

WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

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Policy Statement

Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something wrong within the establishment, it is important that they feel able to express their concerns without fear of harassment or victimisation. The Public Interest Disclosure Act (in force since January 1999) 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. It is recognised that cases may have to be processed on a confidential basis.

The term employee will include temporary staff, volunteers, contractors and ex-employees except where required otherwise by the context.

This policy works in conjunction with our Anti-Bullying, Acceptable Behaviour, Complaints, Equality, Health and Safety, Internet Acceptable Use, Safeguarding and Child Protection and Safer Recruitment Policies. Other documentation should also be considered such as staff disciplinary procedures and staff code of conduct.

Aims

This policy aims to:

- Raise awareness that expressing concerns about unacceptable practice is the responsibility of all employees
- 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 investigated
- Reassure employees that they will be protected from reprisals or victimisation for whistleblowing in good faith
- Allow employees to take the matter further if they are dissatisfied with the response
- Describe how any employee can raise concerns s/he may have about working practices and who should be informed about the concerns

Legislation

The requirement to have clear whistle-blowing procedures in place is set out in the Academy Trust Handbook

This policy has been written in line with the above document, as well as government guidance on whistleblowing. We also take into account the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998.

The policy complies with our funding agreement and articles of association.

Definition of whistleblowing

Whistleblowing covers concerns made that report wrongdoing that is “in the public interest”. Examples of whistleblowing include (but aren’t limited to):

- Criminal offences, such as fraud or corruption
- Pupils’ or staff’s health and safety being put in danger
- Failure to comply with a legal obligation or statutory requirement

- Breaches of financial management procedures
- Attempts to cover up the above, or any wrongdoing in the public interest
- Damage to the environment

A whistle-blower is a person who raises a genuine concern relating to the above.

Not all concerns about the Trust count as whistleblowing. For example, personal staff grievances such as bullying or harassment do not usually count as whistle-blowing. If something affects a staff member as an individual, or relates to an individual employment contract, this is likely to be a grievance.

When staff have a concern they should consider whether it would be better to follow our staff grievance or complaints procedures.

Considerations prior to initiating a procedure

Before initiating the procedure employees should consider the following:

- Does the concern fall within the scope of the whistleblowing procedure because it is about something that is unlawful or it is against school policies, falls below the established standard or practice or amounts to improper conduct?
- Employees should use line manager or team meetings and other opportunities to raise questions and seek clarification on issues which are a day-to-day concern
- Whilst it can be difficult to raise concerns about the practice or behaviour of a colleague, employees must act to prevent an escalation of the problem and to prevent themselves being potentially implicated
- All employees have the right to raise concerns, which could be about the actions of other employees, private contractors, School or Trust members, volunteers or outside agencies
- Concerns raised by employees about their own conditions of service or salary should be addressed to the Headteacher. If the concern is regarding the Headteacher or if central employees wish to raise a concern they should address these to the CEO.

Safeguards

Harassment or victimisation

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 raise a concern in good faith.

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 Whistle-Blowing Policy.

Confidentiality

The Trust will do its best to protect an employee's identity if confidentiality is requested. However, it must be understood that should the concern raised need to be addressed through another procedure, eg, disciplinary procedures, the employee may be asked to provide a signed statement as part of the evidence, thus revealing identity. Failure to provide such statement may mean further action cannot

be taken by the School to address the concern and in some circumstances, the School may have to disclose the identity of the employee without their consent, although this will be discussed with the employee first.

Anonymous allegations

Employees are encouraged to put their name to an allegation. Allegations expressed anonymously are much less powerful and more difficult to address, but they will be considered at the discretion of the School. In exercising the discretion, the factors to be taken into account would include:

- The seriousness of the issue raised
- The credibility of the concern
- The likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources

Untrue allegations

If an employee makes an allegation in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against the employee. If, however, there is clear evidence that an employee has made malicious or vexatious allegations, disciplinary action may be taken against that employee.

Unfounded allegations

Following the investigation, allegations may be confirmed as unfounded. This outcome will be notified to the employee who has raised the concern, who will be informed that the School deems the matter to be concluded and that it should not be raised again unless new evidence becomes available.

Principles of processing data under GDPR

Whilst a large proportion of whistleblowing reports are made anonymously, many contain personal data that is divulged as part of the reporting process.

The processing of personal data can greatly aid effective operation of a whistleblowing service because it allows a more detailed investigation to take place. It also enables the receiving party to provide feedback to the reporter on the outcome of an investigation.

The governing principles for processing personal data under GDPR articles 5-11 state that data should be:

- Processed lawfully, fairly and transparently
- Collected for specified, legitimate purpose
- Adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary
- Accurate and up to date
- Kept in form which permits identification for no longer than necessary for purpose
- Processed in a manner to ensure appropriate security of data

Data Minimisation in a whistleblowing context

‘Data minimisation’ means data reporters and handlers only collecting data that is “adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary” is processed.

When capturing a whistleblowing report, detail is essential. More detail can greatly aid the investigation process- but it can be difficult to determine how much information is ‘too much’.

Both the reporter and the handler must avoid collecting and sharing unnecessary personal data (which is then subsequently stored and processed).

Storing whistleblowing report and subject data

ALT Trust GDPR Policy requires that data is not kept for longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data was processed.

Whilst GDPR does not impose an exact timeframe, it may cause data processors and controllers to implement stricter requirements to delete and destroy data which is no longer deemed necessary.

This storage period may vary significantly for whistleblowing reports. In the event of a complex investigation, the data controller may need to retain the data for several months whilst that investigation takes place.

Although a 'set retention period' is not always applicable, whistleblowers must be advised that their details will only be retained until the case is closed and issue resolved.

Consent

Under GDPR, Data Handlers must 'demonstrate that the data subject has consented' to the processing of their data. The consent must be specific, informed and there must be some form of clear affirmative action.

This means the whistleblower will be more informed about how and where their data is stored and, in turn, can exercise their rights under GDPR should they wish to. (See the Subject Access Request Policy in GDPR policy).

Obtaining consent at outset

Data handlers, must obtain the consent of the whistleblowing individual regarding their own data at the outset of data collection. In instances when the reporter shares the data of a third party, all affected employees must be informed that their data may be processed and their consent must be requested to proceed. Only data relevant to the report must be processed, and that information will only be held until the report has been fully investigated and resolved.

Withdrawal of consent

Whilst employees can be asked to agree to the processing of their data for the whistleblowing report, they are also within their rights to withdraw such consent.

It must be as easy to withdraw as to give consent. For example, if consent is obtained by a signed letter, it must also be possible to withdraw consent with a signed letter

Rights of the Data Subject

Articles 12-23 (The UK General Data Protection Legislation – UK GDPR) outline the rights afforded to Data Subjects under the GDPR, namely:

- The Right to access
- Right to data portability
- Right to rectification/right to erasure
- Right to object
- Right to restriction of processing

They are set out in more detail in the Trust Data Protection Policy.

In a whistleblowing context, the rights of the data subject may be restricted. For example, it would not be productive to identify, under a Subject Access Request, that they are the subject of a serious report regarding a criminal offence.

There is provision under Article 23 for Member States to restrict the GDPR subject's rights for the 'prevention, investigation, detection or prosecution of criminal offences' or civil claims.

Article 29 Working Party recommends that "under no circumstances can the person accused in a whistleblower's report obtain information about the identity of the whistleblower"

As the data subject, GDPR does put the whistleblower in a much stronger position and affords them more authority over their own data.

Who to report to and how to raise a concern

a. As a first step, an employee should normally raise concerns with their immediate manager or their manager's superior. This depends, however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues and who is involved. For example, if an employee believes that their immediate manager or their manager's superior is involved, they should approach the Headteacher. If the matter involves the Headteacher, the CEO of ALT should be approached. If the matter involves the CEO, the Chair of ALT should be approached, if the matter involves the Chair of ALT, the CEO should be approached.

b. An employee (including the Headteacher and members of the Senior Leadership Team) can bypass the direct management line and the MAT if they feel the overall management and governing body of a school is engaged in an improper course of action. In this case, please refer below (Raising concerns outside the school).

c. Concerns are better raised in writing. The employee should set out the background and history of 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 the employee is raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure.

d. 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.

The role of senior leaders (senior leaders can be school or centrally based)

A senior leader may be informed by an employee about concern(s) and that they are 'blowing the whistle' within the procedure in person or in writing over the phone.

The senior leader should respond immediately by arranging to meet with the employee to discuss the concern(s) as soon as possible.

Investigating the concern

Stage one

At the initial meeting the senior manager should establish that:

- There is a genuine cause and sufficient grounds for concern
- The concern has been appropriately raised via the Whistleblowing Policy

The senior leader should ask the employee, to put their concern(s) in writing, if they have not already done so. The senior leader 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 raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure and provide:

- The background and history of concerns
- Names, dates and places (where possible)
- The reasons why the employee is particularly concerned about the situation

The employee should be asked to date and sign their letter and/or the notes of any discussion. The senior leader 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 letters/notes become evidence in other proceedings, e.g. an internal disciplinary hearing.

The senior leader should follow the policy as set out above and in particular explain to the employee:

- What steps the employee intends to take to address the concern
- How they will communicate with the employee at the end of the process and that a written response would be sent out 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 information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed
- That the school will do all that it can to protect the employee from discrimination and/or victimization
- That the matter will be taken seriously and investigated immediately
- That if the employee's concern, though raised in good faith, is not confirmed by the investigation, no punitive action will be taken against them
- If clear evidence is uncovered during the investigation that the employee has made a malicious or vexatious allegation, disciplinary action may be taken against them.
- The investigation may confirm their allegations to be unfounded in which case RWBA Trust will deem the matter to be concluded and the employee will be expected not to raise the concern again, unless new evidence becomes available.

Stage two

The senior leader should consult with the Headteacher 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.

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)
- The likelihood of confirming allegation(s) from attributable sources

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
- Be referred to the police
- Be referred to the Trust's external auditor
- Form the subject of an independent enquiry

Senior leaders should have a working knowledge and understanding of other school policies and procedures, e.g. disciplinary, harassment, child protection procedures, to ensure that concerns raised by employees are addressed via the appropriate procedure/process.

Stage three

Within ten working days of a concern being received, the manager receiving the concern must write to the employee:

- Acknowledging that the concern has been received
- Indicating how they propose to deal with the matter
- Giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response
- Telling the employee whether any initial enquiries have been made
- Telling the employee whether further investigations will take place, and if not why not
- Letting the employee know when they will receive further details if the situation is not yet resolved
- Providing the employees with details of whom to contact should they be dissatisfied with this response (see below)

Malicious or vexatious allegations

Staff are encouraged to raise concerns when they believe there to be potentially an issue. If an allegation is made in good faith, but the investigation finds no wrongdoing, there will be no disciplinary action against the member of staff who raised the concern.

If, however, an allegation is shown to be deliberately invented or malicious, the Trust will consider whether any disciplinary action is appropriate against the person making the allegation.

Raising concerns outside the school

ALT Trust encourages staff to raise their concerns internally, in line with this policy, but recognises that staff may feel the need to report concerns to an external body.

The Whistle-Blowing Policy is intended to provide employees with a procedure for raising concerns and resolving these within the school. If an employee is not satisfied with the response, the manager should ensure that the employee is made aware with whom they may raise the matter externally:

- Protect Concern at Work- www.protect_advice.org.uk
- Recognised trade union
- Relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- A solicitor
- A list of prescribed bodies to whom staff can raise concerns with is included here: [Whistleblowing: list of prescribed people and bodies - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whistleblowing-list-of-prescribed-people-and-bodies)

The senior leader should stress to the employee that if they choose to take a concern outside the school, 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.

- Protect, concern at Work is a registered charity that employees can contact for advice to assist them on raising concerns about poor practice at work. The charity also provides advice to employers as to the possible way to address these concerns.

Monitoring and review

The CEO will be responsible for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of this policy/procedure. The policy/procedure will be reviewed by the Trust board every three years unless new information and guidance arises.

