

Audit and Standards Committee Report

Title of Report:	Whistleblowing
Date of Decision:	October 17 th 2024
Report To:	Audit and Standards Committee
Report Of:	Jane English, Director People and Organisational Culture
Report Author:	Elyse.Senior-Wadsworth Assistant Director People Team
Executive Summary:	Update to committee on the activity and application of the Council's Whistleblowing Policy.

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? [No]

Recommendations:

The Audit and Standards Committee is recommended to

1. Support the clarifications set out in the report in relation to Whistleblowing and wider HR Policy
2. Acknowledge that alongside the Whistleblowing Policy the Council is working to improve the levels of engagement to ensure our workforce can and do raise concerns
3. Note the future reporting of Whistleblowing into the Assurance Board

Financial Implications: None

Legal Implications: None

Equality and Inclusion Implications: None

Climate Change Implications: None

Background Papers: [none]

Appendices: [Whistleblowing Policy]



1. Background to the issue

Whistleblowing is a mechanism that gives those making protected disclosures legal protections, thus encouraging and enabling those who may feel concern about raising issues able to do so. Audit and Standards Committee receive an annual report on this to allow any intelligence, trends or issues to be considered. Last year's report 22/23 confirmed that awareness was to be raised in relation to Whistleblowing as the number of issues raised was concerningly low, rarely more than 1 a year.

2. Proposal / Update

Whistleblowing Progress since last year

Year of year the number of whistleblowing complaints is low, in the 23/24 year there were 3 complaints received, which although low is higher than in previous years. Awareness around whistleblowing has increased with stronger links into those services with regulator oversight where the requirement for robust whistleblowing arrangements is stipulated.

Although there were 3 recorded whistleblowing complaints last year, there were 2 further complaints that did not meet the threshold of a protected disclosure and were resolved through a different route or process.

Of the 3 protected disclosures accepted;

- 1 led to an investigation and subsequent recommendations agreed and actioned
- 1 was resolved without the need of investigation
- 1 remains ongoing and is linked to a wider complex HR process

The legal definition of a protected disclosure is clear and where a complaint meets that threshold the response is clear, however where the threshold is not met it is not always clear what process should be used to support the complaint and individual raising the issue. This is being addressed through the HR Policy review process.

HR Policy and Employee Relations

Making the alternative routes clearer is as important as a robust whistleblowing policy. A complete review of all HR Policies will allow the Council to reset our employee relations framework and put our values at the core. Whistleblowing is important, but it is also as important that there are other channels to deal with employee relations such as misconduct so that Whistleblowing is clearly there for issues that sit outside of general employee relations. A clear, updated modern suite of policies including whistleblowing is being developed, which includes consultation with Trade Unions colleagues.

People Team now record and track all employee relations processes with reporting to SLB on a quarterly basis, this includes whistleblowing will in addition be reported into the Officer Assurance Board. This strengthens the visibility of employee complaints under whistleblowing and will ensure that the themes and issues raised lead to organisational learning and where appropriate action.

Employee Engagement

In November 2023 the Council carried out its first all staff survey in over 4 years, which saw a 45% return rate. The system used to support a fully anonymous survey is called HIVE, which is run by an external organisation completely independent from SCC. One of the additional functions the HIVE system has is a portal called Open Door, an anonymous route for staff to raise questions or share concerns. This was introduced because staff had fed back they did not feel confident to raise issue in their services for fear of consequence. This platform is complimentary to a wider approach that will see the development of an employee voice strategy through a wider review of the overall approach to Employee Engagement, which is a substantial area of work for the people team.

Investment in HR has seen the appointment of an HR Policy Manager and Head of Employee Engagement and Inclusion. These roles will work collaboratively to ensure that a range of channels are available for employees to raise concern, including Whistleblowing.

An updated whistleblowing policy will be agreed via the Local Negotiating Committee in the coming months and will be widely communicated once in place. The new policy will use a consistent format, plain language and ensure links to other channels are clear and accessible.

3. Equality and Inclusion Implications

There are no equality and/or inclusion implications arising for this report

4. Financial and Commercial Implications

There are no financial implications arising for this report

5. Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising for this report

6. Climate and Environmental Implications

There are no climate and/or environmental implications arising for this report

This page is intentionally left blank