

The Priestley Academy Trust



Whistleblowing Policy

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Statement of Intent

The Priestley Academy Trust is committed to open and honest communication and ensuring the highest possible standards in integrity – we will always treat whistleblowing as a serious matter.

In line with the Trust's commitment to openness, probity and accountability, members of staff are encouraged to report concerns. This policy will work to ensure that, if an employee sees or suspects that something is wrong, they will raise this with the school. This is known as "blowing the whistle" – a phrase that is used throughout this policy and should be viewed as a positive action of speaking up.

This policy seeks to ensure that any person suspecting malpractice knows how to raise concerns and what procedures are in place to deal with the concern.

Where this policy necessitates personal or special category data to be processed, it will be done so in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection Policy.

Legal framework

This policy has due regard to all relevant legislation including, but not limited to, the following:

- Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998
- Employment Rights Act 1996

This policy has been created with regard to the following guidance documents:

- ESFA (2019) 'Academies financial handbook 2019'
- Gov.uk (2015) 'Whistleblowing for employees'
- Sir Robert Francis (2015) 'Freedom to speak up report'

This policy operates in conjunction with the following Trust policies:

- Disciplinary Procedure Policy
- Data Retention Policy
- Concerns & Complaints Policy
- Data Protection Policy

Introduction

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) protects employees who "blow the whistle" where the employee reasonably believes that the disclosure falls within the remit of the prescribed person or body and that the information and any allegations are substantially true.

Disclosures made under this procedure will be monitored for statistical purposes as required under the PIDA. The details of any disclosure will remain confidential.

The headteacher is the first point of contact for whistleblowing queries within a school and the Chief Operating Officer is the first point of contact for whistleblowing queries within the central team. If the allegation is related to the headteacher or the Chief Operating Officer, the concern will be raised with the CEO. If the allegation is related to the CEO concerns should be either put in writing, marked Private & Confidential and addressed to the Chair of Trustees, The Priestley Academy Trust, c/o The Hub, Margaret McMillan Primary School, Scotchman Road, Bradford BD9 5DF or alternatively via email on chair@priestley.academy. If the allegation is related to a Trustee or Founder Member the concern should be raised with the ESFA – information on the process can be found by following this link: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-esfa-handles-whistleblowing-disclosures>

Any allegations related to an external contractor should be raised with the COO via the headteacher.

Any member of the Trust community or the general public is able to “blow the whistle”, however, the PIDA only protects employees. Refer to the section on Non-employees for further details on how whistleblowing affects this category of individual.

Definitions

Whistleblowing: whistleblowing is when an employee reports suspected wrongdoing, or ‘qualifying disclosures’, at work to their employer.

Qualifying disclosures: as outlined by the PIDA, qualifying disclosures pertain to when any of the following take place:

- A criminal offence has been committed, is likely to be committed or is being committed
- A person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which they are subject
- A miscarriage of justice has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur
- The health and safety of any individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered
- The environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged
- Information tending to show any matter falling within any of the preceding points has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed

In the public interests means that an individual acted outside of their own personal interest – they acted for more than personal gain. It is not necessary for the disclosure to be of interest to the entire public. The following considerations are often used as a test to establish whether something is within the scope of public interest:

- The number of people in the group whose interests the disclosure served
- The nature of the interests and the extent by which individuals are affected by the wrongdoing disclosed
- The nature of the wrongdoing disclosed
- The identity of the alleged wrongdoer

Blacklisting refers to an individual who is being refused work because they are viewed as a whistleblower.

Grievances involve someone filing a complaint because they personally have been mistreated in some way – the person making the complaint will have a direct interest in the outcome. It is important to understand the difference between raising a grievance and blowing the whistle.

Roles and responsibilities

The Trust Board will be responsible for:

- Establishing and agreeing the whistleblowing procedure
- Monitoring the effectiveness of this policy and undertaking any necessary reviews, eg in relation to good practice recommendations or changes in legislation
- Ensuring all members of the Trust community have access to this policy
- Investigating, in liaison with the CEO/COO/headteacher, any concerns that are raised
- Ensuring this policy provides an open and transparent framework where members of the school community can raise their concerns
- Taking the necessary action against members of staff following an investigation into any alleged malpractice
- Ensuring that the minutes of the Trust Board include a record of the Trust's whistleblowing arrangements and who, both internally and externally, staff members should report concerns to

The headteacher will be responsible for:

- Ensuring all members of staff have read and understood this policy
- Receiving, investigating and responding to any concerns that have been raised by the school community
- Being the first point of contact regarding whistleblowing

The Chair of Trustees will be responsible for receiving any concerns raised about the CEO

The CEO will be responsible for receiving any concerns raised about the headteacher or the COO

The COO will be responsible for receiving any concerns raised about the Central Team or external contractors eg cleaning staff, IT staff etc

All members of the school community will be responsible for:

- Raising any concerns that meet the definitions of 'qualifying disclosures' and 'in the public interests'
- Being truthful and reasonable with any concerns that they have
- Not raising malicious or unfounded concerns

Scope

This policy will:

- Give confidence to members of the school community when raising concerns about conduct or practice that is potentially illegal, corrupt, improper, unsafe or unethical, or which amounts to malpractice or is inconsistent with school standards and policies
- Provide members of the school community with avenues to raise concerns
- Ensure that members of the school community receive a response to the concerns they have raised and feedback on any action taken
- Offer assurance that members of staff are protected from reprisals or victimisation for whistleblowing action undertaken in good faith and within the meaning of the PIDA

This policy will not be confused with the procedure on dealing with harassment at work or the Trust's Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures

Under this policy, any of the following can raise a concern:

- Employees of the school
- Employees of contractors working for the school, for example, agency staff, builders and drivers
- Employees of suppliers
- Voluntary workers working with the school
- A trainee, such as a student teacher
- Pupils
- The wider community
- Governors

Harassment and victimisation of staff

The Trust recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to take, not least because of the fear of reprisal from those responsible for the malpractice or from the Trust as a whole; however, the Trust will not tolerate any such harassment or victimisation and will take appropriate action to protect staff who raise a concern in good faith.

Staff are protected in law by the PIDA, which gives employees protection from detriment and dismissal where they have made a protected disclosure, providing the legal requirements of the Act are satisfied, eg the disclosure was in the public interest.

Any member of staff who victimises or harasses a member of staff as a result of their having raised a concern in accordance with this policy will be dealt with under the Trust's Disciplinary Procedure.

Non-employees

The PIDA and the Employment Rights Act 1996 **do not** protect non-employees as far as whistleblowing is concerned.

Irrespective of the above, the Trust will not allow harassment, dismissal or exclusion for any non-employee who raises a genuine concern.

Where an individual feels that they have been unfairly treated following blowing the whistle, they should make a complaint under the Trust's Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Governors are not employees and, while they are responsible for ensuring there is a whistleblowing procedure in place, they are not protected under the PIDA.

Good practice principles

The Trust will implement the core whistleblowing principles, as outlined in the 'Freedom to speak up report', to ensure that whistleblowing procedures are fair, clear and consistent.

The Trust will implement a culture of change by ensuring the following principles are reflected in our ethos and values – there will be a culture:

- Of safety in the Trust
- Where people feel confident with raising concerns
- Free from bullying
- Of visible leadership
- Of valuing staff
- Of reflective practice

By providing a clear procedure for mediating and resolving classes, as outlined in the section below (Procedure), the Trust will ensure that all cases are efficiently handled. This procedure includes:

- How to raise and report concerns
- How investigations will be conducted
- How the school will mediate and resolve disputes

The Trust will implement measures to support good practice by ensuring adherence to the following principles:

- Offering relevant training to staff
- Providing the necessary support to staff
- Providing support to staff who are seeking alternative employment
- Being transparent
- Being accountable
- Conducting an external review of any concerns raised, where necessary
- Undertaking regulatory action as required

We will ensure there are particular support measures in place for vulnerable groups by adhering to the following principles:

- Ensuring non-permanent staff are taught, and receive training on, the same principles as permanent staff

- Ensuring students and trainees are subject to all the safeguarding and whistleblowing principles
- Ensuring staff from ethnic minorities are supported, as they may feel particularly vulnerable when raising concerns
- Ensuring staff are empowered and protected, enabling them to raise concerns freely

Procedure

When raising concerns, individuals will express them in writing to the headteacher.

If an individual is raising a concern about the headteacher or COO, they should express their concerns in writing to the CEO. Where this is the case, the CEO will take on the headteacher's duties as outlined in the following section (Next Steps).

When individuals raise their concern, they will include the following information as far as possible:

- The background and history of the concern
- Any relevant names, dates and places
- The reason for the concern

The Trust encourages individuals to let their identity be known when they raise concerns, as anonymous concerns can be challenging to investigate.

Individuals who would like to seek professional and confidential advice should contact Protect, a registered charity that advises on whistleblowing queries. The Protect website can be accessed via www.protect-advice.org.uk or they can be contacted on 020 311 72520.

Once an individual has raised a concern, the Trust/school will be responsible for investigating it.

In certain instances, it may be appropriate for the individual to raise the concern with an outside agency eg the police, depending on the severity of the concern. Equally, it may be appropriate for the individual to request that their trade union raises the matter.

If a member of staff feels they should report a concern to the ESFA, they should use the online contact form.

The Trust/school, or the appropriate external agency, will acknowledge receipt of a disclosure but, unless additional information is required, will not contact or engage in dialogue with the whistleblower, as this may undermine the legitimacy of the investigation outcome.

Next steps

The headteacher will write to the individual within 10 working days of the initial meeting to confirm that the concern has been received, as well as to indicate proposals for dealing with the matter.

The initial stage will be an interview with the whistleblower, and then an assessment of further action will be discussed. During this initial stage, the headteacher will establish if:

- There are grounds for concern and that it is genuine
- The concern was raised in accordance with this policy

During the initial interview, the headteacher will request the individual puts their concern in writing, if they have not already done so. The headteacher will write a summary of the concern if the individual is unable to put it in writing.

The headteacher will explain the following to anybody raising a concern:

- How they will communicate with the complainant throughout the process. It should be noted, the need for confidentiality may prevent the Trust/school giving the complainant specific details of any necessary investigation or any necessary disciplinary action taken as a result of the concern
- That the complainant's identity will be kept confidential from the alleged wrongdoer
- That the Trust will do everything in its power to protect the complainant from discrimination
- That if the concern is genuine, even if the concern is not confirmed, no disciplinary action will be taken against the complainant
- If clear evidence is uncovered that the complainant's concern is malicious or unfounded, disciplinary action may be brought against them

The Trust accepts that the complainant expects to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. The CEO/Trust Board, subject to any legal constraints and Data protection, will inform them of the outcome of any investigation that may take place

Please note, complainants will not be given any information regarding possible sanctions against the staff member that the concerns were raised about

A record will be kept of the seriousness of the issues raised and the credibility of the concern. All records will be kept confidential and will be stored in line with the Trust's Data Retention Policy.

It may be possible for the concern to be resolved by simply agreeing the necessary action or explaining procedures to the alleged wrongdoer; however, depending on the severity and nature of the concern, it may:

- Be investigated by management, an internal audit or through the disciplinary process
- Be referred to the police or an external auditor
- From the subject of an independent enquiry

If the investigating officer needs to talk to the whistleblower, they are permitted to be accompanied by a trade union representative, a professional association representative, a friend or fellow member of staff not involved in the area of work that the concern relates to. This person will provide support only and will not be allowed to become involved in the proceedings.

A record will be made of the nature and outcome of the concern. The purpose of this is to ensure that a central record is kept which can be cross-referenced with other complaints to monitor any patterns of concern across the Trust and to assist in monitoring the procedure.

The whistleblower will be informed of the results of the investigation, and any action that is proposed will be subject to third party rights. Where action is not taken, the individual will be given an explanation.

What the Trust asks of you

The purpose of this policy is to enable individuals to raise concerns in confidence, without any fear of reprisal; therefore, it is imperative that whistleblowers:

- Do not take the concern outside the Trust, eg gossiping
- Declare any personal interest in the matter, as the policy is designed to be used in the interest of the public and not for individual matters

Appeal process

If no action is to be taken and/or the individual is not satisfied with the way the matter has been handled, they can make a complaint under the Trust's Concerns and Complaints Policy.

Unfair treatment

An individual can take a case to an employment tribunal if they feel that they have been treated unfairly as a result of whistleblowing.

Further information can be sought from the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the whistleblowing charity Protect, or from an individual's trade union.

Any claims of unfair dismissal needs to be made within three months of the investigation ending.

Appendix A – Managing Whistleblowing During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Trust remains committed to managing any instances of whistleblowing. Employees of the Trust are still able to whistleblow during this time.

The Trust will endeavour to follow the procedures outlined in the main body of the policy as much as possible. This appendix outlines necessary changes to managing whistleblowing.

Legal framework

This appendix has due regard to all relevant legislation and guidance, including, but not limited to, the following:

- DfE (2020) ‘Guidance for full opening: schools’

Conducting investigations

Interviews or meetings that are required to be conducted during the investigation of an allegation will be conducted virtually, where possible.

The whistleblower retains the right to be accompanied by a trade union representative, a professional association representative, a friend or a fellow member of staff not involved in the area of work that the concern relates to.

If it is not possible to conduct an interview or meeting virtually, it will be conducted face-to-face. In these cases, attendees will be required to follow the Trust’s infection control and social distancing measures.

The investigating officer will ensure attendees of virtual meetings and interviews have access to the necessary technology to participate.

Any interviews or meetings that take place remotely will be conducted in line with the Trust’s Protocols for Virtual Meetings.