

WHISTLE-BLOWING POLICY

INTRODUCTION

This policy applies to all staff, volunteers, third party service providers and service users of The Great North Air Ambulance Service.

The Great North Air Ambulance Service is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment we expect employees, volunteers and others that we deal with, who have serious concerns about any aspect of the charity's work to come forward and voice those concerns. It is recognised that most cases will have to proceed on a confidential basis.

The policy document makes it clear that you can do so without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. This whistle-blowing policy is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the charity rather than overlooking a problem or airing their complaints outside the charity.

Aims and Scope

This policy is designed to enable employees of the charity to raise concerns internally and at a high level and to disclose information which the individual believes shows malpractice or impropriety. This policy is intended to cover concerns which are in the public interest prescribed in law as "qualifying disclosures" A "qualifying disclosure" means a disclosure of information that the employee genuinely believes is in the public interest and shows that the Charity has committed a "relevant failure" by:

- committing a criminal offence;
- failing to comply with a legal obligation;
- a miscarriage of justice;
- endangering the health and safety of an individual;
- environmental damage; or
- concealing any information relating to the above

These acts can be in the past, present or future, so that, for example, a disclosure qualifies if it relates to environmental damage that has happened, is happening, or is likely to happen.

There are existing procedures in place to enable you to lodge a grievance relating to employment matters.

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, and
- take any concerns you may raise relating to the above matters very seriously

Safeguards

This policy is designed to offer protection to those employees and volunteers of the charity who disclose such concerns provided the disclosure is made:

- in the reasonable belief of the individual making the disclosure that it tends to show malpractice or impropriety and if they make the disclosure to an appropriate person (see below). It is important to note that no protection from internal disciplinary procedures is offered to those who choose not to use the procedure.

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

The charity recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If what is reported is true, staff should have nothing to fear because they will be doing a duty to their employer and those for whom you are providing a service.

The charity will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect staff when they raise a concern.

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

Confidentiality

The charity will treat all such disclosures in a confidential and sensitive manner. The identity of the individual making the allegation may be kept confidential so long as it does not hinder or frustrate any investigation. However, the investigation process may reveal the source of the information and the individual making the disclosure may need to provide a statement as part of the evidence required.

Anonymous Allegations

This policy encourages individuals to put their name to any disclosures they make. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less credible, but they may be considered at the discretion of the Chief Executive

In exercising this discretion, the factors to be taken into account will include:

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

Untrue Allegations

In making a disclosure the individual should exercise due care to ensure the accuracy of the information. However, if the procedure has been invoked for malicious, or vexatious reasons or in pursuit of a personal grudge, then you will be liable to immediate termination of employment or such lesser disciplinary sanction as may be appropriate in the circumstances.

How to raise a concern

You can raise a concern orally or in writing. The charity would normally expect you to raise your concern internally, in the first instance and if appropriate through your line management structure. If the matter is of a more serious nature then we would expect you to raise your concern to the Chair of Trustees or the Chief Executive. Which of these individuals is the most appropriate will depend on the seriousness of the matter and who you think is involved. If, under the circumstances you do not feel comfortable about raising your concern with any of these persons, then you can report instead to any other Trustee or Director.

Staff should report the concern at the earliest opportunity so that action can be taken.

Although staff are not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, they will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for concern.

The person expressing concern should state at the time if they want to raise the matter in confidence so that appropriate arrangements can be made

Proof of wrongdoing

The charity does not expect you to have absolute proof of any misconduct or malpractice that you report. However, you must have some sound reason for your concern.

How will the matter be investigated?

Once you have raised your concern with the charity you will receive an acknowledgement of receipt normally within five working days.

The charity will then need to make preliminary enquiries to decide whether a full investigation is necessary. If such an investigation is necessary then, depending on the nature of the misconduct, your concerns will be either:

- Investigated internally (by management or trustees appointed for that purpose) or
- Referred to the appropriate external person (for example the external auditors, the Charity Commission, police or health and safety executive) for investigation

Subject to any legal constraints, the charity will inform you of the outcome of the preliminary enquiries, full investigation and any further action that has been taken.

What can I do if I am unhappy with the way the charity has dealt with my concern?

If you are unhappy with the outcome of an investigation, the charity would prefer that you pursue your concern through the internal grievance procedures in the first instance. If you are still not happy you may wish to raise your concern with an external organisation, such as the Charity Commission or the Police.

Independent advice

If you feel you need independent advice at any stage, you may like to contact Public Concern at Work, which is an independent charity that promotes good practice, compliance with the law and accountability in the workplace. It is entirely self-funding and relies on modest subscriptions from employing organisations for its existence.

Public Concern at Work is recognised as a leader in its field and its work has been endorsed by government, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the TUC, the CBI and the Institute of Directors. Among the services it provides to organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors are:

- A helpline staffed by qualified lawyers providing advice, free of charge, primarily for employees but also open to trustees;
- A consultancy service assisting clients in developing and implementing effective whistle-blowing policies; and
- Policy packs for employers

While we hope this policy gives you the reassurance you need to raise your concern internally, we recognise that there may be circumstances where you can properly report a concern to an outside body. Public concern at work will be able to advise you on such an option if you wish; contact: Public Concern at Work on 020 7404 6609 or by email at whistle@pcaw.org.uk

Conclusion

While the charity cannot predict the outcome of an investigation prompted by any concerns raised by you, it will handle the matter fairly and properly. By using this procedure, trustees, members of staff and volunteers will help the charity to achieve this.

See also the following policies and procedures:

Grievance

Complaints and Appreciations/ Dealing with feedback and complaints process

Serious Incident