

THE MERIDALE ORGANISATION

WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

The Meridale Organisation is committed to being open, honest and accountable. It encourages a free and open culture in its dealings between the Trustees and those volunteering and working with the organisation.

This policy aims to help the Trustees and volunteers to raise any serious concerns they may have about colleagues or their seniors with confidence and without having to worry about being victimised, discriminated against or disadvantaged in any way as a result.

It is written in the context of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 which provides protection for those who 'blow the whistle' on malpractices within their organisation.

What types of concerns?

The policy is intended to deal with serious or sensitive concerns about wrongdoings such as the following:

- a criminal offence
- a failure to comply with any legal obligation
- a failure in the protection of children or vulnerable adults
- a miscarriage of justice
- a health and safety risk to an individual
- damage to the environment
- concealment of any of the above.

It is not necessary for individuals who raise the concern to prove the wrongdoing that is alleged to have occurred or is likely to occur. However, if an individual knowingly or maliciously makes an untrue allegation (eg: in order to cause disruption within the Meridale Organisation), the organisation will take appropriate disciplinary action against them. It may constitute gross misconduct.

Individuals should note that they will not be protected from the consequences of making a disclosure if, by doing so, they commit a criminal offence.

The charity's Anti-Bullying and Harassment policy offers protection to volunteers and service users against harassment, bullying and discrimination. Volunteers should make complaints or raise concerns through the Complaints Procedure.

How to raise a concern

The officer designated to handle whistleblowing concerns is the Centre Manager. Individuals should in most cases, first report their concern to a person on the management team or an officer of the Trustees who is expected to respond to the matter. If the relevant person cannot deal with the matter, he or she will refer the concern to the Centre Manager or Chair of Trustees.

Dependent on the seriousness and sensitivity of the matter, and who is suspected of the wrongdoing, the individual can, if necessary report directly to the Centre Manager.. If the matter concerns the Centre Manager., it should be raised with the Trustees.

Individuals are encouraged to raise their concerns in writing where possible, setting out the background and history of their concerns (giving names, dates and places where possible) and indicating the reasons for their concerns.

If any individual is unsure whether to use this procedure or they want independent advice at any stage, they should contact the independent charity, Public Concern at Work's legal helpline on 020 7404 6609, email: helpline@pcaw.co.uk Public Concern at Work will be able to advise on how and with whom to raise a concern about malpractice.

Disclosures made to a legal advisor in the course of obtaining legal advice will be protected under the Public Interest Disclosure Act.

If the individual reasonably believes that the matter relates wholly or mainly to the conduct of a person or body other than the Meridale Organisation or any other matter for which a person or body other than the Meridale Organisation has legal responsibility, the disclosure should be made to that other person or body.

Protecting the individual raising the concern

If an individual raises a concern which they believe to be true, The Meridale Organisation will take appropriate action to protect the individual from any harassment, victimisation or bullying. Volunteers who raise a genuine concern under this policy will not be at risk of losing their role, nor will it influence any unrelated disciplinary action procedures.

The matter will be treated confidentially if the individual requests it and their name or position will be not be revealed without their permission unless the Meridale Organisation has to do so by law. If in other circumstances the concern cannot be resolved without revealing the individual's identity, the Centre Manager will discuss with the individual whether and how to proceed.

Concerns raised anonymously tend to be far less effective but the Centre Manager will decide whether or not to consider the matter taking into account:

- the seriousness of the matter;
- whether the concern is believable;
- whether an investigation can be carried out based on the information provided.

How the Meridale Organisation will deal with the concern

How the concern will be dealt with, will depend on what it involves. It is likely that further enquiries and/or investigation will be necessary. The concern may be investigated by the Centre Manager, the Trustees, through the disciplinary process or it may be referred to the police, other agencies such as Social Services, an external auditor or an independent investigator.

It may be necessary for the individual to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings.

The charity will give the individual feedback on the progress and outcome of any investigation wherever possible.

If the suspicions are not confirmed by an investigation, the matter will be closed. Volunteers will not be treated or regarded any differently for raising the concern, and their confidentiality will continue to be protected.

Monitoring and Review

The Trustees will review this statement periodically and no later than three years from the date below.

Signed: (On behalf of the Meridale Organisation)

Name:

Position:

Date:

Appendix - General Guidance

Whilst much of this is pertinent to employers and employed staff, the general principles are of relevance to the Meridale Organisation.

What is Whistleblowing?

Whistleblowing, or public interest disclosure, is when a worker reports a concern about the improper actions or omissions of their colleagues or their employer which may cause harm to others or to the organisation. Obvious examples of such improper actions include theft, fraud, abuse, breaches of health & safety.

The disclosure should be made 'in good faith'. In other words, the disclosure must be made out of real concern about wrongdoing. Knowingly and maliciously making false accusations for ulterior motives is not whistleblowing. The whistleblower should reasonably believe the information and allegation is substantially true, even if the information later turns out to have been incorrect.

Whistleblowing is not the same as making a complaint or raising a grievance, where the individual is saying that they have personally been poorly treated. A whistleblower is usually not directly or personally affected by the concern and therefore rarely has a direct personal interest in the outcome of any investigation into their concerns.

The whistleblower raises the concern so that others can address it. Examples of concern may include:

- an employee or volunteer defrauding the charity or anyone associated with the charity;
- the physical or emotional abuse of children, young people, vulnerable adults or the elderly;
- anyone making inappropriate use of the charity's resource (eg: for their own personal benefit);
- faulty machinery that puts at risk the safety of employees or anyone associated with the charity.

Good Practice

For effective risk management, volunteers need to be confident that they can raise matters of concern without suffering any detriment. Not dealing with problems early could have a devastating effect on organisations with costly fines, compensation, higher insurance premiums, damaged reputation, regulatory investigation, lost jobs, and even lost lives. Whistleblowing can be an early warning system for the Meridale Organisation and an effective policy can provide a clear framework for action for volunteers and the Meridale Organisation alike.

Following its public consultation on whistleblowing, the UK Financial Services Authority (FSA) found that:

A whistleblowing policy will improve the trust and confidence among volunteers by creating what one respondent called a "culture of honesty and openness" by encouraging volunteers to report internally. This was seen as "good for the morale of volunteers", giving them confidence to come forward with concerns. Senior managers will be the first to know of any issues that they may need to address. These can be dealt with internally. This also means that the costs of investigating any problems, such as fraud, are reduced as problems can be caught quickly.

If volunteers voice concerns within the organisation rather than being forced to go to an external body, the organisation can often tackle a problem before it becomes a crisis, thus helping to avoid potentially damaging media coverage, regulatory sanctions and/or costly compensation payments. A

whistleblowing policy can provide a clear framework for constructive problem solving in a reasonable, appropriate and controllable way.

Whistleblowers should not be expected to prove their case should they have a concern about malpractice. Therefore, an organisation's policy on - and response to - whistleblowing should be different from its policy on and response to a grievance.

The main points to consider within a whistleblowing policy or approach to whistleblowing at work:

- Involve personnel by consulting with them through staff groups, or – in smaller organisations – individually, before the introducing the policy;
- Discuss the types of risk your organisation may face with your personnel;
- Be clear about what conduct is unacceptable and about the standards expected of your personnel;
- Encourage personnel to share their concerns internally and in confidence – they do not need to have proof or need to investigate the matter themselves;
- Be clear that concerned personnel will be supported and protected from reprisals;
- Explain that a whistleblower is a witness, not a complainant;
- Deal with wrongdoing seriously and effectively;
- Train managers on how to deal with whistleblowing;
- If personnel feel uncomfortable raising their concern with their line manager, explain that they should then raise it at a senior level such as to a member of the Board of Trustees ;
- Emphasise to managers and personnel that victimisation is a disciplinary offence as is knowingly raising malicious untrue allegations;
- Offer confidentiality to any person who asks for it but be clear that there may be circumstances when their identity might have to be revealed such as when you are ordered by court;
- Report back to personnel about the progress and outcome of any enquiry or action taken;
- Be prepared to explain how you have handled the concern;
- Under no circumstances try to suppress evidence of malpractice.

The Legislation

The Public Interest Disclosure Act came into force in July 1999. It protects most workers against unfair dismissal or being subjected to any other detriment by their employer (such as denial of promotion, pay rise or training) for making disclosures about wrongdoing. It covers all employees, trainees, agency staff, contractors and homeworkers, regardless of length of service or age. However, the genuinely self-employed and volunteers are not covered by the Act.

The Act encourages personnel to raise concerns about malpractice – dangerous or illegal activity – in the workplace. It does not matter whether the wrongdoing takes place in the United Kingdom or abroad. In order for it to be a 'qualifying disclosure' under the Act, the whistleblower should reasonably believe that there is

- a criminal offence
- a failure to comply with any legal obligation
- a miscarriage of justice
- a health and safety risk to an individual
- damage to the environment
- or concealment of the above.

Case law has shown that the second reason for a qualifying disclosure, a failure to comply with any legal obligation can be interpreted broadly. For example this includes breach of a contract of employment,

but for the disclosure to be protected there must be a real legal obligation not just a belief that there is one.

Once a disclosure has been made in good faith to a manager or employer it will be protected under the Act. This should normally be the first route for workers, rather than having to disclose the concern externally. However it does mean that the matter should be dealt with by employers, quickly and thoroughly.

If the matter is not dealt with internally, whistleblowers can disclose to appropriate external bodies. The Act protects disclosures made to prescribed bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive, the Inland Revenue, the Audit Commission, the Charity Commission, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the Financial Services, General Social Care Council, the Housing Corporation, the Information Commissioner and the National Care Standards Commission. For further guidance see the Protect website, <https://protect-advice.org.uk/>.

The disclosure is also protected if it is made to a legal advisor in order to obtain legal advice. The Act also helps ensure that organisations respond without trying to cover up, or to victimise or dismiss the whistleblower. If the whistleblower fears they may be victimised, or that a cover-up is likely or there is no appropriate prescribed regulator, or if the matter has already been raised internally or with a prescribed body, wider disclosures can be made and still be protected. Wider disclosures might be to another professional body, the police, an MP, the media, etc. They should still be reasonable in all circumstances taking into account the seriousness of the matter and likelihood of re-occurrence. Reasonableness would also include consideration of whether the worker first followed any internal whistleblowing procedure the organisation may have.

However if the wrongdoing is of an 'exceptionally serious nature', (such as involving a murder enquiry) the whistleblower need not fear victimisation or cover up to make a protected disclosure to an external body, although it should still be reasonable particularly with regard to whom the disclosure is made. If the whistleblower is victimised for making the disclosure, they can bring a claim to an employment tribunal for compensation. Dismissals of personnel for making a protected disclosure are automatically unfair. Compensation awards will be uncapped and based on the losses suffered. Any clauses in an agreement between a person and the organisation which prevent the person from making disclosures protected under the Act will be void.

Further Information

Protect (Whistleblowing Advice) Limited - This charity is an independent authority on public interest and whistleblowing. It promotes compliance with the law and good practice. They also aim to influence public policy and legislation.

<https://protect-advice.org.uk/>

ACAS

The Arbitration Conciliation & Advisory Service website provides guidance on whistle-blowing for both employers and employees

www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1919

Direct.Gov

Information on whistleblowing can be accessed through the government websites.

www.gov.uk/whistleblowing/overview

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

CIPD is the professional body for those involved in the management and development of people. They have a factsheet on whistleblowing.

www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/whistleblw/whistle.htm