

# VALE OF AYLESBURY HOUSING TRUST

## CONFIDENTIAL REPORTING POLICY (WHISTLE BLOWING)

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### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something seriously wrong within the Trust. However, they may not express their concerns because they feel that speaking up would be disloyal to their colleagues or to the Trust. They may also fear harassment or victimisation. In these circumstances it may be easier to ignore the concern rather than report what may just be a suspicion of malpractice.
- 1.2 The Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment we expect employees, and others that we deal with, who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Trust's work to come forward and voice those concerns. It is recognised that most cases will have to proceed on a confidential basis.
- 1.3 This policy document makes it clear that you can do so without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. *This Confidential Reporting policy is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the Trust rather than overlooking a problem or 'blowing the whistle' outside.*
- 1.4 The policy applies to all employees and those contractors working for the Trust on Trust premises, for example, agency staff, builders, drivers. It also covers suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Trust in their own premises, for example, the sheltered housing scheme.
- 1.5 These procedures are in addition to any compliments and complaints procedures that the Trust have in place at any time, and other statutory reporting procedures applying to some departments. You are responsible for making service users aware of the existence of these procedures.

### 2. Aims and Scope Of This Policy

- 2.1 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 if you have a reasonable belief that you have made any disclosure in good faith.

2.2 There are existing procedures in place to enable you to lodge a grievance relating to your own employment. The Confidential Reporting Policy is intended to cover major concerns that fall outside the scope of other procedures. These 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
- possible fraud and corruption
- sexual or physical abuse of clients or employees of the Trust, or
- other unethical conduct.

Thus, any serious concerns that you have about any aspect of service provision or the conduct of Trust employees acting on behalf of the Trust can be reported under the Confidential Reporting Policy. This may be about something that:

- makes you feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, your experience or the standards you believe the Trust subscribes to; or
- is against the Trust's Standing Orders and policies; or
- falls below established standards of practice; or
- amounts to improper conduct.

### **3. Safeguards**

#### **3.1 Harassment or Victimisation**

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

3.1.2 The Trust recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If what you are saying is true, you should

have nothing to fear because you will be doing your duty to your employer and those for whom you are providing a service.

3.1.3 The Trust will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith.

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

### **3.2 Confidentiality**

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

### **3.3 Anonymous Allegations**

3.3.1 This policy encourages you to put your name to your allegation whenever possible. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the Trust.

3.3.2 In exercising this 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.

### **3.4 Untrue Allegations**

3.4.1 If you make an allegation in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against you. If, however, you make an allegation frivolously, maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against you.

## **4. How to Raise a Concern**

4.1 As a first step, you should normally raise concerns with your immediate manager or their superior. This depends, however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues involved and who is suspected of the malpractice. For example, if you believe that management is involved, you should approach the Chief Executive. If the matter concerns a Director or the Chief Executive you should approach the Chairman of the Board.

4.2 Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. Staff who wish to make a written report are invited to use the following format:

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

4.3 The earlier you express the concern the easier it is to take action.

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

4.5 For advice or to raise a concern, either verbally or in writing, employees can raise issues confidentially with:

**Your Manager, Head of Service or Director** but if you feel you cannot follow this route, for whatever reason, you can contact:

**A member of HR** in the first instance who on a case-by-case basis may refer the matter to another Director, the Chief Executive or Chairman of the Board.

4.6 You may wish to consider discussing your concern with a colleague first and you may find it easier to raise the matter if there are two (ore more) of you who have had the same experience or concerns, while observing the need for confidentiality and preserving the dignity of all parties concerned.

4.7 This procedure has been set up to make it easier for you to raise issues internally, however, if despite this procedure, you still feel unable to voice your worries to a colleague, like any member of the public, you can contact the Trust's external auditor

4.8 You may invite a work colleague to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns you have raised.

## **5. How the Trust Will Respond**

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

5.2 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;
  - be the subject of an independent inquiry.
- 5.3 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 it should take. The overriding principle which the Trust will have in mind is the public interest. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example, child protection or discrimination issues) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- 5.4 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 conducted.
- 5.5 Within ten working days of a concern being raised, the person to whom you passed your concern will write to you:
- acknowledging that the concern has been received;
  - indicating how we propose to deal with the matter;
  - giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response;
  - telling you whether any initial enquiries have been made;
  - supplying you with information on staff support mechanisms and
  - telling you whether further investigations will take place and if not, why not.
- 5.6 The amount of contact between the employees considering the issues and you will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the Trust will seek further information from you.
- 5.7 Where any meeting is arranged, off-site if you so wish, you can be accompanied by a work colleague.
- 5.8 The Trust will take steps to minimise any difficulties which you may experience as a result of raising a concern. For instance, if you are required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings the Trust will arrange for you to receive advice about the procedure.

5.8 The Trust accepts that you need to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. Thus subject to legal constraints, we will inform you of the outcome of any investigation.

## **6. The Responsible Employee**

6.1 The Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. The Internal Audit section maintains a record of concerns raised and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger your confidentiality) and the Chief Executive will report as necessary to the Board.

## **7. How the Matter Can Be Taken Further**

7.1 This policy is intended to provide you with an avenue within the Trust to raise concerns. The Trust hopes you will be satisfied with any action taken. If you are not, and if you feel it is right to take the matter outside the Trust, the following are possible contact points:

- the external auditor (Audit Commission, Tel: 020 7828 1212)
- your local Citizens Advice Bureau
- relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- a relevant voluntary organisation
- the police.

7.2 If you do take the matter outside the Trust Board, you should ensure that you do not disclose confidential information. You should check and obtain advice with the contact point about that.