

Romney Marshes Area Internal Drainage Board

Whistle Blowing Policy and Confidential Reporting Code

POLICY AIMS

The aim of this policy is to maintain a working environment where people, whether they are employees of the Board, suppliers, contractors, members or private individuals co-opted on to committees of the Board are able to raise concerns where they think there is misconduct or malpractice, and to know that their concerns will be taken seriously and investigated. The policy is intended to give confidence to employees to whistle blow and, as such, it incorporates statutory provision for protection under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. Members of the public may also have concerns. That is why we have produced this whistle blowing policy not only to help our staff but we will publish this document on our website to enable the public to also contact us with their concerns.

OUR COMMITMENT

The Board attaches high priority to ethical standards and probity and is committed to taking appropriate action where misconduct or malpractice is identified. We are committed to being open, honest and accountable. The Board will protect both former and current staff from being penalised for raising concerns about misconduct or malpractice provided that allegations are made in good faith and without mischievous or malicious intent.

The following are affected by this policy:

- All former and current employees including part time, agency and temporary staff
- Board Members
- Private individuals co-opted on to committees of the Board
- Suppliers and those providing services under a contract whether working for the Board on Board premises or their own premises.

INTRODUCTION

Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something seriously wrong within the Board. However, they may not express their concerns because they feel that speaking up would be disloyal to their colleagues or to the Board. They may also fear harassment or victimisation. In line with the policy statement we encourage employees and others that we work with, who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Board's work, to come forward and voice those concerns. All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made not to reveal anyone's identity if they so wish. At the appropriate time however, they may need to come forward as a witness. We wish to make it clear that they can do so without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. This 'Whistle blowing Policy and Confidential Reporting Code' aims to encourage and make it possible for employees to raise serious concerns within the Board rather than overlooking a problem or 'blowing the whistle' outside the Board.

AIM AND SCOPE OF THE POLICY

This policy aims to:

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

There are existing procedures in place which make it possible for staff to lodge a grievance relating to their own employment. This policy is intended to cover major concerns that fall outside the scope of other policies and procedures. These concerns 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
- damage to the environment
- the unauthorised use of public funds
- the Board's Constitution (including Standing Orders or Other Regulations etc) not being observed or are being breached by members and/or officers
- possible fraud and corruption
- sexual or physical abuse of clients
- other unethical conduct
- information relating to any of the above being deliberately concealed or attempts being made to conceal the same.

This means that any serious concerns anyone has about any aspect of service provision or the conduct of officers or members of the Board or others acting on behalf of the Board can be reported under this policy. This may be about something that:

- makes anyone feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, their experience or
- the standards they believe the Board subscribes to
- is against Financial Regulations, Board Procedure Rules, and so on
- falls below established standards of practice
- amounts to improper conduct.

What is not covered?

This policy cannot be used to deal with serious or sensitive matters that are covered by other procedures. Such procedures include the following:

- Staff complaints about their employment. These complaints are dealt with through our Grievance Procedure
- Customers' complaints about our services. These complaints are dealt with through our Complaints Procedure

- Allegations against members. Those wishing to whistle blow on members should do so directly to the Clerk/Engineer of the Board or the Internal Auditor

SAFEGUARDS

The Board is committed to good practice and high standards and wants to be supportive of employees. It is recognised that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If what is being reported is true, there should be nothing to fear because the person reporting will be doing their duty to the employer and those for whom they are providing a service. Any investigation into allegations of potential malpractice will not influence or be influenced by any disciplinary or redundancy procedures that already affect staff.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made not to reveal anyone's identity if they so wish. At the appropriate time however, you may need to come forward as a witness.

ANONYMOUS ALLEGATIONS

This policy encourages anyone to put their name to an allegation whenever possible. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the Board. In exercising this discretion the factors to be taken into account would include:

- the seriousness of the issues raised
- the credibility of the concern
- the likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources.

UNTRUE ALLEGATIONS

If an allegation is made in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against the person concerned. If, however, they make an allegation frivolously, maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against them where appropriate.

HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN

If the person works for the Board, they should normally raise their concerns with their line manager. This depends however on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice. For example, if they believe that management is involved they should approach the Clerk/Engineer or in the absence of the Clerk/Engineer, or if the complaint relates to the Clerk/Engineer, the Internal Auditor or the Board Chairman. Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. Anyone who wishes to make a written report is invited to use the following format:

- the background and history of the concern (giving relevant dates)
- the reason why they are particularly concerned about the situation.

The earlier the concern is expressed the easier it is to take action. Although no one is expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, they will need to demonstrate to the person being contacted that there are reasonable grounds for their concern. Advice and guidance on how to pursue matters of concern may be obtained from:

- The Clerk/Engineer of the Board
- The Internal Auditor .

It may be appropriate to consider discussing a concern with a colleague first and it may be easier to raise the matter if there are two (or more) of you who have had the same experience or concerns. Anyone may also invite their trade union, professional association representative or a friend to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns they have raised. Unions and professional associations may also raise matters of concern on behalf of their members employed by the Board. If anyone prefers not to raise their concern through their line manager, they may report it direct to the Internal Auditor.

If you are a member of the public you should contact the Internal Auditor directly or, in his absence, the Clerk/Engineer to the Board.

HOW THE BOARD WILL RESPOND

The Board will respond to any concerns. Do not forget that testing out concerns is not the same as either accepting or rejecting them. 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

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 should it take. The overriding principle which the Board will have in mind is the public interest. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example fraud or discrimination issues) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures. 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 carried out. Within ten working days of a concern being raised, a line manager, the Clerk/Engineer to the Board or the Internal Auditor, depending upon who has been approached, will write:

- advising that the concern has been received
- advising how we propose to deal with the matter
- giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response
- advising whether any initial enquiries have been made
- supplying information on staff support mechanisms where appropriate
- advising whether further investigations will take place and, if not, why not.

The amount of contact between the officers considering the issues and the person raising them will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the Board will get further information from them.

The Board will take steps to minimise any difficulties which may be experienced as a result of raising a concern. For instance, if it is necessary to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the Board will arrange for advice about the procedure. The Board accepts that individuals need to be confident that the matter has been properly addressed. Therefore, subject to legal constraints, we will tell them the outcome of any investigation.

THE RESPONSIBLE OFFICER

The Clerk/Engineer to the Board has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. In the absence of the Clerk/Engineer, the Internal Auditor will act on his/her behalf. They maintain a record of concerns raised and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger anyone's confidentiality) and will report as necessary to the Board.

HOW THE MATTER CAN BE TAKEN FURTHER

This policy is intended to provide anyone with an avenue within the Board to raise concerns. If internal advice is required before starting action, you may talk to:

- an immediate line manager, the Internal Auditor or the Clerk/Engineer to the Board
- the local union branch.

The Board hopes everyone will be satisfied with any action taken. If they are not, and they feel it is right to take the matter outside the Board, the following are possible contact points:

- the District Auditor
- UNISON Whistle blowers hotline 0845 355 0845
- the local Citizens Advice Bureau
- relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- a relevant voluntary organisation
- the police
- the independent charity Public Concern at Work. Their lawyers can give free confidential advice at any stage about how to raise a concern about serious malpractice at work. The charity's contact details are: 020 7404 6604 / 020 7404 6576 / www.pcaw.co.uk/ whistle@pcaw.co.uk (enquiries) / helpline@pcaw.co.uk (helpline) / Public Concern at Work, Suite 306, 16 Baldwin Gardens, London EC1N 7RJ

If the matter is taken outside the Board, please make sure that you do not disclose confidential information. Check with the Clerk/Engineer to the Board or Internal Auditor about that.

WHISTLE BLOWING DO'S AND DON'TS

Do

- keep calm
- think about the risks and outcomes before you act
- remember you are a witness, not a complainant
- phone Public Concern at Work for advice on 020 7404 6604

Don't

- forget there may be an innocent or good explanation
- become a private detective
- use whistle blowing procedures to pursue a personal grievance
- expect thanks.

The policy will be reviewed again if there are any changes in legislation or reorganisation of the staff structure.