

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Staff Governance
DATE	25 August 2025
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Whistleblowing Policy Review
REPORT NUMBER	CORS/25/198
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Andy MacDonald
CHIEF OFFICER	Isla Newcombe
REPORT AUTHOR	Sharon Robb – Employee Relations Casework Lead
TERMS OF REFERENCE	2.5

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This purpose of this report is to share the reviewed Whistleblowing Policy.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Committee

- 2.1 Notes the undertaking of the review of the Whistleblowing policy and the minor amendments as a result;
- 2.2 Notes the updates to guidance (outlined at section 3.9 of this report), in line with the recommendations of the Accounts Commission Section 102 Report on Aberdeen City Council , as reported to Council on 17 February 2025, and wider process review; and
- 2.3 Instructs the Chief Officer – People and Citizen Services to widely communicate the Policy and Guidance as outlined within the report at section 3.18.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

Background

- 3.1 The Council's current Whistleblowing Policy was approved at [Staff Governance Committee in November 2023](#) and the scheduled biennial review of the Policy was planned for November 2025.
- 3.2 The Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 gives legal protection to individuals against being dismissed or penalised by their employers as a result of publicly disclosing certain serious concerns.
- 3.3 Aberdeen City Council (ACC) has a Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure in place to set out how these protections will be applied within the Council and the process that should be followed to raise any such concerns. The revised 2023

policy incorporated the findings from an independent inquiry and cultural review, commissioned by the City of Edinburgh Council in 2020, the recommendations of which included improvements to the way in which whistleblowing cases were handled by the Council. The ACC policy also took into consideration learning from a criminal trial which highlighted issues regarding whistleblowing procedures within NHS Scotland and led to the establishment of NHS Scotland's National Whistleblowing Standards.

- 3.4 A report to Council on 17 February 2025 in relation to a major fraud case, highlighted the following statement from the Accounts Commission.

"The member of staff who identified this fraud should be commended, for having the confidence to initially raise the issue and to then escalate it when they remained concerned by the response received. The Commission wishes to stress the importance of the council keeping its policies, training, and procedures in relation to counter-fraud and whistleblowing up to date and communicated to all staff. This will ensure that staff continue to have the confidence to raise concerns if they suspect something fraudulent may be happening."

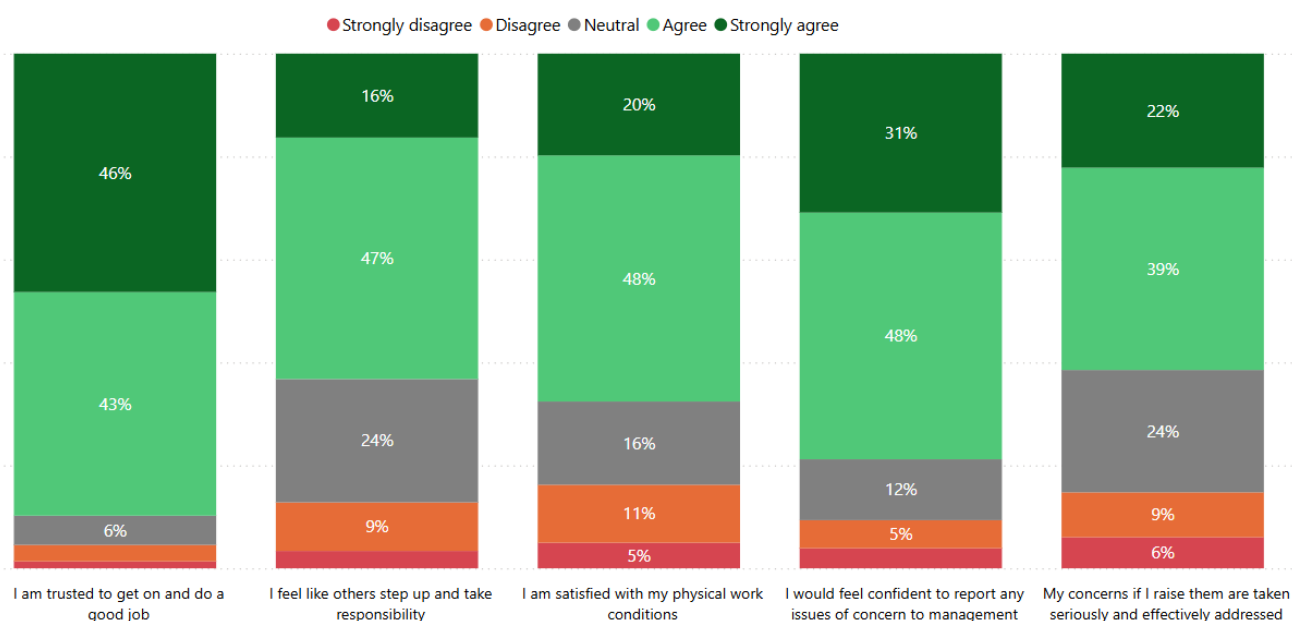
- 3.5 As a result of the above statement from the Accounts Commission, the scheduled review has been brought forward to build on the learning from this case and its positive statement around confidence to report and escalate concerns, ensure any necessary changes could be implemented quickly, and also to align this with the Fraud Action plan, which is anticipated to be presented to Audit, Risk and Scrutiny Committee on 11 September 2025.
- 3.6 Whilst a standard review of a policy would not normally be presented back to committee unless major changes were made, given the significance of the above Accounts Commission report, it was agreed that the reviewed Whistleblowing Policy would return to Staff Governance Committee for assurance, in recognition of its importance in safeguarding the Council, and to give the committee assurance that relevant actions were being undertaken to meet our statutory duties.
- 3.7 Normal governance procedures as outlined by the Council's Policy Group were followed throughout the review.
- 3.8 The Policy was jointly reviewed by People and Citizen Services, Legal Services and the Monitoring Officer, with input from the Deputy Chief Finance Officer to ensure alignment with the Fraud Action Plan. The review also took into consideration key findings from the recent Employee Engagement Survey, as shown in the data section below, and also from recent cases where Whistleblowing had been considered (even where these had not been progressed through the formal policy).
- 3.9 The review determined that the policy remains effective with only minor organisational amendments required (highlighted on the policy). However, it also determined that some improvements to the associated guidance may support clarity and understanding of the procedure itself, should an individual

need or wish to disclose any potential wrongdoing. A summary of the main changes made to guidance are as follows:

- Clarifying that individuals can raise concerns directly with the Monitoring Officer, should they not feel able to raise these through normal management channels.
- Ensuring that a documented outcome (with reasons) is recorded and provided to the potential whistleblower for any complaint raised under the policy, regardless of the determination by the Monitoring Officer as to whether it is to be treated as whistleblowing or not.
- Ensuring there is a structured feedback loop incorporated within the guidance so individuals raising complaints receive timely updates on progress.
- Clearer signposting to the support options available for individuals raising concerns
- A simpler reporting form so it is clear and straightforward to use
- A standard report template for any whistleblowing investigation to aid consistency and transparency of the formal process
- A clearer flowchart of the Whistleblowing process to allow individuals to understand the process at a glance.

Employee Experience Survey

- 3.10 The Employee Experience Survey launched on 13th December 2024 and was open until 14th January 2025. The purpose of the survey was to gather insights and feedback from all employees into various aspects of the employee experience at Aberdeen City Council to inform future improvements. In total, the survey received 1,711 responses. The Council's total headcount is around 8500, representing an almost 20% return rate.
- 3.11 Whilst the employee experience survey did not directly ask employees about Whistleblowing, some key highlights around the questions related to trust, and reporting issues or concerns highlighted the following:
- 3.12 79% advised they would feel confident reporting issues of concern to management. 61% agreed that concerns are addressed seriously and effectively, with 15% disagreeing. Further analysis suggests that there is an indication that younger employees (under 35) are more likely to feel concerns are not addressed, and this highlights a potential area for the organisation to engage further, ensuring support, communication, and confidence in formal processes for employees at all stages, but particularly at the beginning of their careers.



Learning from relevant cases

3.13 In recent years, a limited number of complaints have been formally progressed under the Whistleblowing Policy and have instead progressed through other routes. This is reflective of a culture where individuals feel able to share concerns directly with their manager without delay. An example of this can be seen in the major fraud case, where direct reporting through management was used, with swift actions taken. Notwithstanding this, there are lessons which can be learned from this case, and also other cases where whistleblowing was not deemed to be applicable, but where procedural improvements surrounding reporting of issues have been highlighted. Some of these lessons identified by reviewing such cases were:

- Ensuring that the appropriate route for raising a complaint is made clear if it is not felt that this can be done through the line manager (or another manager in the reporting line)
- Identification of whether a complaint is to be progressed through the Whistleblowing Policy or via the grievance, disciplinary or dignity and respect at work policies and clear communication and documentation of this being maintained.
- Ensuring that adequate and independent support is in place for individuals raising whistleblowing complaints.
- Reviewing other guidance documents, such as Handling Allegations against School Staff and Investigations Procedure, to ensure these align with the Whistleblowing Policy, as they do with other policies, such as the Managing Discipline and Managing Grievances Policies.
- Increasing awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy, and the alternative routes, should whistleblowing not be deemed applicable.
- Importance and value of early intervention and swift actions when complaints are raised.

Further Actions and Next Steps

- 3.14 The revised Whistleblowing Policy, following its approval in 2023, had been well publicised, including through the Chief Executive's blog ([Chief Exec Blog – Whistleblowing and Aberdeen City Council's Fraud Response](#)). However, it is important that this Policy continues to be communicated widely to ensure all employees and managers are aware of this, should they have any concerns that should be addressed. It is intended that further communications be issued on the reviewed policy and updated guidance.
- 3.15 Taking account of feedback received as part of the policy review, employee experience survey outcomes and through consultation, a number of other actions have also been identified, as well as next steps. These are as follows:.

Improvement Theme	Next Steps	Expected Timescales
Communications	A further Chief Executive Blog Post	October 2025
	A dedicated Whistleblowing page on People Anytime, which includes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Links to the Policy and guidance, with easy access to associated documents• Case studies of typical whistleblowing scenarios• Links to the 2 Chief Executive blog posts to highlight the importance of the policy.• A feedback mechanism for suggesting any improvements to the policy and guidance.	October 2025
	Leadership forum posts about the policy	October 2025 (but also on a regular basis)
	Highlighting the policy to the Young Employee Network to ensure knowledge at the earliest stage of young people's careers.	October 2025 (but also on a regular basis)
	Printed copies of the policy/ guidance to be available for frontline staff with limited digital access.	October 2025 (but also on a regular basis)
	Cascading communication of the policy and guidance through line management to ensure wider knowledge, particularly for frontline operational staff and those working in schools.	November 2025 (but also on a regular basis)

Reviews of other guidance	A review of Handling Allegations Against School Staff guidance is already underway and will be undertaken with engagement and feedback from Education Trade Unions as part of the Local Negotiating Committee for Teachers (LNCT).	February 2026
	A review of the Investigations Procedure is about to commence. This review will be undertaken with engagement and feedback from Trade Unions.	February 2026
Training	Inclusion of the policy within employee Corporate Induction to ensure awareness at the earliest stage.	October 2025
	Development of an ACC Learn module on Whistleblowing	July 2026
Monitoring	Future monitoring of the effectiveness of the policy will include analysis of whistleblowing trends, and feedback from employee surveys and training to inform future improvements to the policy, guidance and communication around whistleblowing.	August 2027
	The policy will continue to mitigate against practices which could put the organisation at risk, in accordance with our risk management framework outlined below in section 7.	Ongoing

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no direct costs associated with the review of the current policy.
- 4.2 The Audit Commission's statement notes that a review of the policy "*will ensure that staff continue to have the confidence to raise concerns if they suspect something fraudulent may be happening*", as such, the application of the policy could lead to financial malpractice or practices which are wasteful of Council resources being identified and addressed, thus protecting finite resources.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The policy provides assurance that the Council is meeting its obligations under the Employment Rights Act 1996 as amended by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013.
- 5.2 The policy further provides a route through which illegal practices may be identified and addressed.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The policy provides a route through which any issues relating to damage to the environment may be identified and addressed, thus helping to ensure that Council activities are carried out in a way that ensures environmental protection.

7. RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Compliance	Risk of legislative non compliance	The policy allows for the identification of any malpractice or wrongdoing, including illegal activity, and ensures that workers are protected against any detriment for raising legitimate concerns, thus ensuring that the Council is compliant with the relevant legislation.	L	Yes
Operational	Workers do not feel empowered and supported to raise legitimate concerns they may have.	The Whistleblowing Policy provides a mechanism for legitimate concerns to be raised without fear of reprisal	L	Yes
Financial	There is a risk of malpractice or wrongdoing giving rise to claims against the Council or resulting in financial loss to the Council	The policy allows for such risks to be mitigated through the identification of legitimate concerns which may lead to the Council incurring financial costs	L	Yes

Reputational	There is a risk of reputational damage to the Council as a result of malpractice or wrongdoing	The policy allows for concerns to be identified and addressed timeously thus reducing the risk of reputational damage to the Council. Additionally, taking a supportive approach to workers who raise legitimate concerns should help to enhance the Council's reputation as a good employer.	L	Yes
---------------------	--	---	---	-----

8. OUTCOMES

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN</u>	
	Impact of Report
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement <u>Working in Partnership for Aberdeen</u>	The provisions within this report support the delivery of the Policy Statement through ensuring that sufficient resources are available to deliver the Council services which will achieve the policy priorities.
<u>Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2016-26</u>	
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	The Prosperous People theme in the LOIP indicates that all people in the City are entitled to live within our community in a manner in which they feel empowered, resilient and safe, which would include employees of the Council. Adopting the approach outlined in the report will support the workforce.
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	The Prosperous Economy theme in the LOIP recognises the link between a healthy economy and a healthy population and aims for everyone in Aberdeen to benefit from a healthy economy and to have equal opportunities to be economically active. This would include the Council. Ensuring that people policies are in place and applied appropriately and consistently should assist with employee relations in the organisation and with the retention of trained and valued employees. This would mean that they can continue in post and contribute to delivering effective services to citizens and businesses, indirectly contributing to the City's economy.
Regional and City Strategies	This report links directly with the Council's <u>Workforce Delivery Plan</u> - setting up our council in a way that supports our aspirations

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy review principles are in place that embed early intervention and prevention • Governance systems are in place that mean people are not impeded by hierarchy and are empowered within our structures to take decisions at the lowest appropriate level
--	---

9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	An integrated impact assessment has been completed for this policy
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not Required.
Other	Not required

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 [Report to Staff Governance Committee 13 November 2023 – Whistleblowing Policy](#)

10.2 [Report to Full Council 5 February 2025 \(17 February 2025\) – Accounts Commission Findings](#)

11. APPENDICES

11.1 Whistleblowing Policy

11.2 Whistleblowing Procedure and Guidance

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

Name	Sharon Robb
Title	Employee Relations Casework Lead
Email Address	sharobb@aberdeencity.gov.uk