

Epping Forest District Council

# **Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure (Confidential Reporting)**

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## **Introduction**

Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) will not tolerate fraud and corruption in the administration of its responsibilities. The Council believes in having an open and honest culture and is committed to the highest possible standards of probity and accountability. In line with that commitment, the Council encourages anyone with serious concerns about any aspects of the Council's work to raise those concerns.

The Council is committed to tackling fraud and other forms of malpractice, including abuse of vulnerable people, and treats these issues seriously.

Employees and Members are often the first to realise that there may be something seriously wrong within the Council. However, they may not express their concerns because they feel that speaking up would be disloyal to their colleagues or to the Council. They may also fear harassment or victimisation. In these circumstances, they may feel it is easier to ignore the concern rather than report what may just be a suspicion of malpractice.

The Council recognises that some concerns may be extremely sensitive and have therefore established a framework to allow concerns to be raised confidentially, and provide for a thorough and appropriate investigation of the matter to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.

## **Scope**

This policy applies to matters of suspected fraud and corruption within the Council as well as allegations of abuse perpetrated by staff. It is intended to cover concerns that fall outside the scope of other procedures. For example, there are separate procedures in place to enable staff to lodge a grievance relating to their employment.

This policy also supports the Council's anti-fraud strategy and makes it clear that concerns can be raised without fear of reprisals. It is intended to encourage and enable employees and Members to raise serious concerns within the Council, irrespective of seniority, rank or status, rather than overlooking a problem.

## **Aims**

This policy aims to:

- provide ways for staff to raise concerns and receive feedback on any action taken.
- allow staff to take the matter further if they are dissatisfied with the Council's response.
- reassure staff that they will be protected from reprisals or victimisation for reporting in good faith.

## **What is a whistleblower?**

It is an employee, a former employee or member of an organisation who reports suspected misconduct to people or entities that have the power and presumed willingness to take corrective action. Officially this is called 'making a disclosure in the public interest'.

## **Staff responsibilities**

Staff have a duty to draw attention to bad and/or poor practice in the workplace, including practice that may be abusive and/or neglectful. Failure to report amounts to collusion with the perpetrator and abuse. Staff who work with vulnerable people have an individual responsibility to raise concerns with someone who has the authority to take action.

It may be necessary to go outside the immediate work environment or the immediate organisation, for example to Social Services or the Police.

A staff member can report things that aren't right, are illegal or if anyone at work is neglecting their duties. Concerns must be raised when staff reasonably believe that one or more of the following has occurred, is in the process of occurring, or is likely to occur:

- a criminal offence (including benefit fraud, bribery, money laundering)
- a failure to comply with a statutory or legal obligation
- improper unauthorised use of public or other funds
- improper use or misappropriation of assets

- a miscarriage of justice
- maladministration, misconduct or malpractice
- endangering of an individual's health and safety
- staff perpetrating abuse of a vulnerable individual
- damage to the environment
- any other similar occurrences
- deliberate concealment of any of the above

If staff are unsure whether a concern should be raised, advice can be sought from the Director Resources (Section 151 Officer), the Director of Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director of Communities, the Director of Neighbourhoods, or Chief Internal Auditor, (the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer are statutory roles). The overriding concern should be that it would be in the public interest for malpractice to be corrected and, if appropriate, sanctions applied.

## **Safeguarding - allegations of abuse made against staff**

All Council staff should be aware that colleagues could carry out abuse of children and vulnerable adults and that all allegations are taken seriously so that appropriate action can be taken.

In the event of a serious allegation against a member of staff regarding children or young people, the Council will follow the procedures set out in the Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET) Child Protection document and will involve the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) employed by Essex County Council.

The Council will use similar procedures in order to protect vulnerable adults.

If staff feel a colleague has:

- (a) behaved in a way that has harmed a vulnerable person, or may have harmed a vulnerable person; or
- (b) possibly committed a criminal offence against, or related to, a vulnerable person; or
- (c) behaved towards a vulnerable person in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with them

then they *must* inform their line manager immediately and follow the relevant procedure as outlined in the Council's Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy and Procedure documents.

## **Harassment or Victimisation**

The Council recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make, not least because of the fear of reprisal from those responsible for the malpractice. The Council will not tolerate harassment or victimisation and will take action to protect staff when they raise a concern in good faith. This does not mean, if they are the subject of disciplinary or redundancy procedures, that those procedures will be halted as a result of confidential reporting.

## **Types of whistleblowing eligible for protection**

People have in the past often been deterred from whistleblowing about abuse or neglect by duties of confidentiality and/or fear of the consequences of speaking out.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 seeks to protect individuals making disclosures and expects that malpractice disclosures will generally be made in the first instance to the person's employer or another person/body who appears responsible for the malpractice.

The Act expects employers to have procedures so that staff who have justified concerns about breaches of practice or the law can pass on these concerns to be investigated. Staff are only protected by the Act if they are acting in good faith, and reasonably believe that their allegations are true. Allegations made for financial gain are not protected, even if they are true.

It may be justified for the whistleblower to disclose to a third party in the first instance rather than the employer.

A disclosure made in accordance with the Act's expectations will mean that:

- a confidentiality clause in an employment contract cannot be used to prevent staff from disclosing relevant breaches of the law or practice. This means that confidentiality terms in employment contracts cannot be used by employers who are responsible for breaking a law or for abuse or neglect or other malpractice.
- dismissal on grounds of disclosure within the terms of the Act is automatically unfair, and can be challenged before an employment tribunal.

Someone who is treated detrimentally at work because of making a disclosure, which is protected by the Act, may be able to claim compensation at an Employment Tribunal.

The person providing the information may be reluctant to give their name or they may ask that they remain anonymous. Their wishes will be recorded and respected as part of the referral process.

Whilst respecting their right to confidentiality, they cannot however be given an absolute undertaking that they will not be identified at a later date, especially, if any legal action is indicated.

### **Who is protected?**

The following people are protected:

- employees
- agency workers
- people that are training with the Council, but not employed
- self-employed workers engaged by the Council, if supervised or working off-site
- volunteers
- Council Members

A worker will be eligible for protection if:

- they honestly think what they're reporting is true
- they think they're telling the right person
- they believe that their disclosure is in the public interest

Workers who aren't employees can't claim unfair dismissal because of whistleblowing, but they are protected and can claim 'detrimental treatment'.

### **Tribunals**

Workers dismissed for whistleblowing can go to an employment tribunal. If the tribunal decides the employee has been unfairly dismissed, it may order that they are:

- reinstated (get their job back)
- paid compensation

A tribunal judge can reduce any compensation awarded by 25% if they find the person has acted dishonestly.

A whistleblower who is bullied at work will also be able to bring a claim to the employment tribunal against their employer or colleagues.

### **Confidentiality**

The Council will respect confidentiality and all steps will be taken to ensure that confidentiality is maintained throughout the process. However, it must be appreciated that the investigation process may reveal the source of the information.

Any statement made by a whistleblower may be required as part of the evidence but could be submitted anonymously, if requested.

## **Anonymous allegations**

This policy encourages staff to put their name to their concerns. Concerns expressed anonymously are more difficult to action effectively, but they will all be considered. In such circumstances, the Council will take the following factors into account when establishing the scope and depth of the investigation:

- the seriousness of the issues raised.
- the credibility of the concern.
- the likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources and information provided.

## **Untrue allegations**

If staff make an allegation in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against them. If, however, staff make malicious allegations, disciplinary action may be taken against them.

## **Reviewing the Policy and Procedure**

The Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. The Chief Internal Auditor maintains a record of concerns raised and outcomes, and will report, as necessary to Members via the Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee and/or the Audit and Governance Committee.

Other contacts with respect to this policy are the Director of Neighbourhoods, Director of Governance, Director of Resources, Director of Communities, Chief Internal Auditor, Assistant Director (Human Resources), Assistant Director (Benefits) and your trade union representative.

The Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure will be reviewed every three years, or when necessary due to changes in legislation etc., by the Chief Internal Auditor.

## **Other relevant information**

Other relevant EFDC documents that may be read in conjunction with this Policy and Procedure:

- Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy and Procedure;
- Recruitment Policy and Procedures;
- Staff Handbook - Disciplinary and Grievance Policies and Procedures;
- Staff Code of Conduct;
- Safety Policy;
- Accident and Incident Report Guidance.
- Safe Working Practice Guide – A guide to professional boundaries for Staff;
- A Guide to Risk Management for Managers and the Risk Assessment Template;
- Equality and Diversity Policy;
- Compliments and Complaints Booklet;
- Dealing with Complaints – for officers and Members
- Data Protection Policy and Procedures.
- IT Policies and Procedures regarding e-safety and appropriate use of the internet.

## **Other organisation's policies and procedures:**

- Southend, Essex & Thurrock (SET) - Child Protection Procedures.
- Southend, Essex & Thurrock (SET) - Safeguarding Adult Guidelines.

## Whistleblowing Procedure

### Raising a concern

The way a worker can 'blow the whistle' on wrongdoing depends on whether they feel they can tell their employer. If staff feel they can't tell their employer, they should contact a prescribed person or body. If staff decide to blow the whistle to a prescribed person rather than the Council, they must make sure that they've chosen the correct person or body for the issue.

For example:

- HM Revenue and Customs - for business, finance or fraud.
- The Audit Commission - fraud and corruption in local government.
- Serious Organised Crime Agency - about money laundering and major financial crimes.
- The Information Commissioner - data protection and freedom of information rights and duties.
- The Health and Safety Executive - health and safety at work.
- The Pensions Regulator - about occupational and private pensions.

Staff should make disclosures to people other than their employer if:

- they reasonably believe that they will be treated detrimentally for disclosing to the employer; or
- they reasonably believe that the evidence will be destroyed or hidden if the employer is 'tipped off'; or
- the employer has been told, but has not taken appropriate action.

### Raising concerns within the Council – staff should contact one of the following:

- their Line Manager
- their Service Director
- their Trade Union representative
- the Benefit Investigation office
- the Human Resources office

### Staff may also raise a concern or discuss the issue with:

Job Title	Name	Contact
The Chief Internal Auditor	Brian Bassington	01992 564446
The Chief Executive	Glen Chipp	01992 564758
Deputy Chief Executive (also Director of Neighbourhoods)	Derek Macnab	01992 564050
Director of Resources (Section 151 Officer)	Bob Palmer	01992 564279
Director of Governance (Monitoring Officer)	Colleen O'Boyle	01992 564475
Director of Communities	Alan Hall	01992 564004
The External Auditor (may liaise with the Chief Internal Auditor depending on the type of concern)	Andrew Barnes BDO LLP	01473 320745
Assistant Director of Human Resources	Paula Maginnis	01992 564536
Assistant Director of Benefits	Janet Twinn	01992 564215

### Elected Members should raise concerns with:

The Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Chief Internal Auditor or Monitoring Officer.

## **How to raise a concern**

The earlier staff express the concern and the more details provided, the easier it will be to take action. At this stage, staff are not expected to prove the allegation but will need to demonstrate that there are sufficient grounds for the concern, to enable a meaningful investigation to take place.

Staff can raise a concern:

### **In Writing**

- Staff can send a letter or email to one of the people or organisations mentioned on page 7.

Staff should give as much information as they can about their concern giving background information (where relevant), the reason why they're concerned and any important details such as names, dates and places.

### **By Telephone**

- Staff can leave a message on the 24-hour Whistleblowing Hotline 01992 564444; or
- Speak to a member of the Audit Team during office hours on 01992 564449.

This service is strictly confidential and staff do not have to give their name if they do not want to. The person receiving the concern will make notes of any conversations so that, if required, a proper investigation can be undertaken.

### **Through an Advocate**

Staff may prefer, in order to protect themselves or maintain anonymity, invite their trade union or other representative to raise the matter on their behalf. The representative may be required to obtain additional information so that a proper investigation can be undertaken.

## **How the Council will respond**

### **Action to be taken**

This will depend on the nature of the concern. The process is covered in the Fraud Response Plan and the matters raised may:

- be investigated internally by Internal Audit.
- be investigated internally by the Benefits investigation team.
- be referred to the Police.
- be referred to the external auditor or Ombudsman.
- be referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer (regarding child protection cases).
- form the subject of an independent enquiry.

or any combination of the above.

If the concern is a safeguarding matter then it will be referred to the Safeguarding Lead Officer or Deputies who will follow the procedures in the Council's Safeguarding Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults Policy and Procedure.

In order to protect individuals and the Council, initial enquiries will be made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it will take. Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for further investigation. Any investigations will follow the course of natural justice and in particular will adhere to Articles 6 and 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (right to a fair hearing and right to private family life) and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

### **Acknowledging receipt**

The person with whom the concern was initially raised will write to the staff member within 8 working days of the concern being received (excluding anonymous concerns) to acknowledge receipt.

## **Future contact and meetings**

The amount of contact between staff raising the concern and the officer(s) considering the issues will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, further information will be sought from staff in a discreet manner. When any meeting is arranged, staff have the right, if they wish, to be accompanied by a trade union or other representative. The meeting can be off site, if requested.

## **Support offered during the enquiry**

The Council will take steps to minimise any difficulties staff may experience as a result of raising a concern, and will provide appropriate support. For instance, if staff are required to give evidence in disciplinary or criminal proceedings, the Council will advise them about the procedure.

With internal proceedings, staff will have the option of asking someone else to represent them.

To maintain confidence in the process, staff will be kept advised of the outcome of any investigation, subject to legal constraints.

Staff can withdraw from the process at any stage but they, or their representative, must inform the person with whom the initial concern was raised and the investigating officer. Staff will be requested to provide a reason for their withdrawal.

## **Alleged perpetrator**

The person against whom the concern has been raised will be informed following the initial investigations if it is considered that there is an issue to be investigated further, subject to current personnel procedures. This person will be supported in an appropriate manner and will be informed of the progress of the investigation.

## **How the matter can be taken further**

The Council hopes staff will be satisfied with the response to their concern. However, if staff are not satisfied they should inform their Service Director, Chief Executive or Deputy Chief Executive in the first instance.

If staff feel it is right or necessary to take the matter outside the Council, the following are possible contact points:

- the External Auditor
- relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- their solicitor or other legal representative
- the Police
- their Trade Union
- their local Council Member

## **Other useful contacts:**

### **Public Concern at Work**

Provides free confidential advice on how to raise a concern about malpractice at work.

**Tel: 020 7404 6609      [www.pcaw.co.uk](http://www.pcaw.co.uk)**

### **GOV.UK**

More information on whistleblowing can be found on the GOV.UK website at **[www.gov.uk/whistleblowing](http://www.gov.uk/whistleblowing)**.