College Therapy Dogs

Person Responsible:	Principal
Date of Policy:	September 2026
Next review date:	September 2029

Rationale

Great Oaks College recognises the positive impact that a therapy dog can have on students' wellbeing, engagement and personal development. The College is committed to ensuring that the therapy dog's presence is managed safely, professionally and inclusively, with appropriate risk assessments, welfare arrangements and consideration of student needs, allergies, cultural sensitivities and preferences.

Aims

The overall objective of this policy is to establish a safe, effective and inclusive framework for the use of a therapy dog at Great Oaks College, ensuring that the benefits to students, staff and the wider college community are maximised while maintaining appropriate standards of safety, welfare and risk management.

Objectives

The College dogs are Samson, owned by a Deputy Principal, and Mabel, owned by the Principal who will be referred to as the dogs' handlers throughout this policy. The responsibility of these animals falls directly to their handlers and not to the college. The College dogs are both Golden Retrievers. This breed has a well-established reputation for being gentle, friendly, intelligent and highly trainable. Golden Retrievers are widely used in educational, therapeutic and healthcare settings because they are calm, patient and enjoy positive interaction with people. Both dogs have risk assessments for each of the college sites (see Appendix 1).

Responsibility within the college day/on college property

During the college day and whilst on college premises, the responsible handler will ensure that the therapy dog remains under appropriate supervision at all times and will not leave the site without the dog or arranging for its care by another authorised handler (see Appendix 2). The dog's welfare will be prioritised through the provision of adequate rest breaks, food, fresh water, and access to a safe space for rest and play. If the dog is unwell or displaying signs of illness, it will not attend college until it is fit to do so.

Safety and Welfare of Staff and Students

The College is committed to ensuring the safety, wellbeing and comfort of all students, staff and visitors. Individuals known to have allergies to dogs will not be required to interact with them, and all visitors will be informed on arrival that a therapy dog is present on site. In the interests of health and hygiene, the dogs will be toileted during supervised walks around the college grounds. Any waste will be promptly and appropriately cleared by a member of staff, or by vocational students participating in supervised dog-care activities, with the area cleaned and disinfected where necessary.

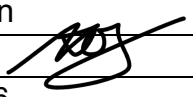
When moving around the College or taking part in walks, the dogs will normally be kept on a lead and under the full control of a trained staff member. At the discretion of Mr Murr, and where circumstances are deemed safe and appropriate, the dogs may be allowed off lead when interacting with calm and confident students. Students will never be left alone with a dog, and appropriate staff supervision will be maintained at all times. Students will be supported to understand appropriate behaviour around dogs, including approaching Samson calmly while standing, avoiding placing their face near him, and not disturbing him when he is sleeping or eating. Rough play or inappropriate handling will not be permitted in order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both students and the dog.

How the Therapy Dog May Be Used to Support Students

The therapy dog may be used as part of the College's wider therapeutic and educational provision to support students' communication, emotional wellbeing, and engagement in learning. Interactions with the dog can help reduce anxiety, promote positive mental health, and provide comfort during periods of stress or emotional dysregulation. The dog may also be used to encourage physical activity through walking, play, and outdoor activities, supporting students' health, mobility, and independence. In addition, structured sessions with the dog can be used to support students in becoming more comfortable around animals through gradual desensitisation, helping to build confidence and reduce fear or anxiety. Further details of therapeutic activities and intervention approaches can be found in Appendix 3.

Financial and Legal Responsibility and Insurance

Financial and legal responsibility for the therapy dog remains with the designated dog handlers. Dog handlers are responsible for all routine costs associated with the dog's care and welfare, including insurance premiums, veterinary treatment, food, grooming, and any other domestic expenses. The College will reimburse the cost of appropriate third-party liability insurance that enables the therapy dog to be covered whilst carrying out its role on college premises and participating in college-related activities. The College accepts no responsibility for the dog's routine upkeep or personal expenses beyond this agreed insurance contribution.

Approved by Board of Trustees	
Print Name	Killian O'Sullivan
Sign	
Date Agreed	11th November 2026

Appendix 1

		Date; 15/9/2026					Written by; Rich Murr and Nickyie Thomas		
Behaviour	Hazard	Person(s) at risk	Sev	Likli hd	Risk	Control Strategies	Sev	Likli hd	risk
Students/ Staff with allergies	Sneezing/eyes watering	Check individual RAs	2	3	6	Staff made aware through the medical list. Students will then have limited access to the dog. Dog groomed regularly. All Students will be instructed to wash their hands following contact with the dog.	2	2	4
Dog waste	Students picking up/eating/stepping	All	4	3	12	At the Triangle, the dogs will be allowed to access the outside space when students are not onsite. Dogs should be taken out for regular walks. At the Windmill, the dogs may access the grass area	4	1	4

						when not in use by the students (unless it is a planned session) The staff with the dog will be responsible for picking up and disposing of dog waste unless it is part of a vocational training programme. Dog waste should be disposed of in an appropriate bin. Should the dog have an accident onsite, it should be cleaned immediately and appropriately. The site team should be informed so that a deep clean of the area can also take place.			

Safety of the dog	Students being over stimulated and potentially harming dog	All	4	4	16	A responsible, named staff member must be with the dog at all times, particularly when it is being used for therapy or learning sessions. The dog will only be allowed off-site with the Handler's permissions. Any contact with the dog must be agreed by the handler. Training/commands learnt by the handler to be shared with responsible, named staff.	4	2	8
Introducing the dog to the college and its staff/students	Students being scared of the dog	All	4	4	16	New students to the school/college will be introduced to the dog slowly.	4	2	8

						Training materials for students from the Kennel Club and Battersea Cats and Dogs Home will be available for staff for them to complete with students where appropriate. Students' wishes will always be respected, there are no forced interactions with the animals.			
Interactions between students/staff and the dog	Students being scared of the dog Students picking up/eating/stepping in dog mess Students being over stimulated and potentially harming dog	All	4	4	16	The dog will be on a lead and with a responsible, named staff member when initially interacting with the students. If it is deemed appropriate, the handler may allow the dog off the lead when	4	2	8

						around students who are confident and calm. The handler will assess the dog's temperament each day before allowing the dog access to students. They will also check that the student(s) the dog will be working with are calm and that the dog is going into a suitable environment. Any concerns re the suitability of therapy time will result in the dog being returned to the handler's office.			
Dog training	Dog unsuitable for college/school environment	All	4	4	16	Dog training is ongoing in line with the developmental needs of the dogs and in line with the needs of our students.	4	1	4

Food	Dog eating inappropriate foods and becoming unwell/unhealthy	All	3	3	9	The dog will not be allowed in areas when the students are eating. The dog will not be given food/treats by anyone other than their handler or staff walking the dog during the day. Only treats provided by the handler will be allowed to be given to the Dog	3	1	3
Students who are not familiar with dogs	Students being scared of the dog Students picking up/eating/stepping in dog mess Students being over stimulated and potentially harming dog	Identified students	4	4	16	The dog to be kept on a lead when around students although it may be allowed off lead at the handler's discretion if all students are able to cope with this. A desensitization program for	4	2	8

						students and a social story is available for staff to use with certain students who are trying to become more confident with dogs.			
Visitors to the school	Visitors being scared of the dog Visitors seeing/smelling/stepping in dog mess Visitors being over stimulated and potentially harming dog	All	3	3	9	Statement on website, leaflet to be prepared for brochure, notice to be put in reception informing visitors of the dog. RA to be followed The dog will remain on the lead and under control at all times.	3	1	3
Site security	Dog running away and being injured/lost/taken	Dog	4	3	12	Electronic gates in place, fences/boundaries to be checked regularly. The dog will be accompanied by a responsible,	4	2	8

						named staff member at all times. Both dogs have id tags and are microchipped			

Appendix 2

Trusted Handlers on a day-to-day basis (those that are permitted to take responsibility for the dogs at the discretion of the dog's handler)

Principal

Deputy Principals

Head of Pathways

Therapists

Teachers

Admin and reception team

Employability and Transition Coaches

In an emergency

Any staff member may take responsivity for the dogs at the request of the dog handler.

Appendix 3

Desensitisation of dogs' program

Step 1 - Look at photos of dogs.

Step 2 - Look at videos of dogs.

Step 3 - Look at dogs through a closed window.

Step 4 - Look at dogs through a partially opened window.

Step 5 - Look at dogs through an open window.

Step 6 - Look at dogs through a doorway.

Step 7 - Look at dogs from outside the doorway.

Step 8 - Look at a dog (who is on a lead) in the next room.

Step 9 - Look at a dog (who is on a lead) in the same room.

Step 10 - Sit beside a dog on a chair.

Step 11 - Pet a dog.

Step 12 – Walk a dog on a supported 2-person lead

Step 13 – Walk a dog on a 1-person lead

Step 14 – Walk with dog in open space with dog off lead

Step 15 – Play fetch with dog

Step 16 – Sit on floor with dog and dog toys

SEND area	Therapeutic activity / intervention	Intended outcome
Communication & Interaction	Giving the dog simple cues with support from the handler	Develop expressive communication
Communication & Interaction	Choosing an activity/toy for the dog	Develop choice-making
Communication & Interaction	Reading to the dog	Increase confidence in verbal communication and literacy
Communication & Interaction	Turn-taking with the dog and handler	Develop reciprocal interaction
Communication & Interaction	Observing dog body language	Develop recognition of non-verbal communication
SEMH	Calmly sitting near or interacting with the dog	Develop emotional regulation
SEMH	Feelings cards linked to the dog	Improve emotional literacy
SEMH	Discussing how the dog may be feeling	Develop empathy and perspective-taking
SEMH	Completing achievable tasks with the dog	Build confidence and self-esteem
SEMH	Coping when the dog does not respond as expected	Develop flexibility and frustration tolerance
Cognition & Learning	Sequencing the dog's routine	Improve sequencing and executive functioning
Cognition & Learning	Counting treats, toys or equipment	Develop functional numeracy

Cognition & Learning	Remembering equipment or learned cues	Develop working memory
Cognition & Learning	Planning an enrichment activity	Develop planning and problem-solving
Sensory & Physical	Grooming, where welcomed by the dog	Develop fine-motor control and graded sensory experience
Sensory & Physical	Walking alongside the dog and handler	Develop gross-motor coordination
Sensory & Physical	Mindfully observing the dog or stoking the dog	Support sensory and emotional regulation
Independence / Preparation for Adulthood	Preparing water or equipment	Develop responsibility and functional skills
Independence	Selecting and preparing an activity	Develop planning and decision-making
Independence / Safety	Learning consent and boundaries through dog body language	Develop understanding of personal boundaries