

Whistleblowing Policy



1.0 Introduction

Rother District Council is committed to the highest possible standards of corporate governance including openness, probity and accountability in the delivery of its services to the people who live and work within the District. It is also committed to the prevention, deterrence, detection and investigation of all forms of fraud, theft or corruption. The authority has put in place a range of rules, regulations, procedures and codes of practice to deliver this commitment, but unfortunately malpractice and/or wrongdoing may still occur.

The Council is determined that the culture and tone of the organisation shall be one of honesty and strong opposition to fraud, corruption or any form of malpractice. There is an expectation and requirement that all individuals and organisations associated in whatever way with the Council will act with integrity and that employees, at all levels, will lead by example in these matters.

The Council's employees are an important element in detecting and preventing fraud, corruption or any form of malpractice. Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something wrong within the Council. However, they may be reluctant to speak up if their concerns are no more than a suspicion or if they feel that raising the matter would be disloyal to their colleagues or the Council.

The Council is not prepared to tolerate malpractice or fraudulent activity. Employees, and others that we deal with, are therefore positively encouraged to raise any concerns associated with the Council's activity at an early stage. This policy has been introduced to enable you to do this in confidence, without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. The policy also encourages you to raise concerns within the Council (or if you feel that this is not appropriate then externally) rather than overlooking a problem.

2.0 Objectives and Scope

The objectives of this policy are to:

- encourage individuals to feel confident in raising serious concerns;
- provide a channel to raise those concerns (on an anonymous basis if necessary) and to have confidence that those concerns will be properly dealt with; and
- reassure staff that they will be protected from possible reprisals or victimisation if they have made the disclosure in good faith.

This policy applies to all employees of the Council (including agency staff, trainees and volunteers) as well as independent consultants, contractors, suppliers, elected Members (Councillors) and members of the public.

3.0 Definition of Whistleblowing

The term 'whistleblowing' in this policy refers to any confidential disclosure of suspected wrongdoing in respect of anyone working for or associated with the Council.

4.0 Reportable Behaviour

Any serious concerns about a Council's activity or the conduct of any of its officers, Members or agents should be reported using this procedure.

Potential areas of concerns may include:

- Any unlawful act, whether criminal (e.g. theft) or a breach of the civil law (e.g. breach of contract).
- Maladministration (e.g. unjustified delay, incompetence, neglectful advice).
- Breach of any statutory Code of Practice.
- Health and safety risks, including risks to the public as well as other employees.
- The unauthorised use of public funds (e.g. expenditure for an improper purpose).
- Fraud and corruption (e.g. to solicit or receive any gift/reward as a bribe).
- Breach of the Conditions of Service or Members' Code of Conduct
- Any unethical conduct.

Note - This list is not exhaustive.

This policy does not cover employees lodging grievances about their employment, or the public complaining about services that they have or have not received. There are separate Council procedures in place detailing the course of action for those circumstances.

5.0 Safeguards

5.1 Prevention of 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 any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith. Any member of staff found to be victimising you will be considered to be committing a serious disciplinary offence. If you

experience any such pressure after raising a legitimate concern, tell someone in authority.

5.2 *Confidentiality*

Whilst the Council gives an assurance that it will not tolerate the harassment or victimisation of anyone raising a genuine concern, it recognises that nonetheless an individual may want to raise a concern in confidence under this policy. The Council will take steps to maintain your confidentiality throughout the process. However, it is possible that we will be unable to resolve the concern raised without revealing your identity (e.g. because your evidence is needed in court) but if this occurs we will discuss with you in advance how we can proceed.

5.3 *Anonymous Allegations*

This policy encourages you to put your name to any allegation you make. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful, but they will still be considered for investigation at the discretion of the Council.

5.4 *Untrue Allegations*

No action will be taken against staff who make allegations in good faith if they are not confirmed by the investigation. Employees who report legitimate concerns under this policy are merely fulfilling their duty to the Council and will not therefore be at risk of losing their job/position or suffering any form of retribution. However, if an individual is found to make malicious or vexatious allegations it may be considered appropriate to take disciplinary action.

6.0 **How to Raise a Concern**

Any concerns that you have may be raised verbally or in writing. Concerns are better raised in writing giving the background, history and reason for the concern together with names, dates, places and as much information as possible. If you do not feel able to put your concern in writing then you can telephone or meet the officer you intend reporting to. Where appropriate, arrangements can be made for disclosures outside normal working hours.

Remember – The earlier you express your concern the easier it will be to take action. If in doubt, raise it!

The reporting route for concerns will depend on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues and who is thought to be involved.

If you are a member of staff, agency staff, self-employed worker, contractor, or volunteer you can raise your concern or suspicion in the first instance with your line manager or Head of Service. (The officer receiving the allegation is then required to inform the Audit Manager and the Section 151 Officer and/or Monitoring Officer.) If this is not appropriate you can raise the issue directly with **one** of the following Designated Officers.

- Lorna Ford, Chief Executive
- Andrew Vallance, Deputy Chief Executive (Section 151 Officer)

- Ben Hook, Director - Place and Climate Change
- Linda Walker, Interim Monitoring Officer
- Gary Angell, Audit Manager

If you are a Councillor you should approach one of the above Designated Officers directly.

Your choice of Delegated Officer should take into account the nature and seriousness of your concern and whether they might already be involved in the issue.

Note - Regardless of the route you take, the Designated Officer will be required to inform at least one member of the Senior Leadership Team (Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Director of Place and Climate Change or Chief Finance Officer) if your concern leads to a formal investigation. However, only one of these officers will usually be consulted in relation to the detail of your concern. This is to ensure that any further escalation or complaint about the conduct of an investigation may be dealt with by a different officer.

If you are a member of the public then you are encouraged to raise any matters of concern directly with the Council by contacting the Audit Manager. This may be done using one of the following methods:

- **Online:** By completing a [Whistleblowing Form](#)
- **By email:** By sending a message to audit@rother.gov.uk
- **By telephone:** By calling the Fraud Hotline on **01424 787799**
- **By post:** By writing to the Audit Manager at Rother District Council, Town Hall, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, TN39 3JX.

All Whistleblowing Forms and email messages are delivered direct to the Audit Manager and are only accessible by this officer. Similarly, all calls (and voicemail messages) received on the Fraud Hotline can only be answered (or accessed in the case of a message) by the Audit Manager.

All information received by the Audit Manager will be handled in the strictest confidence, but you may still raise your concerns anonymously if you prefer.

In the event that the Audit Manager is absent for any sustained period of time (e.g. annual leave of more than 72 hours) then one of the Designated Officers listed above will be given secure access to any messages received.

Note - The Internal Audit Team are automatically sent an email alert whenever a whistleblowing referral is received meaning that they would know when to arrange for a Designated Officer to be given secure access. However, at no point are they able to view the content of the message themselves.

7.0 How the Council Will Respond

The action taken by the Council will depend on the nature of the concern. The matters raised may:

- Be investigated internally by Management or Internal Audit
- Be referred to the Monitoring Officer
- Be referred to the Police
- Be referred to the External Auditor
- Form the subject of an independent inquiry.

You are encouraged to put your name to concerns. All cases reported will be considered, but concerns expressed anonymously are more difficult to action and investigate effectively. The Council will not expect you to prove that your concern is true, but you will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for you to raise the issue.

The following factors will be taken into account when establishing the scope and depth of any investigation:

- The seriousness of the issues raised
- The credibility of the concern
- The likelihood of confirming the allegation from other sources and information

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 should take. Concerns or allegations that fall within the scope of specific procedures, for example, discrimination issues, will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures. Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for investigation.

All serious concerns will be investigated quickly using the most appropriate procedure. It is essential that your allegation is heard by an officer who is impartial and capable of taking an independent view on the concerns raised.

The amount of contact between you and the Designated Officer considering your concerns 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 you in a discreet manner. You have the right to be accompanied by a friend, colleague (not involved in the area of work to which the concern relates), trade union or professional association representative when attending any meetings.

The Designated Officer will respond to you within 10 working days acknowledging that your concern has been received and where required arrange an initial, confidential meeting to obtain any further information. This is to enable the Designated Officer to decide upon the best course of action but should not be construed as an acceptance or rejection of the concern.

The Designated Officer will then decide whether an investigation is appropriate or not and, if so, what form it should take.

Owing to the variety of factors to take into account it is only possible to offer an estimate of the timescale for investigation, but the Designated Officer will keep you informed of progress – subject to legal constraints and matters of confidentiality.

8.0 How the Matter Can Be Taken Further

This policy is intended to provide a channel for you to raise concerns within the Council. If you are not satisfied with the outcome of an investigation, and you feel it is right to take the matter outside the Council, the following are possible contact points:

- Relevant professional, government or regulatory bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive, Environment Agency, Financial Conduct Authority, HM Revenue and Customs, or HM Treasury
- Local Government Ombudsman
- External Auditor – Contact: Darren J. Wells (Director), Grant Thornton UK LLP, Telephone: 01293 554120, Email: Darren.J.Wells@uk.gt.com
- Police
- Recognised trade unions

In instances where staff decide to take the matter outside the Council they must always ensure that, in the first instance, the Council has been given an opportunity to fully investigate the issues raised. You will also need to ensure that confidential information is not disclosed unless relevant to your concern.

9.0 Independent Advice

9.1 Council Employees

The Council recognises that employees may wish to seek advice and be represented by their trade union when using the provisions of this policy and acknowledges and endorses the role trade union representatives play in this area.

It is worth remembering that your trade union, professional organisation or regulatory body can play a valuable role in assisting you raise your concerns under this policy.

9.2 Members of the Public

Organisations that may be able to provide specific advice, in addition to those listed in paragraph 8.0, include:

- Citizens Advice
- Protect (formerly Public Concern at Work)

Protect is an independent charity that provides free advice to anyone who wishes to raise concerns about fraud or other serious malpractice. It can be contacted by telephone on 020 3117 2520, by email at whistle@protect-advice.org.uk or by completing an [online form](#)

10.0 Relevant Legislation

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 aims to protect whistleblowers from victimisation and dismissal, where they raise genuine concerns about a range of misconduct and malpractice. It covers virtually all employees in the public, private and voluntary sectors, and certain other workers, including agency staff, homeworkers, trainees, contractors, and all professionals in the NHS. The usual employment law restrictions on minimum qualifying period and age do not apply.

A worker will be protected if the disclosure is made in good faith and is about:

- a criminal act
- a failure to comply with a legal obligation
- miscarriage of justice
- danger to health and safety
- any damage to the environment
- an attempt to cover up any of these.

The Act extends protection given to health and safety representatives to individuals who raise genuine concerns about health, safety or environmental risks. (The Employment Rights Act 1996 already gives some legal protection to employees who take action over, or raise concerns about, health and safety at work.)

Where a whistleblower is victimised following a protected disclosure, they can take a claim to an employment tribunal for compensation. If a whistleblower is dismissed, they can apply for an interim order to keep his/her job, pending a full hearing.

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