



Whistleblowing Policy

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Eko Trust an employer of choice – our principles

Eko Trust recognises that:

Only through a motivated, professional, well-developed workforce can the trust and its schools achieve the desired outcomes for children, staff and the communities the trust serves.

Eko Trust *as* an employer:

- Carries out its work in line with the trust values of ‘Vitality, optimism, Integrity, Courage and Equity’.
- Will be one of choice for support and teaching staff.
- Promotes the Equality Duty as per the Equality Act 2010 with regard to the protected characteristics of race, disability, sex, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, gender reassignment and marriage and civil partnership.
- Has ‘due regard’ when making decisions and developing policies, to the need to:
 1. Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Equality Act 2010.
 2. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.
 3. Foster good relations across all protected characteristics – between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.
- Works to:
 1. Remove or minimise disadvantages.
 2. Takes steps to meet different needs.
 3. Encourage participation when it is disproportionately low.
- Does all it can to ensure that the wellbeing of staff is paramount and that staff are looked after.
- Will maintain proper standards of professionalism, integrity, conduct and concern for the public interest and the safeguarding and wellbeing of children.
- Ensures that teaching and support staff have access to regular, high quality learning and development opportunities to be the best they can be.
- Will support staff in fulfilling their ambition to provide the very best quality of education by enabling career progression and opportunities for staff to move upwards and sideways. Staff developing within our trust is integral to maintaining our high quality workforce.
- Participates in quality marks and awards that highlight the impactful work the trust does in valuing staff.
- Applies policies consistently and fairly.
- Operates safe working conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The Eko Trust is committed to the highest possible standard of operation, probity and accountability. In line with that commitment, employees, officers, consultants, contractors, volunteers, casual workers and agency workers with serious concerns are encouraged to come forward and voice those concerns. This policy document makes it clear that employees can do so without fear of reprisals; it is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within the Trust rather than overlooking a problem or alerting anyone external to the Trust.

This policy does not form part of any employee's contract of employment and it may be amended at any time following consultation. Elements of this procedure, including any time limits, may be varied as appropriate in any case.

1. DEFINITIONS

The term "Headteacher" also refers, where appropriate, to any other title used to identify the Headteacher. The role of the Headteacher will be taken by the CEO or COO where the conduct/performance/actions being reviewed is that of a Headteacher or any member of the Central Team, or by the Chair of Trustees where the conduct/performance/actions being reviewed is that of the CEO or COO.

The term "employee" refers to any member of the Trust staff employed to work solely at the Trust.

2. PURPOSE

As employees are often the first to realise that there may be something wrong within the Trust, it is important that they feel able to express their concerns without fear of harassment or victimisation. Otherwise they may find it easier to ignore the concern rather than report it. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 recognises this fact and is designed to protect employees, who make certain disclosures of information in 'the public interest', from detriment and/or dismissal. This policy builds on the provisions of the Act.

This policy sets out the procedure for dealing with concerns raised by employees which relate to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work. Allegations of child abuse against teachers and other staff and volunteers is dealt with in accordance with Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance for schools and colleges.

This policy aims to:

- provide avenues for employees to raise concerns internally as a matter of course, and receive feedback on any action taken
- provide for matters to be dealt with quickly and appropriately and ensure that concerns are taken seriously and treated consistently and fairly
- reassure employees that they will be protected from reprisals or victimisation for whistle-blowing where they have a genuine concern
- allow employees to take the matter further if they are dissatisfied with the Trust's response

This policy should not be used for complaints about an employee's personal circumstances, such as the way s/he has been treated at work. In these cases an employee should use the Trust's Grievance Policy (or Bullying and Harassment Policy, as appropriate). If the matter relates to salary, the salary review procedures are documented in the Trust's pay policy.

3. APPLICATION AND COMMUNICATION OF THIS POLICY

This policy applies to all staff employed by the Trust. All staff must be made aware of the Whistleblowing process. This policy must be published on the Trust's website.

4. EQUAL TREATMENT

The Trust Board is committed to ensuring consistency of treatment and fairness. It will abide by all relevant equality legislation, including the duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees. The Trust Board is aware of the guidance on the Equality Act issued by the Department for Education.

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WHISTLEBLOWING

1. WHAT IS WHISTLEBLOWING?

A whistleblower is a person who raises a genuine concern relating to the matters below. If employees have any genuine concerns related to suspected wrongdoing or danger affecting any of the Trust's activities (a whistleblowing concern) they should report it under this policy.

Whistleblowing is the disclosure of information which relates to suspected wrongdoing or dangers at work. This may include:

- criminal activity
- miscarriages of justice
- danger to health and safety
- damage to the environment
- failure to comply with any legal or professional obligation or regulatory requirements
- bribery
- financial fraud or mismanagement
- negligence
- breach of internal policies and procedures
- conduct likely to damage the Trust's reputation
- unauthorised disclosure of confidential information
- public examination fraud
- the deliberate concealment of any of the above matters

Before initiating the procedure employees should consider the following:

- the responsibility for expressing concerns about unacceptable practice or behaviour rests with all employees
- employees should use line manager or team meetings and other opportunities to raise questions and seek clarification on issues which are of day-to-day concern
- whilst it can be difficult to raise concerns about the practice or behaviour of a colleague, employees must act to prevent an escalation of the problem and to prevent themselves being potentially implicated

2. SAFEGUARDS

Harassment or Victimisation

The Trust Board recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make, not least because of the fear of reprisal from those responsible for the malpractice. Trustees will not tolerate harassment or victimisation and will take action to protect employees when they have a genuine concern. They will ensure that concerns raised by whistleblowers are addressed promptly and fairly.

This does not mean that, if an employee is already the subject of internal procedures such as disciplinary or redundancy, those procedures will be halted as a result of that employee raising a concern under the whistleblowing policy.

Confidentiality

The Eko Trust hopes that staff will feel able to voice whistleblowing concerns openly under this policy. The Trust Board will make every effort to protect an employee's identity if confidentiality is requested.

As indicated above, identity will be protected as far as possible, but should the investigation into the concern require the employee to be named as the source of the information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed.

Anonymous Allegations

Employees are encouraged to put their name to an allegation. Proper investigation may be more difficult or impossible if the Trust cannot obtain further information and it is also more difficult to establish whether allegations are credible.

Anonymous allegations will be considered at the discretion of the Trust Board. In exercising the 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

Untrue Allegations

If an employee makes an allegation where s/he has a genuine concern, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against that employee. If, however, the Trust concluded that an employee has made malicious or vexatious allegations, or with a view to personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against that employee.

Unfounded Allegations

Following investigation, allegations may be confirmed as unfounded. This outcome will be notified to the employee who raised the concern, who will be informed that the Trust Board deems the matter to be concluded and that it should not be raised again unless new evidence becomes available.

Support to Employees

It is recognised that raising concerns can be difficult and stressful. Advice and support will be made available, as appropriate, to both the employee(s) raising the concerns and any employee(s) subject to investigation.

3. HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN

As a first step, an employee should normally raise concerns with their immediate manager or their manager's superior. This depends, however, on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issues and who is involved. For example, if an employee believes that their immediate manager or their manager's superior is involved, s/he should approach the Headteacher or CEO. An employee (including the Headteacher and members of the leadership team) can by-pass the direct management line, the CEO and the Trust Board if s/he feels the overall management and Board of a Trust is engaged in an improper course of action.

It is a statutory obligation for a Board to have a named Trustee for Whistleblowing. The named Trustee will be clearly identified on the Trust website and can be contacted via the Trust Lead for Governance.

Concerns are better raised in writing. The employee should set out the background and history of the concerns, giving names, dates and places where possible, and the reasons why s/he is particularly concerned about the situation. If an employee does not feel able to put the concern in writing, s/he should telephone or meet the appropriate person. It is important that, however the concern is raised, the employee makes it clear that s/he is raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure.

The earlier an employee expresses the concern, the easier it is to take action.

Although an employee is not expected to prove the truth of an allegation, s/he will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are sufficient grounds for the concern.

In some instances it may be appropriate for an employee to ask the trade union to raise a matter on the employee's behalf.

At each meeting under this policy the employee may bring a colleague or trade union representative. The companion must respect the confidentiality of the disclosure and any subsequent investigation.

4. THE ROLE OF SENIOR MANAGERS

A Senior Manager may be informed by an employee about concern(s) and that they are "blowing the whistle" within the procedure in person; or in writing or over the phone.

The Senior Manager should respond immediately by arranging to meet with the employee to discuss the concern(s) as soon as possible.

5. PROCEDURE

Stage One:

At the initial meeting the Senior Manager should establish that:

- there is genuine cause and sufficient grounds for the concern and
- the concern has been appropriately raised via the Whistle-blowing Policy

The Senior Manager should ask the employee to put their concern(s) in writing, if they have not already done so. If the employee is unable to do this the senior manager will take down a written summary of their concern/s and provide them with a copy after the meeting. The Senior Manager should make notes of the discussions with the employee.

The employee's letter and/or senior manager's notes should make it clear that the employee is raising the issue via the whistle-blowing procedure and provide:

- the background and history of the concerns and
- names, dates and places (where possible) and
- the reasons why the employee is particularly concerned about the situation

The employee should be asked to date and sign their letter and/or the notes of any discussion. The Senior Manager should positively encourage the employee to do this, as a concern expressed anonymously is much less powerful and much more difficult to address, especially if the letter/notes become evidence in other proceedings, e.g. an internal disciplinary hearing.

The Senior Manager should follow the policy as set out above and in particular explain to the employee:

- who they will need to speak to in order to determine the next steps (e.g. Headteacher)
- what steps they intend to take to address the concern
- how they will communicate with the employee during and at the end of the process. It should be noted that the need for confidentiality may prevent the Trust giving the employee specific details of any necessary investigation or any necessary disciplinary action taken as a result
- that the employee will receive a written response within ten working days
- that their identity will be protected as far as possible, but should the investigation into the concern require the employee to be named as the source of the information, that this will be discussed with the employee before their name is disclosed

- that the Trust Board and Local Governing Body will do all that it can to protect the employee from discrimination and/or victimisation
- that the matter will be taken seriously and investigated immediately
- that if the employee's concern, though raised as a genuine concern, is not confirmed by the investigation, no punitive action will be taken against them
- if clear evidence is uncovered during the investigation that they have made a malicious or vexatious allegation, disciplinary action may be taken against them and
- the investigation may confirm their allegations to be unfounded in which case the Governing Body will deem the matter to be concluded unless new evidence becomes available.

Stage Two:

Following the initial meeting with the employee, the Senior Manager should consult with the Headteacher or **CEO** to determine whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take. A record should be made of the decisions and/or agreed actions.

It may be necessary, with anonymous allegations, to consider whether it is possible to take any further action. When making this decision, Senior Managers should take the following factors into account:

- the seriousness of the issue(s) raised
- the credibility of the concern(s) and
- the likelihood of confirming the allegation(s) from attributable sources

In some cases, it may be possible to resolve the concern(s) simply, by agreed action or an explanation regarding the concern(s), without the need for further investigation. However, depending on the nature of the concern(s) it may be necessary for the concern(s) to:

- be investigated internally
- be referred to the police
- be referred to the external auditor
- form the subject of an independent inquiry

Senior Managers should have a working knowledge and understanding of other Trust policies and procedures, e.g. grievance, disciplinary, harassment, child protection procedures, to ensure that concerns raised by employees are addressed via the appropriate procedure/process.

Stage Three:

Within ten working days of a concern being received, the manager receiving the concern (at paragraph 5.1 above) must write to the employee:

- acknowledging that the concern has been received
- indicating how they propose to deal with the matter
- giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response and/or
- telling the employee whether any initial enquiries have been made and
- telling the employee whether further investigations will take place, and if not why not and/or
- letting the employee know when s/he will receive further details if the situation is not yet resolved

Raising Concerns Outside the Trust

The aim of this policy is to provide an internal mechanism for reporting, investigation and remedying any wrongdoing in the workplace. In most cases the employee should not find it necessary to alert anyone externally.

The law recognises that in some circumstances it may be appropriate for the employee to report their concerns to an external body such as a regulator. It will very rarely if ever be appropriate to alert the media. Employees are strongly encouraged to seek advice before reporting a concern to anyone external.

If an employee is not satisfied with the Trust's response, the manager should ensure that s/he is made aware with whom they may raise the matter externally:

- 'Protect' Tel no: 0207 404 6609*
- Recognised Trade Union
- ESFA
- External Auditor
- Relevant professional bodies or regulatory organisations
- Solicitor

The Trust's external auditor is an external body who has responsibilities to monitor the Trust's compliance to its own standards and legal obligations and will, in most cases, be the most appropriate body. The current Trust Auditor is Buzzacott, which can be contacted on enquiries@buzzacott.co.uk

The manager should stress to the employee that if they choose to take a concern outside the Trust, it is the employee's responsibility to ensure that confidential information is not disclosed, i.e. confidential information, in whatever format, is not handed over to a third party.

*Protect is a registered charity that employees can contact for advice to assist them in raising concerns about poor practice at work. The charity also provides advice to employers as to the possible ways to address these concerns.

Concerns about safeguarding practices can be raised externally using the NSPCC whistleblowing helpline. Employees can call 0800 028 0285 or email help@nspcc.org.uk.