

The Reader Group

Whistleblowing Policy

Policy Title: Whistleblowing Policy

Date Adopted: February 2013

Approved By: Directors Group

Next Review Date: July 2023

Accountable Person: Anna Wells, Head of People

The Reader Group is made up of The Reader Organisation and the Calderstones Mansion House Community Interest Company.

Version History:

| Date | Summary of Change |
|---------------|--|
| February 2013 | New policy adopted |
| July 2017 | Policy review: Minor amendments - format of document changed. More detail around procedure. |
| October 2018 | Policy review: minor amendments to 1.2 – right to whistleblow; 1.3 – examples of grievances, harassment and complaints. |
| July 2020 | Policy review: amendments to 1.2 – added definition of whistleblowing, 2.2 – list of cases where whistleblowing is appropriate; 4.1 – updated section on anonymous allegations |

Policy Statement

The Reader Group is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment employees, volunteers and others with serious and reasonably held concerns about malpractice within the Reader Group are encouraged to come forward and voice those concerns.

Aims and Objectives

This policy is designed to enable employees and volunteers of The Reader Group to raise concerns internally and at a high level and to disclose information which the individual believes shows malpractice or impropriety.

This policy aims to:

- encourage employees and volunteers to feel confident in raising serious concerns and to question and act upon concerns about practice
- provide avenues for employees and volunteers to raise those concerns and receive feedback on any action taken
- ensure that employees and volunteers receive a response to concerns and that they are aware of how to pursue them if they are not satisfied
- reassure employees and volunteers 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

To Whom the Policy Applies

This policy applies to all staff and volunteers of the Reader Group.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Head of People is responsible for maintaining a register containing all concerns reported. All managers allocated to investigate a concern must ensure sufficient details are provided for the register.

The Head of People is responsible for reviewing the policy.

Introduction

The Policy is designed in accordance with the Public Interest Disclosure (PIDA) Act 1998 to ensure that employees/volunteers can raise concerns which are in the public interest and relate to wrongdoing, illegal acts or malpractice within the Reader Group. The policy provides for the individual to raise such concerns without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination, disadvantage or dismissal.

Whistleblowing is the disclosure of information in the public interest which related to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work.

Everyone has the right to whistleblow and this policy exists to encourage and enable employees/volunteers to raise serious concerns within the Reader Group rather than ignoring a problem or 'blowing the whistle' outside.

The Whistleblowing Policy is not intended to replace existing procedures:

- If a concern relates to individual treatment as an employee/volunteer, it should be raised under the existing grievance or harassment procedures. Examples of this include unfair treatment or bullying behaviour.
- If a service user / customer has a concern about services provided to him/her, it should be raised as a complaint under the complaint procedure. Examples of this include poor customer service.

Definitions of grievances, harassment and complaints can be found in the relevant policies.

Employees and volunteers are expected to be professional and only raise concerns where they genuinely feel that there has been wrongdoing. They should not make malicious or vexatious allegations, or seek to make personal gains from a disclosure. If an individual makes an allegation in good faith, which is not confirmed by subsequent investigation, no action will be taken against that individual.

What should be reported

You should use this policy if you have reasonable grounds for believing that any examples of below have taken place or are taking place within The Reader Group:

- a) Criminal activity had been, or is likely to be committed
- b) Financial malpractice, impropriety or fraud
- c) Failure to comply with a legal or professional obligation or regulatory requirements
- d) Dangers to Health & Safety or the environment
- e) Bribery
- f) Unlawful behaviour
- g) Deliberate concealment of any of the above

This list is not exhaustive.

Confidentiality

The Reader Group will treat all such disclosures in a confidential and sensitive manner. Where the individual requests confidentiality then every effort will be made to protect the identity of the individual raising the concern. 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. In such circumstances the individual will be offered advice and support.

Anonymous Allegations

This policy encourages individuals to put their name to any disclosures they make. Proper investigation may be more difficult or impossible if we cannot obtain further information. It is also more difficult to establish whether allegations are credible and reasonable. If you are concerned about possible consequences of your identify being revealed, appropriate measures will be taken to preserve confidentiality.

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

If an individual makes an allegation in good faith and reasonably believing it to be true, but it is not confirmed by subsequent investigation, the Reader Group will recognise the concern and no action will be taken against that individual.

In making a disclosure the individual should exercise due care to ensure the accuracy of the information. If, however, an individual makes a frivolous, malicious or vexatious allegation, and particularly if they persist with making them, disciplinary action may be taken against that individual.

Support

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

- in good faith
- 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.

The Reader Group is committed to good practice and high standards and is supportive of its employees.

Individuals who raise a concern can invite a colleague or friend to be present for support during any meetings or interviews they have in connection with the issues they have raised.

The Reader 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 we are providing a service.

The Reader will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect staff when they raise a concern in good faith and will treat this as a serious disciplinary matter in accordance with internal disciplinary procedures.

Raising a concern

Who a concern should be reported to will depend on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues and who is suspected of the wrongdoing. Concerns can be raised with any of the following:

- Line manager
- Senior Manager/Head of Department
- A member of Directors Group
- The Director
- The Head of People

Concerns regarding the Director should be raised with the Chair of Trustees who will decide how the investigation will proceed. The Chair has the right to refer the complaint/concern back to management if he/she feels that the management can more appropriately investigate the complaint without any conflict of interest.

Concerns about a Trustee should be raised with the Charities Commission if it is inappropriate to raise within the organisation.

Concerns may be raised by telephone, in person or in writing. Staff who wish to make a written report should mention the following:

- the background and history of the concern (giving relevant dates)
- the reason for the concern

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 charity, Public Concern at Work, provides independent advice on whistleblowing and can be contacted as follows:

Phone: 020 7404 6609 Email: whistle@pcaw.org.uk Website: www.pcaw.org.uk

How the Reader Group will respond

The manager receiving the complaint should advise the Head of People and initial enquiries made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and if so what form it should take.

Within ten working days of a concern being raised the investigation officer will, acknowledge to the complainant that the complaint has been received; indicate how it is proposed to deal with the matter, and inform them whether further investigations will take place and if not, why not.

Inform the member of staff against whom the complaint is made as soon as is practically possible. The member of staff will be informed of their right to be accompanied by a friend or colleague at any future interview or meeting held under the provision of these procedures.

If there is evidence of criminal activity, then the investigating officer should inform the police. The Reader Group will ensure that any internal investigation does not hinder a formal police investigation.

Consider the involvement of the auditors and the police at this stage and consult with the Director or Chair of the Board of Trustees.

The allegations should be fully investigated by the investigating officer with the assistance, where appropriate, of other individuals / bodies.

The investigating officer will provide a written report on findings from the investigation which will be considered by the Head of People, Director, or Chair of the Board of Trustees as appropriate

The Director or Chair of the Board of Trustees will decide what action to take. If the complaint is shown to be justified, then they will invoke the disciplinary or other appropriate internal procedures.

The complainant should be kept informed of the progress of the investigations and, if appropriate, of the final outcome.

- If appropriate, a copy of the outcomes will be passed to the Reader auditors to enable a review of the procedures.
- If the complainant is not satisfied that their concern is being properly dealt with by the investigating officer, they have the right to raise it in confidence with the Head of People, Director or Chair of the Board of Trustees.
- If the investigation finds the allegations unsubstantiated and all internal procedures have been exhausted but the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the investigation, The Reader recognises the lawful rights of employees and ex-employees to make disclosures to prescribed persons (such as the Health and Safety Executive, the Audit Commission, or the utility regulators), or, where justified, elsewhere.
- A public disclosure to anyone outside the prescribed bodies will not be protected by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and this policy. Concerns reported to the media will in most cases result in the loss of whistleblowing law rights.

Timescales

Due to the varied nature of these sorts of complaints, which may involve internal investigators and / or the police, it is not possible to lay down precise timescales for such investigations. The investigating officer should ensure that the investigations are undertaken as quickly as possible without affecting the quality and depth of those investigations.

The investigating officer should, as soon as is practically possible, send a written acknowledgement of the concern to the complainant and thereafter report back to them in writing the outcome of the investigation and the action that is proposed. If the investigation is a prolonged one, the investigating officer should keep the complainant informed, in writing, as to the progress of the investigation and as to when it is likely to be concluded.

All responses to the complainant should be in writing.

Responsible officer

The Head of People has responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy. They will maintain a record of concerns raised and the outcome (but in a form which does not endanger confidentiality) and will report as necessary to Directors Group and the Board of Trustees.