

CONFIDENTIAL REPORTING
(Also known as 'Whistle Blowing')

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Central Bedfordshire Council is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment we expect employees and others that we deal with who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Council'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 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 it may be easier to ignore the concern rather than report what may just be a suspicion of malpractice.
- 1.3 The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 encourages individuals to raise concerns about malpractice in the workplace and this policy document makes it clear that employees can raise serious concerns without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage and is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise those concerns within the Council, rather than overlooking a problem.
- 1.4 The Policy applies to all employees and those contractors working for the Council on Council premises, for example, agency staff, builders, and drivers. It also covers suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Council in their own premises, for example care homes. Members of the public are also encouraged to raise concerns, which will be responded to in accordance with this policy.
- 1.5 These procedures are in addition to the Council's complaint procedures and other statutory reporting procedures applying to some service areas. Service managers are responsible for making service users aware of the existence of these procedures if and when necessary.
- 1.6 This policy has been discussed with the relevant trade unions and professional organisations and has their support.

2.0 Aims and Scope of this Policy

2.1 This policy aims to:-

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

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2.2 There are existing procedures in place to enable you to lodge a grievance relating to your own employment. The Confidential Reporting Policy is intended to cover major concerns that fall outside the scope of other procedures. These include:

- conduct which is an offence or a breach of law
- disclosures related to miscarriages of justice
- health and safety risks, including risks to the public as well as other employees
- damages to the environment
- the unauthorised use of public funds
- possible fraud and corruption
- sexual or physical abuse of clients, or
- other unethical conduct

2.3 Thus any serious concerns that you have about any aspect of service provision or the conduct of officers or members of the Council or others acting on behalf of the Council can be reported under the Confidential Reporting 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 subscribe to; or
- is against the Council's Standing Orders and policies; or
- falls below established standards of practice; or
- amounts to improper conduct.

2.4 This policy does not replace the corporate complaint procedure.

3.0 **Safeguards**

3.1 **Harassment or Victimisation**

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

3.3 The Council recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If you make an allegation in good faith you will have nothing to fear because you will be doing your duty to your employer and those for whom you are providing a service.

3.4 The Council will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressure) and will take appropriate action to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith.

3.5 Any investigation into allegations of potential malpractice will not influence or be influenced by any disciplinary or redundancy procedures that already affect you.

4.0 **Confidentiality**

4.1 All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made not to reveal your identity if you so wish. At the appropriate time, i.e. if and when, the matter goes to an investigatory stage and a disciplinary hearing, however, you may need to come forward as a witness.

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5.0 **Anonymous Allegations**

- 5.1 This policy encourages you to put your name to your allegation whenever possible.
- 5.2 Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the Council.
- 5.3 In exercising this 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 confirming the allegation from attributable sources.

6.0 **Untrue Allegations**

- 6.1 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 an allegation maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against you. (The Council will manage such situations using its agreed Disciplinary Procedure).

7.0 **How to raise a concern**

- 7.1 As a first step, you should normally raise concerns with your immediate manager or their superior. This depends however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice. For example, if you believe that management is involved you should approach the Chief Executive, Director of Corporate Resources, the Council's Monitoring Officer or the Assistant Director Audit and Risk. .
- 7.2 Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. Staff who wish to make a written report 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.

All concerns received will be registered immediately with the Monitoring Officer.

- 7.3 The earlier you express the concern the easier it is to take action.
- 7.4 Although you are not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, you will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for your concern.
- 7.5 Advice and guidance on how matters of concern may be pursued can be obtained from:
- Monitoring Officer
 - Director of Corporate Resources
 - Assistant Director (Audit and Risk)
 - Assistant Director (Human Resources and Organisational Development)

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- 7.6 You may wish to consider discussing your concern with a colleague or your trade union representative 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. *However, once you have raised a concern under the Confidential Reporting Policy you should be mindful that any further discussions with other parties may impede the maintenance of confidentiality.*
- 7.7 You may invite your trade union or friend to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns you have raised.
- 8.0 **How the Council will respond**
- 8.1 The Council will respond to your concerns. Do not forget that testing out your concerns is not the same as either accepting or rejecting them.
- 8.2 Where appropriate the matters raised may:
- be investigated by management, internal audit, or through the disciplinary process
 - be referred to the police
 - be referred to the external auditor
 - form the subject of an independent inquiry
- 8.3 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 will have in mind, is the public interest. Concerns or allegations, which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example, child protection or discrimination issues), will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- 8.4 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.
- 8.5 Within ten working days of a concern being raised, the Monitoring Officer will write to you:
- 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.
- 8.6 The amount of contact between the officers considering the issues 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 Council will seek further information from you.
- 8.7 Where any meeting is arranged, off-site if you so wish, a union or professional association representative or a friend can accompany you.

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8.8 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 about the procedure.

8.9 The Council accepts that you need to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. Thus, subject to legal constraints, we will inform you of the outcomes of any investigation.

9.0 **The Responsible Officer**

9.1 The Monitoring Officer has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. That officer maintains record of concerns raised and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger your confidentiality) and will report as necessary to the Council.

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

10.1 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, possible contact points are set out in *paragraph 10.3*.

10.2 Before taking matters outside the Council you may wish to take independent advice and the charity Public Concern at Work (telephone 0171 404 6609) offers such facilities to employees.

10.3 The following are possible external contact points:

- the Council's external auditor
- your trade union/professional association representative
- your local Citizens Advice Bureau
- relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- a relevant voluntary organisation
- the police

10.4 If you do take the matter outside the Council, you should ensure that you do not disclose confidential information

Further Information:

Nick Murley -Assistant Director, Audit and Risk

TEL: 0300 300 4605

EMAIL: nick.murley@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Kathy Riches – Head of Audit

TEL: 0300 300 6155

EMAIL: kathy.riches@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

24 Hours BCC Fraud Hotline

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TEL: 0800 587 8277.

EMAIL: tellusaboutfraud@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Barbara Morris– Assistant Director – Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer)

TEL: 0300 300 4024

EMAIL: Barbara.morris@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Gordon McFarlane Head of Operational HR

TEL: 0300 300 6651

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