



BEST WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

DATE APPROVED:	30th January 2024 (Union consultation 28 th February 2024)
APPROVED BY:	Trust Board
NEXT REVIEW DATE:	January 2027

1. Purpose

To set out the Trust's policy and procedure for dealing with concerns raised by employees which relate to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work (see paragraph 3). Allegations of child abuse against teachers and other staff and volunteers are to be dealt with in accordance with Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance for nurseries, schools and colleges and the Trust's Managing Allegations of Abuse Against Staff policy

2. Background

- 2.1. As employees are often the first to realise that there may be something wrong within the Academy/Nursery/Trust, it is important that they feel able to express their concerns without fear of harassment or victimisation. Otherwise they may find it easier to ignore the concern rather than report it. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 recognises this fact and is designed to protect employees, who make certain disclosures of information in 'the public interest', from detriment and/or dismissal. This policy builds on the provisions of the Act.
- 2.2. The Trust is committed to the highest possible standards of operation, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment, employees, officers, consultants, contractors, volunteers, casual workers and agency workers with serious concerns are encouraged to come forward and voice those concerns. This policy document makes it clear that employees can do so without fear of reprisals; it is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the Academy/Nursery/Trust rather than overlooking a problem or alerting anyone external to the school/nursery.
- 2.3. A Senior Manager for the purpose of this procedure is defined as a Head of Department, member of the Academy/Nursery leadership team, Nursery Manager, Principal or Chief Executive Officer.
- 2.4. If an employee has a concern about the CEO, Manager, a Principal or a member of Central Services, the Whistleblowing process will be referred to the next senior manager or Board of Directors as appropriate.
- 2.5. This policy does not form part of any employee's contract of employment and it may be amended at any time following consultation and agreement with the recognised trade unions.
- 2.6. The Trust consulted with the recognised trade unions during the development of this policy.

3. Aims of the Policy

3.1. This policy aims to:

- provide avenues for employees to raise concerns internally as a matter of course, and receive feedback on any action taken;
- provide for matters to be dealt with quickly and appropriately; and ensure that concerns are taken seriously and treated consistently and fairly;
- reassure employees that they will be protected from reprisals or victimisation for whistle-blowing where they have a genuine concern;
- allow employees to take the matter further if they are dissatisfied with the Trust's response.

3.2. A whistleblower is a person who raises a genuine concern relating to the matters below. If employees have any genuine concerns related to suspected wrongdoing or danger affecting any of our activities (a whistleblowing concern) they should report it under this policy. Whistleblowing is the disclosure of information which relates to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work. This may include (but is not limited to):

- criminal activity;
- miscarriages of justice;
- danger to health and safety;
- damage to the environment;
- failure to comply with any legal or professional obligation or regulatory requirements;
- bribery;
- financial fraud or mismanagement;
- negligence;
- breach of internal policies and procedures;
- conduct likely to damage the Trust's reputation;
- unauthorised disclosure of confidential information;
- public examination fraud;
- deliberate concealment of any of the above matters.

3.3. Before initiating the procedure, employees should consider the following:

- take trade union advice before initiating the procedure;
- the responsibility for expressing concerns about unacceptable practice or behaviour rests with all employees;
- employees should use line manager or team meetings and other opportunities to raise questions and seek clarification on issues which are of day-to-day concern;
- whilst it can be difficult to raise concerns about the practice or behaviour of a colleague, employees should act to prevent an escalation of the problem and to prevent themselves being potentially implicated.

3.4. This policy should not be used for complaints about an employee's personal circumstances, such as the way in which they have been treated at work. In these cases, an employee should use the Trust's Grievance Procedure (or the Academy/Nursery antiharassment and bullying policy as appropriate); if the matter relates to salary, the salary review procedures documented in the Trust/nursery's pay policy as appropriate

4. Safeguards

4.1. Harassment or Victimisation

4.1.1. The Trust 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 Trust will not tolerate harassment or victimisation and will take action to protect employees when they have acted in good faith.

4.1.2. This does not mean that if an employee is already the subject of internal procedures such as disciplinary or redundancy, that those procedures will be halted as a result of that employee raising a concern under the whistleblowing policy.

4.2. Confidentiality

- 4.2.1. We hope that staff will feel able to voice whistleblowing concerns openly under this policy. The Trust will make every effort to protect an employee's identity.
- 4.2.2. As indicated above, identity will be protected as far as possible, but should the investigation into the concern require the employee to be named as the source of the information, that this will be discussed and agreed with the employee and their representative before their name is disclosed.
- 4.2.3. All parties should respect the confidentiality of the disclosure and any subsequent investigation.

4.3. Anonymous Allegations

- 4.3.1. Employees are encouraged to put their name to an allegation. Proper investigation may be more difficult or impossible if we cannot obtain further information and it is also more difficult to establish whether allegations are credible. Anonymous allegations will be considered at the discretion of the Trust. In exercising the discretion, the factors to be taken into account would include:
 - the seriousness of the issues raised;
 - the credibility of the concern; and
 - the likelihood of substantiating the allegation.

4.4. Unsubstantiated Allegations

- 4.4.1. If an employee makes an allegation where they have acted in good faith, but it is not substantiated by the investigation, no action will be taken against that employee. If, however, we conclude that an employee has made malicious or vexatious allegations, or with a view to personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against that employee.
- 4.4.2. Following investigation, allegations may be confirmed as unsubstantiated. This outcome will be notified to the employee who raised the concern, who will be informed that the Academy/Nursery/Trust deems the matter to be concluded and that it should not be raised again unless new evidence becomes available.

4.5. Employee Support

- 4.5.1. It is recognised that raising concerns can be difficult and stressful. Advice and support will be made available, as appropriate, to both the employee(s) raising the concerns and any employee(s) subject to investigation. Employees may wish to seek advice from their trade union or professional representative.

5. How to raise a Concern

- 5.1. As a first step, an employee should normally raise concerns with their Head of Department or a member of the Leadership Team, (anyone who meets the definition of Senior Manager in paragraph 2.3). This depends, however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues and who is involved. For example, if an employee believes that their Head of Department or a member of the SLT is involved, they should approach the Principal/Nursery Manager or Chief Executive Officer.
- 5.2. An employee (including the Principal/Nursery Manager and Leadership Team) can bypass the direct management line and the Chief Executive Officer and report the matter to the Board of Directors if they feel the overall management is engaged in an

improper course of action. Please refer to Section 7 below.

- 5.3. Concerns are better raised in writing. The employee should set out the background and history of the concerns, giving names, dates and places where possible, and the reasons why they are particularly concerned about the situation. If an employee does not feel able to put the concern in writing, they should telephone or meet the appropriate person. It is important that, however the concern is raised, the employee makes it clear that they are raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure.
- 5.4. The earlier an employee expresses the concern, the easier it is to take action.
- 5.5. Although an employee is not expected to prove the truth of an allegation, they will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are sufficient grounds for the concern.
- 5.6. In some instances, it may be appropriate for an employee to ask the trade union to raise a matter on the employee's behalf.
- 5.7. At each meeting under this policy the employee may bring a colleague or trade union representative. All parties must respect the confidentiality of the disclosure and any subsequent investigation. Meetings will be scheduled to a mutually agreed date and time.

6. Investigation Procedure

- 6.1. A Senior Manager (as per definition in paragraph 2.3) may be informed by an employee about concern(s) and that they are "blowing the whistle" within the procedure in person; or in writing or over the phone.
- 6.2. The Senior Manager should respond immediately by arranging to meet with the employee to discuss the concern(s) as soon as possible.

6.3. Stage One:

6.3.1. At the initial meeting the Senior Manager should establish that:

- there is genuine cause and sufficient grounds for the concern; and
- the concern has been appropriately raised via the Whistle-blowing Policy.

6.3.2. The Senior Manager should ask the employee to put their concern(s) in writing if they have not already done so. If the employee is unable to do this, the Senior Manager will take down a written summary of the concern(s) and provide them with a copy after the meeting. The Senior Manager should make notes of the discussions with the employee. The employee's letter and/or Senior Manager's notes should make it clear that the employee is raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure and provide:

- the background and history of the concern(s); and
- names, dates and places (where possible); and
- the reasons why the employee is particularly concerned about the situation.

6.3.3. The employee should be asked to date and sign their letter and/or the notes of any discussion. The Senior Manager should positively encourage the employee to do this, as a concern expressed anonymously is much less powerful and much more difficult to address, especially if the letter/notes become evidence in other proceedings, e.g. an internal disciplinary hearing.

6.3.4. The Senior Manager should follow the policy as set out above and in particular explain to the employee:

- who they will need to speak to in order to determine the next steps (e.g. the Principal/Nursery Manager);
- what steps they intend to take to address the concern;
- how they will communicate with the employee during and at the end of the process. It should be noted that the need for confidentiality may prevent the Academy/Nursery/Trust giving the employee specific details of any necessary investigation or any necessary disciplinary action taken as a result;
- that the employee will receive a written response within 10 working days;
- that their identity will be protected as far as possible, but should the investigation into the concern require the employee to be named as the source of the information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed;
- that the Academy/Nursery/Trust will do all that it can to protect the employee from discrimination and/or victimisation;
- that the matter will be taken seriously and investigated immediately;
- that if the employee's concern, though raised as a genuine concern, is not confirmed by the investigation, no punitive action will be taken against them;
- if clear evidence is uncovered during the investigation that they have made a malicious or vexatious allegation, disciplinary action may be taken against them; and
- the investigation may confirm their allegations to be unsubstantiated in which case the Academy/Nursery/Trust will deem the matter to be concluded unless new evidence becomes available.

6.4. Stage Two:

- 6.4.1. Following the initial meeting with the employee, the Senior Manager must consult with the Principal, Nursery Manager or appropriate adviser to determine whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take. A record should be made of the decisions and/or agreed actions.
- 6.4.2. It may be necessary, with anonymous allegations, to consider whether it is possible to take any further action. When making this decision, Senior Managers should take the following factors into account:
 - the seriousness of the issue(s) raised;
 - the credibility of the concern(s); and
 - the likelihood of confirming the allegation(s) from attributable sources.
- 6.4.3. In some cases, it may be possible to resolve the concern(s) simply by agreed action or an explanation regarding the concern(s), without the need for further investigation. However, depending on the nature of the concern(s) it may be necessary for the concern(s) to be:
 - investigated internally;
 - referred to the police;
 - referred to the external auditor;
 - the subject of an independent inquiry.
- 6.4.4. Senior Managers should have a working knowledge and understanding of other school/nursery policies and procedures, e.g. grievance, disciplinary, harassment, child protection procedures, to ensure that concerns raised by employees are addressed via the appropriate procedure/process.

6.5. Stage Three:

6.5.1. Within ten working days of a concern being received, the Senior Manager receiving the concern (at paragraph 5.1 above) must write to the employee:

- acknowledging that the concern has been received;
- explaining how they propose to deal with the matter;
- providing an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response;
- letting the employee know when they will receive further details if the situation is not yet resolved

7. Raising Concerns Outside the Trust

7.1. The aim of this policy is to provide an internal mechanism for reporting, investigating and remedying any wrongdoing in the workplace. In most cases the employee should not find it necessary to alert anyone externally. The law recognises that in some circumstances it may be appropriate for the employee to report their concerns to an external body such as a regulator. It will very rarely, if ever, be appropriate to alert the media. Employees are strongly encouraged to seek advice before reporting a concern to anyone external.

7.2. If an employee is not satisfied with the Trust's response, the manager should ensure that they are made aware with whom they may raise the matter externally:

- Recognised Trade Union;
- Protect¹
- Senior LA Officer;
- Relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations;
- Solicitor.

7.3. The Senior Manager should stress to the employee that if they choose to take a concern outside the Trust, it is the employee's responsibility to ensure that confidential information is not disclosed, i.e. confidential information, in whatever format, is not handed over to a third party.

7.4. Concerns about safeguarding practices can be raised externally using the NSPCC whistleblowing helpline.

8. Monitoring and Review

The CEO and Board of Directors will be responsible for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of this policy/procedure. This Policy will be reviewed every three years or sooner in response to changes in employment legislation. The policy will be reviewed with the recognised Trade Unions and employees and any changes will be subject to consultation and negotiation.

Under the Equality Act 2010 we have a duty not to discriminate against people on the basis of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation.

This policy has been equality impact assessed and we believe that it is in line with the Equality Act 2010 as it is fair, it does not prioritise or disadvantage any person and it helps to promote equality in this Trust.

¹ Protect is a registered charity that employees can contact for advice to assist them in raising concerns about poor practice at work. The charity also provides advice to employers as to the possible ways to address these concerns.