



# **WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY**

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## Whistleblowing Policy

### 1.0 Overview

- 1.1 [Sevenoaks District Council is committed to having effective whistleblowing arrangements, in order to safeguard individuals who have genuine cause for raising concerns in the work place and to promote good governance and safeguard the public interest. To facilitate this commitment, this whistleblowing policy incorporates both the requirements of The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and the Whistleblowing Commission's Code of Practice 2013. The policy also underpins the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.](#)
- 1.2 Key Requirements of the Public Disclosure Act 1998:
- (a) It is designed to give statutory protection to employees who “blow the whistle” on their employer’s malpractice;
  - (b) although not requiring the employer to set up an appropriate mechanism for dealing with whistleblowing, the Act makes clear the important role that such a mechanism can play in helping the employer comply with the law (a good policy, is one key way, to deliver accountability throughout the organisation). [To this effect, the Council has adopted the Whistleblowing Commission's Code of Practice 2013, which sets out best practice whistleblowing framework for the Public Sector.](#)
- 1.3 The Council aims to mitigate the risk of inappropriate behaviour by those undertaking work on behalf of the Council. To mitigate the risks of inappropriate behaviour, the Council refers to this Policy in contracts with suppliers and service providers, in the Procurement Guide and in its partnership arrangements.
- 1.4 The Council takes seriously and will investigate all reports of improper activities. This Policy aims to ensure that when concerns are raised, the Council will address the concerns and protect the person raising the concern. Employees 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, victimisation or recrimination from the Council. The Council takes its responsibilities for safeguarding public funds and assets seriously, as well as safeguarding the well-being of its employees. Thus this Policy outlines a framework which provides potential whistleblowers the opportunity to communicate their concerns within a safe environment without fear of recrimination.
- 1.5 The Council is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment, the Council expects employees and others that they deal with who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Council’s work, to come forward and

voice those concerns. The Council recognises that whistleblowers may wish to raise concerns on a confidential basis.

- 1.6 This Policy applies to all employees (including temporary and agency staff), councillors, co-optees, contractors, their agents and/or sub-contractors, consultants, suppliers and service providers in the course of their work for the Council.
- 1.7 This Policy does not replace the Council's Corporate Complaints and Grievance Procedures and/or any other statutory reporting procedures applying to the Council.
- 1.8 This Policy furthers the aims of and is complementary to the Code of Conduct for Local Government Employees, the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy and the Member Code of Conduct.

### **2.0 Aims and Scope of this Policy**

2.1 This Policy aims to:

- encourage employees to feel confident in raising serious concerns and to question and act upon concerns in practice
- provide avenues for employees to raise those concerns and receive feedback on any action taken
- ensure that employees receive a response to your concerns and that you are aware of how to pursue them if you are not satisfied
- reassure employees that they will be protected from possible reprisals or victimisation, if they have a reasonable belief that they have made any disclosures in good faith

2.2 Where employees are aggrieved at any matter relating to their own employment, then other procedures apply e.g. grievance procedure. Employees must not use this Policy to deal with day to day problems, such as, mistakes, errors, or general differences of view that arise in the workplace. Operational matters should be raised with management first.

2.3 [Examples of the types of concerns](#) this Policy is intended to cover [are as follows](#):

- conduct of a criminal nature or a breach of the law;
- bullying, harassment or victimisation of a third party;
- disclosures related to miscarriages of justice;
- health and safety risks, including risks to the public as well as other employees;
- damage to the environment;
- the unauthorised use of public funds;
- possible fraud and corruption; [including offences falling under the Bribery Act 2010](#);
- sexual or physical abuse of customers;
- breach of Council procedures; or
- other unethical conduct or malpractice.

2.4 Any serious concerns that employees have about any aspect of service provision or the conduct of officers, councillors, co-optees, partners or others acting on behalf of the Council, can be reported under this Policy. This may be about something that:

- makes you feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, your experience or the standards you believe the Council subscribes to; or
- relates for example to a breach of the Council's Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, policies, practices and procedures; or
- falls below established standards of practice; or
- amounts to improper conduct.

### **3.0 Safeguards**

#### **3.1 Harassment or Victimisation**

3.1.1 By publicising this Policy, the Council is demonstrating a strong commitment to good practice and high standards in protecting its employees from harassment and victimisation.

3.1.2 The Council recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. Where you are raising a concern in good faith, you will have nothing to fear, because you will be doing your duty to the Council and those for whom you are providing a service; as well as acting in the wider public interest.

3.1.3 The Council will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action, (which may include removal from the workplace of the offending party where appropriate) to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith.

3.1.4 [If you believe you have suffered or are under threat of suffering victimisation or harassment as a result of raising concerns, you may also report this concern as set out under section 4 below.](#)

#### **3.2 Confidentiality**

3.2.1 The Council will use its best endeavours to treat in confidence all concerns raised and every effort will be made by the Council not to reveal your identity without your agreement. However, it must be appreciated that the Council cannot guarantee that any investigation process will not reveal the source of the information.

#### **3.3 Anonymous Allegations**

3.3.1 While you are encouraged to put your name to your allegation whenever possible, it is recognised that in some instances, employees may have genuine concerns about their safety, security of well-being which may preclude them from revealing their identity. Under such circumstances, employees may make anonymous complaints or allegations.

3.3.2 Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful, but will be considered, on their merits, at the discretion of the Council.

3.3.3 In exercising this discretion, the factors to be taken into account will include:

- the seriousness of the issues raised;
- the credibility of the concern; and
- the likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources and available evidence.

### 3.4 Untrue Allegations

3.4.1 If you make an allegation in good faith but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against you. If, however, you make a false or malicious allegation, for an ulterior motive, disciplinary action may be taken against you. It is therefore important that you ensure your allegation is made in good faith.

## 4.0 How to raise a concern

4.1 Depending on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice, you are encouraged in the first instance to raise concerns with your immediate manager or your supervisor. **Generally concerns should be raised with individuals in the order they are listed in Annex A except where they are involved in the issue, or are the cause of the concerns. If your concerns are about Audit, or a Chief Officer, you must contact the Chief Executive in the first instance. For all concerns, you may also contact the Chairman of the Audit Committee, as a last resort, if you believe that your concerns have not been appropriately dealt with.**

Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. A dedicated **Freephone** telephone number has been set up to allow you to speak in confidence to the Audit & Fraud Team **[0800-4963245]**. If you wish to submit your concern in writing, send this to the Audit, Risk & Anti-Fraud Manager, Council Offices, Argyle Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 1HG and mark your envelope 'private and confidential'. Alternatively you can email [whistleblowing@sevenoaks.gov.uk](mailto:whistleblowing@sevenoaks.gov.uk).

4.2 You are invited to use the following format:

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

4.4 The earlier you express the concern, the easier it is to take action, as delays may make it more difficult to obtain the relevant evidence.

- 4.5 Although you are not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, you should ensure that there are reasonable grounds for your concern.
- 4.6 Advice and guidance on how matters of concern may be pursued can be obtained from the Audit, Risk & Anti-Fraud Manager, Chief Executive, relevant Chief Officer or Chief Officer, Legal Services.
- 4.7 You may wish to consider discussing your concern with a colleague first and you may find it easier to raise the matter if there are two (or more) of you who have had the same experience or concerns.
- 4.8 Where concerns are raised in person, you may invite your trade union representative, or a friend to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns you have raised.
- 4.9 An officer will be appointed to investigate your concerns.

### **5.0 How the Councils will respond**

- 5.1 The Council will take every whistleblowing concern impacting on fraud and corruption seriously and will conduct an appropriate investigation.
- 5.2 Where appropriate, the matters raised may:
  - be investigated by senior management and/or the Audit & Fraud Team, or through the disciplinary process;
  - be referred to the police;
  - be referred to the external auditor; or
  - form the subject of an independent inquiry.
- 5.3 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 Council has in mind, is the public interest. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example discrimination issues) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- 5.4 Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for investigation. If urgent action is required, this will be taken before any investigation is conducted.
- 5.5 Within ten working days of a concern being raised, the investigating officer will write to you if you provide your contact details:
  - acknowledging that the concern has been received
  - indicating how we propose to deal with the matter
  - giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response
  - telling you whether any initial enquiries have been made
  - supply you with information on staff support mechanisms; and
  - telling you whether further investigations will take place and if not, why not.

- 5.6 The amount of contact between the investigating officer and you, will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the investigating officer will seek further information from you.
- 5.7 Where any meeting is arranged, off-site if you so wish, a union representative, or professional association representative, or a friend can accompany you.
- 5.8 The Council will take steps to minimise any difficulties which you may experience as a result of raising a concern. For instance, if you are required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the Council will arrange for you to receive advice and support.
- 5.9 The Council accepts that you need to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. Subject to legal constraints, you will be informed of the outcomes of any investigation.

### **6.0 The Responsible Officer**

- 6.1 The Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this Policy. A record of concerns raised and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger your confidentiality) is maintained and reported (in such a way as to preserve confidentiality), to the Audit Committee.

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

- 7.1 This Policy is intended to provide you with an avenue within the Council to raise concerns. The Council hopes you will be satisfied with any action taken. If you are not, and if you feel it is right to take the matter outside the Council, please refer to the external contacts listed in Annex 2.
- 7.2 If you do take the matter outside the Council, you should ensure that you do not disclose confidential information without obtaining further advice from any of the Council contacts referred to in Annex 1.

### **8.0 Policy review**

This Policy will be subject to annual review by the appropriate committee. The review will take into consideration the views of users of the Policy and any relevant professional or regulatory changes.

## **9. Training, Dissemination and Monitoring**

- 9.1 As part of the Councils' Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy, appropriate training will be offered to officers on key aspects of the policy and how it should be implemented. The policy will be available on the Council's website for easy access by staff.
- 9.2 The Monitoring Officer's Annual Report to Members will incorporate a summary of whistleblowing events and their outcomes. The external

auditor will also be advised at least annually, of all proven whistle blowing events and their outcomes.

**10. Any doubts?**

- 10.1 If there are any doubts about the contents of this Policy or where there are issues that are not adequately covered, then the matter should be discussed with the Audit, Risk & Anti-Fraud Manager.

**DETAILS OF WHOM YOU MAY REPORT YOUR WHISTLEBLOWING CONCERNS TO ARE AS FOLLOWS:**

*Generally, concerns should first be raised with your line manager or supervisor. Then concerns should be raised with individuals in the order they are listed below except where they are involved in the issue, or are the cause of the concerns. If your concerns are about Audit, or a Chief Officer, you must contact the Chief Executive in the first instance. For all concerns, you may also contact the Chairman of the Audit Committee, as a last resort, if you believe that your concerns have not been appropriately dealt with.*

**Sevenoaks District Council:**

- (a) Your Head of Service, or
- (b) Your Chief Officer, or
- (c) Dr Pav Ramewal (Chief Executive)or;
- (d) Audit, Risk & Anti-Fraud Team, or
- (e) Chair of the Audit Committee
- (f) (Also see Annex 2 for external contacts below)

**DETAILS OF EXTERNAL CONTACTS TO WHOM YOU MAY REPORT YOUR CONCERNS**

If you are not satisfied with the response you have received from the Council with respect to your concerns and you want to take the matter outside of the Council, the following are possible contact points:

- Public Concern at Work on 0207 404 6609 (a charity which gives advice about raising concerns)
- External Auditor
- Your local Citizens Advice Bureau
- Relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- A relevant voluntary organisation
- The police
- Your trade union representative
- Local Government Ombudsman