

The Grampian Valuation Joint Board

Confidential Reporting Policy (Whistle Blowing)

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Board is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment we encourage employees and others that we deal with and who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Board's work to come forward and voice those concerns. It is recognised that most cases will have to proceed on a confidential basis.
- 1.2 Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something seriously wrong within the Board's organisation. However, they may not express their concerns because they feel that speaking up would be disloyal to their colleagues or to the Board. They may also fear harassment or victimisation. In these circumstances it may be easier to ignore the concern rather than report what may just be a suspicion of malpractice.
- 1.3 There are existing mechanisms in place, through line management, that employees can use to raise matters of concern, but this policy document makes it clear that they can do so without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. The Confidential Reporting Policy is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the organisation rather than overlooking a problem or "blowing the whistle" outside.
- 1.4 The Policy applies to all employees and those employees of external agencies and companies working for the Board on Board premises, for example, agency staff, builders, and other contractors. It also covers suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Board in their own premises.
- 1.5 These procedures are in addition to the Board's Formal Complaint Procedure and other statutory appeal procedures. The Assessor is responsible for making service users aware of the existence of these procedures.

2.0 Aims and Scope of this Policy

- 2.1 This policy aims to:
 - a) encourage individuals to feel confident in raising serious concerns and to question and act upon concerns about practice & procedures
 - b) provide avenues to raise those concerns and feedback on any action taken
 - c) ensure that a response to concerns is issued and that individuals are aware of how to pursue them if they are not satisfied
 - d) provide reassurance that individuals will be protected from possible reprisals or victimisation if they have a reasonable belief that any disclosure was made in good faith

- 2.2 There are existing procedures in place to enable staff to lodge a Grievance relating to their own employment. The Confidential Reporting Policy is intended to cover major concerns that individuals may have about any aspect of service provision or the conduct of officers or members of the Board. These concerns may be about anything that:
- a) makes them feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, their experience or the standards they believe the Board subscribes to; or
 - b) is against the Board's Standing Orders and policies; or
 - c) falls below established standards of practice; or
 - d) amounts to improper conduct

3.0 Safeguards

3.1 Harassment or Victimisation

The Board is committed to good practice and high standards and wants to be supportive of employees.

The Board recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If what is being said is true, no-one should have anything to fear because they will be doing their duty to their employer and those for whom they are providing a service.

The Board will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect individuals when a concern is being raised in good faith.

Any investigation into allegations of potential malpractice will not influence or be influenced by any disciplinary or redundancy procedures that already affect an individual raising an issue.

3.2 Confidentiality

All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made not to reveal individual identities if so wished. At the appropriate time, however, an individual may need to come forward as a witness.

3.3 Anonymous Allegations

This policy encourages individuals to put their name to their allegation whenever possible.

Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the recipient.

In exercising this discretion the factors to be taken into account would include:

- a) the seriousness of the issues raised
- b) the credibility of the concern; and
- c) the likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources

3.4 Untrue Allegations

If an allegation is made in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against the individual. However, this procedure is not designed to support employees to make an allegation which is either malicious or for personal gain.

4.0 **Responsibilities**

4.1 The Principal Administrative Officer, as the Board's Confidential Reporting Officer, has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. That officer maintains a record of concerns raised and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger individual confidentiality).

5.0 **How to raise a concern**

5.1 As a first step, concerns should normally be raised with the immediate manager or superior. This depends however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice. Individuals may, therefore, wish to contact directly the Principal Administrative Officer who acts as the Board's Confidential Reporting Officer. The Principal Administrative Officer following consultations, as appropriate, with the Assessor or other Senior Officers of the Board will determine what action should be taken and will advise the informant of their decision.

5.2 Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. Staff who wish to make a written report are invited to use the following format:

- a) the background and history of the concern (giving relevant dates);
- b) the reason why they are particularly concerned about the situation

5.3 The earlier concern is expressed the easier it is to take action.

5.4 Although individuals are not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, they will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for their concern.

5.5 Advice and guidance on how matters of concern may be pursued can be obtained from the Principal Administrative Officer as the Board's Confidential Reporting Officer.

5.6 Individuals may wish to consider discussing their concern with a colleague first and may find it easier to raise the matter if there are two (or more) people who have had the same experience or concerns. However, no action should be taken which may impede an enquiry.

5.7 A trade union representative or colleague can be invited to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns which have been raised.

6.0 **How the Board will respond**

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- 6.1 The Board will respond to concerns. Do not forget that investigating reported concerns is not the same as either accepting or rejecting them.
- 6.2 Where appropriate, the matters raised may:
- a) be investigated by management, internal audit or through the disciplinary process
 - b) be referred to the police
 - c) be referred to the external auditor
 - d) form the subject of an independent inquiry
- 6.3 In order to protect individuals and those accused of misdeeds or possible malpractice, initial enquiries will be made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take. The overriding principle which the Board will have in mind is the public interest. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example, discrimination or harassment issues) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- 6.4 Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for investigation. If urgent action is required this may be taken before any investigation is conducted.
- 6.5 Within 10 working days of a concern being raised, the Principal Administrative Officer (Confidential Reporting Officer) as responsible person will write to the informant:
- a) acknowledging that the concern has been received;
 - b) indicating how it is proposed to deal with the matter;
 - c) giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response;
 - d) advising if any initial enquiries have been made;
 - e) supplying information on staff support mechanisms if appropriate; and
 - f) advising whether further investigations will take place and, if not, why not
- 6.6 The amount of contact between the officers considering the issues and the informant will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the Board will seek further information from the informant
- 6.7 Where any meeting is arranged, off-site if preferred, the informant can be accompanied by a trade union or professional association representative or a colleague.
- 6.8 The Board will take steps to minimise any difficulties which may be experienced as a result of raising a concern. For instance, if an individual is required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings the Board will arrange for advice, guidance and support about the procedure.
- 6.9 The Board accepts the need for assurance that the matter has been properly addressed. Thus, subject to legal constraints, will tell informants of the outcome of any investigation.

7.0 How the matter can be taken further

7.1 This policy is intended to provide an avenue within the Board's organisation to raise concerns. The Board hopes informants will be satisfied with any action taken. If not, and an individual feels it is right to take the matter outside the Board, the following are possible contact points:

- a) the external auditor
- b) a trade union
- c) the local Citizens Advice Bureau
- d) relevant voluntary organisation
- e) the police
- f) relevant professional bodies (e.g. RICS) or regulatory organisations

7.1 If an individual does take the matter outside the Board, they should ensure that they do not disclose confidential information. In cases of doubt, advice can be obtained from the Principal Administrative Officer.