’s College
- visiting speakers and other individuals invited to speak at College events
- all events held on College premises or organised under the College’s name.

2. Relationship with Durham University and other bodies

St John’s College is a recognised College of Durham University and an independent charitable institution with its own governance, policies, and procedures.

The College’s approach to freedom of speech largely aligns with Durham University’s Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and relevant sector guidance. This Code sets out St John’s College’s own responsibilities and processes in relation to freedom of speech within the law, particularly in the context of College life and the use of College premises.

Where events involve other University bodies or student organisations, this Code applies alongside any relevant University or Students’ Union requirements.

3. Freedom of speech

The College defines freedom of speech as:

“The freedom to impart ideas, opinions or information by means of speech, writing or images (including in electronic form), within the law.”

Freedom of speech is a fundamental right, protected under:

- the [Human Rights Act 1998](#) (including Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights) which protect freedom of thought, belief, and expression within the law.
- the [Equality Act 2010](#) which requires the College to prevent unlawful discrimination and harassment and to promote good relations within its community.
- the [Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 \(Prevent Duty\)](#) which requires the College to have due regard to preventing people from being drawn into terrorism while supporting lawful freedom of speech.

- charity law, including the [Charities Acts 2011](#) and [2022](#), which require the College to act independently, for the public benefit, and without political endorsement.

Protection extends to the expression of views that may shock, disturb, or offend others, provided they are expressed lawfully.

4. Academic freedom

The College recognises and supports academic freedom as defined in [section 202 of the Education Reform Act 1988](#).

Academic staff have freedom within the law to:

- question and test received wisdom
- put forward new, controversial, or unpopular ideas
- engage in open scholarly debate without fear of institutional penalty.

Academic freedom is central to the College's identity as a place of learning, inquiry, and formation.

5. College values and freedom of speech

St John's College is committed to:

- kindness, gratitude and respect
- inclusion and belonging
- intellectual curiosity and openness
- learning how to disagree well.

The College seeks to create an environment where:

- diverse perspectives can be expressed
- disagreement is handled thoughtfully
- all individuals are treated with dignity.

Providing a platform for lawful speech does **not** imply endorsement of the views expressed. The College's values will not always align with the views of speakers or organisers.

6. Lawful limits to freedom of speech

Freedom of speech must be exercised within the law.

The College will not permit expression that:

- incites violence or terrorism
- promotes hatred against protected groups under the Equality Act 2010
- constitutes harassment, intimidation, or unlawful discrimination
- involves defamation or other illegal activity.

The College also has a duty to promote good relations within its community and to ensure that staff and students can live, work, and study without unlawful intimidation or abuse.

7. Meetings, events, and external speakers

The College has a legal duty to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law, including ensuring that College premises are not denied on the basis of lawful beliefs or views.

At the same time, the College must balance this duty with:

- safety and support considerations
- safeguarding responsibilities
- operational and logistical constraints.

7.1 Prior authorisation

All events involving external speakers or politically-affiliated groups must receive prior authorisation from College Officers, in line with the College's **External Speakers and Events Process** (Appendix I).

7.2 Political and campaign events

Political discussion and advocacy are a legitimate part of College and University life. The College does not endorse political parties or movements but will host lawful political events where appropriate processes are followed.

8. Grounds for declining or cancelling events

Events will only be declined or cancelled where:

- they are likely to break the law
- serious and unmanageable risks remain after reasonable mitigations
- organisers or speakers refuse reasonable conditions set by the College
- the College cannot safely staff or accommodate the event.

Where competing demands exist, events organised by the St John's student or staff community will normally take precedence.

Events will not be declined solely because:

- views expressed are controversial
- members of the community strongly disagree
- the College's values differ from those of the speaker.

9. Cranmer Hall

Cranmer Hall is the Church of England theological college within St John's College.

Cranmer Hall shares the College's commitment to freedom of speech and academic freedom, grounded in theological inquiry, formation, and respectful debate. Events hosted by Cranmer Hall fall within this Code and may also reflect Cranmer's specific educational and ecclesial context.

The College recognises that theological education involves robust engagement with contested ideas and traditions, exercised within the same legal and ethical boundaries outlined in this Code.

10. Complaints and concerns

Anyone who believes that their rights under this Code have been infringed may raise concerns through appropriate College or University procedures, including:

- student complaints processes
- staff concerns procedures
- referral to the Principal's Office.

Concerns will be considered carefully, fairly, and proportionately.

11. Monitoring and review

This Code will be reviewed regularly by College Officers to ensure continued compliance with legal requirements, University guidance, and best practice across the higher education sector.

Approved by College Council, 13 March 2026.

APPENDIX I — External Speakers and Events Process

1. Definition of an external speaker

An external speaker is any individual or group invited to speak at an event held on College premises or organised under the College's name who is not:

- a current student of St John's College
- a member of College staff
- a Fellow or Senior Common Room member with a current College affiliation.

Where an organiser is unsure whether a speaker should be treated as an external speaker (for example, alumni or former staff), advice should be sought from College Officers.

2. Requirement for prior authorisation

All events involving external speakers must receive prior authorisation from a College Officer.

This applies to:

- student-organised events
- staff, Fellows and SCR-organised events
- events organised jointly with external partners
- events held on College premises or promoted in the name of the College.

3. How to seek authorisation

Students

Students organising events on College premises must:

- declare external speakers when completing the Room Booking Form
- submit details at least three weeks before the event.

Staff, Fellows and SCR Members

Staff and SCR members should:

- seek authorisation by emailing the relevant College Officer or the Principal's Office (prin.exec@durham.ac.uk)
- complete the External Speakers documentation on SharePoint.

4. Assessment and approval

College Officers will consider:

- the nature and purpose of the event
- the proposed speaker(s)
- the intended audience and format
- compliance with UK law, College policies, and safeguarding requirements.

Approval may be granted subject to reasonable conditions to ensure the event can proceed safely, lawfully, and respectfully.

5. Conditions of speaker conduct

External speakers are expected to:

- comply with UK law
- engage respectfully with others
- avoid incitement to violence, hatred, or discrimination
- refrain from promoting illegal activity or violent extremism.

The College may require speakers to be briefed in advance on these expectations.

6. Responsibilities of event organisers

Event organisers are responsible for:

- providing accurate and complete information about speakers
- complying with any conditions attached to approval
- completing a risk assessment where requested
- ensuring safeguarding requirements are met
- coordinating with College staff on logistics and security.

7. Grounds for declining or cancelling an event

An event involving an external speaker may be declined or cancelled where:

- it is likely to break the law
- serious and unmanageable risks remain after reasonable mitigation
- organisers or speakers refuse reasonable conditions
- the College cannot safely staff or accommodate the event, including where:
 - no suitable room or space is available
 - multiple College commitments already exist
 - the event would place disproportionate pressure on College operations.

Where competing demands arise, events organised by the St John's student or staff community will normally take precedence.

8. Notification and records

Organisers will receive written confirmation of approval or refusal.

Records of external speaker approvals will be retained by the College in line with its governance and record-keeping practices.