WoodVenturers
Woodland
Learning

Whistleblowing Policy

Purpose

To set out Woodventurers policy and procedure for dealing with concerns raised by employees which relate to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work.

Background

As staff are often the first to realise that there may be something wrong within a setting, it is important that they feel able to express their concerns without fear of harassment or victimisation. Otherwise they may find it easier to ignore the concern rather than report it.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 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.

The directors are committed to the highest possible standard of operation, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment any employees, officers, consultants, contractors, volunteers, casual workers with serious concerns are encouraged to come forward and voice those concerns.

This policy document makes it clear that employees can do so without fear of reprisals; it is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the setting rather than overlooking a problem or alerting anyone external to the setting. This policy does not form part of any contract of employment and it may be amended at any time.

Aims of the Policy

This policy aims to: 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 treated consistently and fairly; reassure employees that they will be protected from reprisals or victimisation for whistleblowing where they have a genuine concern; allow employees to take the matter further if they are dissatisfied with the organisations response.

A whistleblower is a person who raises a genuine concern relating to the matters below. If employees have any genuine concerns related to suspected wrongdoing or danger affecting any of our activities (a whistleblowing concern) s/he should report it under this policy.

Whistleblowing is the disclosure of information which relates to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work. This may include: (a) criminal activity; (b) miscarriages of justice; (c) danger to health and safety; (d) damage to the environment; (e) failure to comply with any legal or professional obligation or regulatory requirements; (f) bribery; (g) financial fraud or mismanagement; (h) negligence; (i) breach of our internal policies and procedures; (j) conduct likely to damage our reputation; (k) unauthorised disclosure of confidential information; (l) public examination fraud; (m) the deliberate concealment of any of the above matters.

Before initiating the procedure employees should consider the following: the responsibility for expressing concerns about unacceptable practice or behaviour rests with all staff; staff should use coordinator, or team meetings and other opportunities to raise questions and seek clarification on issues which are of 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.

This policy should not be used for complaints about an employee's personal circumstances, such as the way s/he has been treated at work. In these cases an employee should use the Grievance Procedure.

The Directors recognise 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 Directors will not tolerate harassment or victimisation and will take action to protect employees when they have a genuine concern.

This does not mean that if an employee is already the subject of internal procedures such as disciplinary, that those procedures will be halted as a result of that employee raising a concern under the whistleblowing policy.

Allegations of child abuse against staff and volunteers will be dealt with in accordance with Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance and Woodventurers policy on Allegations against staff and volunteers.

Confidentiality

We hope that staff will feel able to voice whistleblowing concerns openly under this policy. The Directors will make every effort to protect an employee's identity if confidentiality is requested. However, should the investigation into the concern require the employee to be named as the source of the information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed.

Where possible, employees are encouraged to put their name to an allegation. Proper investigation may be more difficult or impossible if we cannot obtain further information and it is also more difficult to establish whether allegations are credible. Anonymous allegations will be considered at the discretion of the Directors. In exercising the 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.

Untrue Allegations
If an employee makes an allegation where s/he has a genuine concern, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against that employee. If, however, we conclude that an employee has made malicious or vexatious allegations, or with a view to personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against that employee.

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

Support to Employees
It is recognised that raising concerns can be difficult and stressful. Advice and support will be made available, as appropriate, to both the employee(s) raising the concerns and any employee(s) subject to investigation. Where an

How to raise a Concern

Staff should normally raise concerns with their programme Coordinator or one of the other coordinators if preferred. 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 Directors.

Concerns are better raised in writing. The employee should set out the background and history of the 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 request to meet the appropriate person. It is important that, however the concern is raised, the employee makes it clear that s/he/they is/are raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure.

The earlier an employee expresses the concern, the easier it is to take action. 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. In some instances it may be appropriate for an employee to ask the trade union to raise a matter on the employee's behalf. At each meeting under this policy the employee may bring a colleague or trade union representative. The companion must respect the confidentiality of the disclosure and any subsequent investigation.

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

Stage One:

An initial meeting with the Coordinator or Director should establish that: there is genuine cause and sufficient grounds for the concern; and the concern has been appropriately raised via the Whistle-blowing Policy.

The Coordinator/ Director should ask the employee to put their concern(s) in writing, if they have not already done so. If the employee is unable to do this a written summary of the concern/s will be made at the meeting and shared afterwards with the parties involved. Notes of discussions with the employee should be kept and stored securely. The employee's letter and/or any notes should make it clear that the employee is raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure and provide: the background and history of the concerns; and names, dates and places (where possible); and 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 Coordinator should follow the policy as set out above and in particular explain to the employee: who he/she will need to speak to in order to determine the next steps (e.g.Directors); what steps s/he intends to take to address the concern; how s/he will communicate with the employee during and at the end of the process. It should be noted that the need for confidentiality may prevent the setting giving the employee specific details of any necessary investigation or any necessary disciplinary action taken as a result; that the employee will receive a written response within ten 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 the information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed; that the organisation will do all that it can to protect the employee from discrimination and/or victimisation; that the matter will be taken seriously and investigated immediately; that if the employee's concern, though raised as a genuine concern, is not confirmed by the investigation, no punitive action will be taken against them; if clear evidence is uncovered during the investigation that s/he has made a malicious or vexatious allegation, disciplinary action may be taken against them; and the investigation may confirm their allegations to be unfounded in which case the Directors will deem the matter to be concluded unless new evidence becomes available.

Stage Two:

Following the initial meeting with the employee, the Coordinator should consult with the SLT 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, Directors should take the following factors into account: the seriousness of the issue(s) raised; the credibility of the concern(s); and the likelihood of confirming the 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 external auditor; form the subject of an independent inquiry.

Within ten working days of a concern being received, coordinator receiving the concern (at paragraph 5.1 above) 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; and/or telling the employee whether any initial enquiries have been made; and telling the employee whether further investigations will take place, and if not why not; and/or letting the employee know when s/he will receive further details if the situation is not yet resolved

The Coordinator will refer to KCSIE

Raising Concerns Outside the Setting

The aim of this policy is to provide an internal mechanism for reporting, investigation and remedying any wrongdoing in the workplace. In most cases the employee should not find it necessary to alert anyone externally. The law recognises that in some circumstances it may be appropriate for the employee to report his/her concerns to an external body such as a regulator. It will very rarely, if ever, be appropriate to alert the media. Employees are strongly encouraged to seek advice before reporting a concern to anyone external. If an employee is not satisfied with the organisations response, the Directors should ensure that they are made aware with whom they may raise the matter externally: 'Public Concern at Work' Tel no: 0207 404 6609*; Recognised Trade Union; Senior LA Officer; External Auditor; Relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations; Solicitor.

The Directors should stress to the employee that if they choose to take a concern outside the organisation, 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.

Whistleblowing

At Woodventurers we encourage a culture of open communication and believe in the importance of open lines of communication. If you have any concerns about service provision or the conduct of any staff at Woodventurers that:

- make you feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards;
- are not in keeping with Woodventurers policies and procedures;
- fall below established standards of practice; or
- are improper behaviour

*Public Concern at Work is a registered charity that employees can contact for advice to assist them in raising concerns about poor practice at work. The charity also provides advice to employers as to the possible ways to address these concerns. Concerns about safeguarding practices can be raised externally using the NSPCC whistleblowing helpline. Employees can call 0800 0285 from 8.00am – 8.00pm Monday – Friday or email help@nspcc.org.uk

Version Number	3
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Related Policies	Positive behaviour policy Complaints policy Safer Recruitment policy Staff Code of Conduct/Safer Working Practice/ Tutor Handbook Staff Discipline and Grievance procedures Whistleblowing policy

Other Relevant Documents	Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE): Sept 2024 Guidance for Safer Working Practice for those working with children and young people in education settings (May 2019) Guidance from Cambridgeshire Authority: Record Keeping Guidance to take account of GDPR: Sept 2018 Record Keeping Guidance from Cambridgeshire Authority (GDPR): Sept 2018 Working Together to Safeguard Children: July 2018 Disqualification under the Childcare Act 2006: statutory guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools (July 2018) Information sharing: Advice for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers: July 2018 Education Child Protection Record Keeping Guidance Guidance for Safer Working Practice for Adults who work with Children and Young People in Education Settings: Oct 2015 What to do if you're worried a child is being abused: Advice for practitioners" Mar 2015