The Abbey

Whistleblowing Policy

The Abbey School, Reading

Reviewed by:	Director of HR and Compliance	April 2025
Ratified by:	Whole School Leadership Committee and Governor Audit	April 2025
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Definition

In this policy, 'Whistleblowing' means the reporting by employees of suspected misconduct, illegal acts or failure to act within The Abbey.

The school wishes at all times to ensure high professional standards, and to encourage employees and others who have serious concerns about any aspect of the school's work to come forward and voice those concerns.

If further clarity is required on the use of this policy or to seek independent advice at any stage, contact the independent whistleblowing charity '"Protect" on 020 3117 2520 or on 020 7404 6609 Free confidential advice on how to raise concerns about serious malpractice at work will be provided.

Employees are often the first to realise that something maybe seriously wrong. 'Whistleblowing' is seen as a positive act that can make a valuable contribution to The Abbey's efficiency and long-term success. It is not seen as disloyal for colleagues to speak up. The Abbey is committed to achieving the highest possible standards of service and ethics in all of its practices and to help achieve this the school encourages freedom of speech.

If an employee/worker is considering raising a concern, they should read this policy first.

It explains the following:

- What The Abbey will do
- How to raise a concern
- The type of issues that can be raised
- How the person raising the concern will be protected

Aim of the policy

To provide a framework to encourage employees to report any genuine concerns of suspected wrongdoing as soon as possible, in the knowledge that their concerns will be taken seriously and investigated as appropriate and without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination, disadvantage or dismissal.

The policy aims to:

- Encourage confidence in raising any serious concerns at the earliest opportunity and to question and act upon concerns
- Provide avenues to raise the concerns and receive feedback on any actions taken
- Ensure a response to concerns is provided and what to do if still unsatisfied
- Provide assurance that if the disclosure is made in good faith then there will be protection from possible victimisation and reprisals

Scope of the policy

The Policy enables those who become aware of wrongdoing in The Abbey affecting another person or service, to report their concerns as soon as possible so that they can be investigated.

Some concerns should be handled under other policies and procedures:

- Any concern regarding an employee/worker's own treatment as an employee. This should be raised under the school's Grievance Policy
- A concern about the services of the school, which should be raised under the Complaints Policy and Procedure
- A concern relating to Safeguarding, which should be raised under the Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy

The policy applies to all employees of The Abbey as well as contractors; employees of suppliers; anyone providing services under a contract or other agreement with the school and voluntary workers. It covers any serious concerns about the conduct of employees, volunteers or others acting on behalf of The Abbey that they:

- Act improperly
- Fail to meet The Abbey's standards and policies and established practice
- Make the employee/worker feel uncomfortable in terms of standards

These might relate to:

- Conduct which is an offence or a breach of the law (a criminal offence has been committed or failing to comply with other legal obligations)
- Racial, sexual, disability or other discrimination
- Health and safety of the public and/or other employees
- Damage to the environment
- Unauthorised use of funds or other assets
- Possible fraud and corruption
- Neglect or abuse of duties or responsibilities
- Other unethical behaviour or conduct

This list is not exhaustive.

Legal rights

The law provides protection for employees who raise legitimate concerns about specified matters. These are called 'qualifying disclosures'. A qualifying disclosure is one made in the public interest by the employee who has a reasonable belief that:

- A criminal offence;
- A miscarriage of justice;
- An act creating risk to health and safety;
- An act causing damage to the environment;
- Corruptly receiving any gift or advantage, thus failing to comply with the Bribery Act 2010;
- A breach of any legal obligation; or
- Concealment of any of the above;

is being, has been, or is likely to be, committed. It is not necessary for the employee to have proof that such an act is being, has been, or is likely to be committed - a reasonable belief is sufficient.

The employee has no responsibility for investigating the matter; it is the school's responsibility to ensure that an investigation takes place.

Where a disclosure is merely an expression of opinion that fails to show that a legal obligation has been or is likely to be breached, it cannot amount to a protected or qualifying disclosure for the purposes of the whistleblowing legislation.

Employees must have reasonable grounds for believing the information they have is accurate and is not based on speculation or rumour.

Concern about a colleague's professional capability should not be dealt with using this policy and should be raised with the Head of Department/Line Manager.

Harassment or victimisation

The Abbey is committed to good practice and high standards and to providing support to its employees.

The Abbey recognises the decision to report a concern may be a difficult one to make. If the employee or worker raises a genuine concern under this policy, this will not affect their employment, nor will they suffer any retribution as a result.

The Abbey will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation of anyone raising a genuine concern. The Abbey recognises that an employee may want to raise a concern in confidence. The school will not disclose an employee's identity without their consent. If a situation arises where the concern cannot be resolved or the matter taken forward without revealing the employee's identity (for example because their evidence is needed in court) the school will discuss with them how to proceed.

If an employee does not share with the school their identity when the matter is first reported, it will be more difficult for the matter to be investigated, the employee's position protected or feedback given.

Accordingly, while the school will consider anonymous reports, this policy is not designed for concerns raised anonymously.

Throughout this process:

- The Abbey will do all it can to support the employee/worker through this process
- Concerns will be taken seriously
- Full support from senior management will be provided
- The Abbey will (if appropriate) consider temporarily re-deploying employees/workers if appropriate during the period of the investigation.

Confidentiality

All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made to retain the confidentiality of the employee/worker's identity. If disciplinary or other proceedings follow the investigation, it may not be possible to take action as a result of the disclosure without the employee/worker revealing their identity. Advice and support will be offered.

Untrue allegations

Should any disclosure or allegation be made maliciously, and in the awareness it was untrue, this would be likely to constitute gross misconduct and would be addressed under the school's Disciplinary Policy.

Raising a concern

Dependent upon the sensitivity of the issue and who is suspected of the wrongdoing, concerns should be raised with the following:

- Line Manager/Head of Department
- Head of Junior School
- Head of Finance and Resources
- The Head

If the concern is related to the Head of The Abbey, this should be raised with the Chair of Governors, who will decide how the investigation will proceed. The concern may be raised by telephone or in writing. It is advised that any concerns are raised as soon as possible.

The employee/worker will need to provide information about:

- The nature of the concern and why it is believed to be true
- The background and history of the concern, giving relevant dates etc.

The employee/whistleblower will not be expected to prove beyond reasonable doubt the truth of the allegation but will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that they are acting in good faith and have reasonable grounds for concern.

The employee/worker may wish to involve their trade union or workforce representative at meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns raised.

What The Abbey will do

The Abbey will respond to the concerns as quickly as possible.

In order to be fair to all employees, including those who may be wrongly or mistakenly accused, initial enquiries will be made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and if so what form it should take. This may need to be carried out in the strictest of confidence (not informing the subject of the complaint until (or if) it becomes necessary) until it is understood what form it should take.

Where appropriate the matters raised may:

- be investigated by management through the disciplinary and grievance procedures
- be referred to the police or an external auditor
- form the subject of an independent inquiry
- be referred and put through child protection/abuse procedures

Within ten working days of the concern being raised, the person investigating the concern will write acknowledging the concern has been received and:

- indicate how The Abbey proposes to deal with the matter
- supply information on staff support
- advise whether further investigations will be taking place and if not why not.

Contact between the employee/worker and the person to whom the incident was reported may depend on the nature of the issues raised and the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information. It is likely that the employee/worker will be interviewed again to ensure that the disclosure has been fully understood. That meeting maybe arranged away from the workplace with a workforce representative present.

The school will make every effort to minimise any difficulties experienced as a result of raising the concern. If the employee/worker is asked to provide evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the Abbey will arrange for support and advice.

To be assured that the disclosure has been addressed appropriately the employee/worker will be kept informed of the progress and outcome of any investigation unless there are legal reasons why this should not be done.

What if the whistleblower is unsatisfied with the outcome?

It is hoped that the employee/worker will be satisfied with any action taken. Should this not be the case, it is advised that further advice is sought from the:

- Trade Union
- Police
- Other relevant bodies prescribed by legislation

It is important that any concerns raised are with a prescribed contact, as a public disclosure to anyone else could take the employee/worker outside of the protection of the Public Interest Disclosure Act and this Policy.

This Policy does not prevent the employee/worker taking their own legal advice.

Recording and monitoring

The Abbey will maintain a register containing all concerns that are brought to the school's attention. All employees/governors allocated to look after a concern must ensure the register is updated with the information regarding the allegation.

The Abbey will review the register and as necessary produce an annual report for the Governing Body. The report will include a summary of any concerns raised and which department they relate to and any areas of learning if appropriate. The report will not identify individuals. Its purpose is to ensure the school is consistent in its approach across different areas of operations, and to ensure appropriate learning takes place following the raising of any concern.