

Whistleblowing policy

2024-25

1. PREAMBLE

- a. Pele Trust is committed to ensuring continuous development and improvement of services within all of our schools. We welcome suggestions from students, their parents and carers and both teaching and non-teaching employees as to ways in which we can achieve this aim.
- b. In that spirit, there is an expectation that employees and others who deliver services on behalf of the Trust and individual schools will report any concerns about possible bad practice. This will usually be facilitated through normal line management arrangements. However, where that is not possible, this policy provides an avenue for reporting serious malpractice.
- c. Employees are often the first to realise that there may be something seriously wrong within the Trust and/or individual school. However, in some cases they may not express their concerns because they feel that speaking up would be disloyal to their colleagues or to the school and/or Trust. They may also fear harassment or victimisation. In these circumstances it may be thought easier to ignore the concern rather than report what may just be a suspicion of malpractice. However, the Trust and individual schools are committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability. Pele Trust therefore expects employees, and others who it deals with, who have serious concerns about any aspect of the Trust's or individual school's work to come forward and voice those concerns. It is recognised that most cases will have to proceed on a confidential basis.
- d. "Blowing the Whistle" can be done without fear of victimisation, subsequent discrimination or disadvantage. This policy is intended to encourage and enable employees to raise serious concerns within Pele Trust rather than overlooking a problem or 'blowing the whistle' to an external body.
- e. The right to "blow the whistle" applies to all employees and those contractors working for the Trust on its premises, for example, agency staff or building contractors. It also applies to suppliers and those providing services under a contract with the Trust and/or individual school in their own premises. The Board of Directors guarantees this right, so long as the individual has acted in good faith
- f. These procedures exist in addition to the Pele Trust's Complaints Procedure. Headteachers are responsible for making stakeholders aware of the existence of these procedures

- g. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has overall responsibility for this procedure and for ensuring that:
 - i. Appropriate procedures are in place and implemented
 - ii. Any concerns and any action taken are reported to the Board of Directors
 - iii. All staff are aware of their rights and duties under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998

2. AIMS AND SCOPE OF THIS POLICY: This policy aims to:

- a. Encourage you to feel confident in raising serious concerns and to question and act upon concerns about practice
- b. Provide avenues for you to raise those concerns and receive feedback on any action taken
- c. Ensure that you receive a response to your concerns and that you are aware of how to pursue them if you are not satisfied
- d. Reassure you that you will be protected from possible reprisals or victimisation if you have a reasonable belief that you have made any disclosure in good faith
- e. If you are an employee, there are existing procedures in place to enable you to lodge a grievance relating to your own employment. You should always use the grievance procedure before this Whistleblowing Policy.
- f. The Whistleblowing Policy is intended to cover major concerns that fall outside the scope of other procedures. These include:
 - i. Conduct that represents a breach of school rules and expectations of staff
 - ii. Conduct that breaches exam regulations
 - iii. Conduct that would be damaging to the school's and/or Trust's reputation
 - iv. Conduct that is an offence or a breach of law
 - v. Disclosures related to miscarriages of justice
 - vi. Health and safety risks, including risks to the public, service users, as well as other employees
 - vii. Damage to the environment
 - viii. The inappropriate or unauthorised use of public funds or other resources
 - ix. Possible fraud and corruption

- x. Abuse of clients, or
- xi. Any conduct that is viewed as being unethical for an employee of the school and/or Trust
- g. Thus, any serious concerns that you have about any aspect of provision or the conduct of staff or leaders of the school and/or Trust, or others acting on its behalf can be reported under the Whistleblowing Policy. This may be about something that:
 - i. Makes you feel uncomfortable in terms of known standards, your experience or the standards you believe the school and/or Trust subscribes to; or
 - ii. Is against the school's and/or Trust's mission statement, values or policies; or
 - iii. Falls below established standards of practice; or
 - iv. Amounts to improper conduct.
- h. This policy does **not** replace the Complaints Procedure, which is concerned with addressing complaints about school and/or Trust services received from external agents.
- i. If you have any concerns about a service provided by another organisation on behalf of the school, e.g. Northumberland County Council Payroll, you should contact the Headteacher and CEO in the first instance.

3. SAFEGUARDS AGAINST HARASSMENT OR VICTIMISATION

- a. The Trust is committed to good practice and high standards and wants to be supportive of employees and others covered by this policy.
- b. The Trust recognises that the decision to report a concern can be a difficult one to make. If what you are saying is true, you should have nothing to fear because you will be doing your duty to your employer and those for whom you are providing a service.
- c. The Trust will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action, including disciplinary action if necessary, to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith.
- d. Any investigation into allegations of potential malpractice will not influence or be influenced by other procedures such as investigations and hearings under the disciplinary, sickness, capability, redundancy or any other dismissal procedures that already affect you or may affect you in the future.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

- a. All concerns will be treated in confidence and every effort will be made not to reveal your identity if you so wish. At the appropriate time, however, you may need to come forward as a witness.

5. ANONYMOUS ALLEGATIONS

- a. This policy encourages you to put your name to your allegation whenever possible. Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the CEO.
- b. In exercising this discretion the factors to be taken into account would include:
 - i. The seriousness of the issues raised;
 - ii. The credibility of the concern;
 - iii. Any evidence provided with the disclosure;
 - iv. The likelihood of confirming the allegation from attributable sources

6. UNTRUE ALLEGATIONS

- a. If you make an allegation in good faith, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against you. If, however, you make an allegation frivolously, maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against you.

7. HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN

- a. As a first step, you should normally raise concerns with the Headteacher or if the concern is about any action taken by the Headteacher, with the Chair of the Academy Committee. If the concern is about any action taken by the Academy Committee then you should contact the Pele Trust CEO.
- b. Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing. If you wish to make a written report, you are advised to use the following format:
 - i. The background to the concern including any relevant historical information (giving relevant dates)
 - ii. The reason why you are particularly concerned about the situation
- c. If your concern is raised verbally, a written note will be recorded in line with the format above

- d. The earlier you express the concern the easier it is to take action
- e. Although you are not expected to prove beyond doubt the truth of an allegation, you will need to demonstrate to the person contacted that there are reasonable grounds for your concern
- f. Advice or guidance on how to pursue matters of concern may be obtained from the school's Headteacher, the Chair of the Academy Committee or CEO. A contact list is at the end of this document.
- g. You may wish to consider discussing your concern with a colleague first and you may find it easier to raise the matter if there are two (or more) of you who have had the same experience or have the same concerns.
- h. You may invite your trade union representative or a work colleague to be present during any meetings or interviews in connection with the concerns you have raised.

8. HOW THE SCHOOL WILL RESPOND

- a. The Headteacher, Chair of the Academy Committee or CEO, must attempt to resolve the matter with the member of staff within a reasonable time, and must report progress to the member of staff within 10 days of your concern being formally raised.
- b. The Academy Committee will, where it is attempting to resolve the concern, appoint no fewer than 3 of its members to formally consider the concern, and to attempt a resolution within 10 working days of its receiving the concern.
- c. If the member of staff is not satisfied with the Headteacher's or the Academy Committee's response to the concern, or the time being taken to resolve it, the member of staff may take the matter up formally with the CEO.
- d. The school will respond to your concerns. Do not forget that testing out your concerns is not the same as either accepting or rejecting them.
- e. Where appropriate, the concern raised may:
 - i. Need to be investigated by the school, internal audit, or through the disciplinary process
 - ii. Need to be referred to the police
 - iii. Need to be referred to the external auditor
 - iv. Form the subject of an independent inquiry.

- f. In order to protect individuals and those accused of misdeeds or possible malpractice, initial enquiries will be made to decide whether an investigation is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take. The overriding principle, which the school will have in mind, is the public interest. Concerns or allegations which fall within the scope of specific procedures (for example, Child Protection, discrimination or safeguarding issues) will normally be referred for consideration under those procedures.
- g. Some concerns may be resolved by agreed action without the need for a full investigation. If urgent action is required this will be taken before any investigation is conducted.
- h. Within 10 working days of a concern being raised with the school will write to you:
 - i. Acknowledging that the concern has been received
 - ii. Indicating how the school or Pele Trust proposes to deal with the matter
 - iii. Giving an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response
 - iv. Telling you whether any initial enquiries have been made
 - v. Supplying you with information on support available within the Trust
 - vi. Telling you whether further investigations will take place and if not, why not
- i. The amount of contact between those considering the issues and you will depend on the nature of the matters raised, the potential difficulties involved and the clarity of the information provided. If necessary, the school will seek further information from you.
- j. Where any meeting is arranged, off-site if you so wish, you can be accompanied by a union representative or a work colleague.
- k. The school will take steps to minimise any difficulties, which you may experience as a result of raising a concern. For instance, if you are required to give evidence in criminal or disciplinary proceedings, the school will arrange for you to receive advice about the procedure
- l. The Trust accepts that you need to be assured that the matter has been properly addressed. Thus, subject to legal constraints, we will provide limited information on the outcome of any investigation but you must keep that information confidential.

9. THE RESPONSIBLE OFFICER

- a. The CEO has overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of this policy and maintains a record of all concerns raised in schools and the outcomes (but in a form which does not endanger your confidentiality) and will report as necessary to the next meeting of the Pele Trust Board of Directors.

10. HOW THE MATTER CAN BE TAKEN FURTHER

- a. This policy is intended to provide you with an avenue within the school and/or Trust to raise concerns. The Trust hopes you will be satisfied with any action taken. If you are not, and if you feel it is right to take the matter outside the school, further possible contact points are given in the Contact List at the end of this booklet.
- b. If you do take the matter outside the school, you should ensure that you do not disclose information, which should properly remain confidential. You will need to confirm this with the person or organisation you decide to contact.

11. INTERNAL CONTACT LIST

- a. Headteacher - Ponteland High School
 - i. Mr Stefan McElwee
 - ii. 01661 824711
 - iii. s.mcelwee@ponthigh.org.uk
- b. Chair of Academy Committee - Ponteland High School
 - i. Mr Barry Hirst
 - ii. 01661 824711
 - iii. b.hirst@ponthigh.org.uk
- c. Pele Trust - Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
 - i. Mr Kieran McGrane
 - ii. 07445 311633 k.mcgrane@peletrust.org.uk
- d. Chair of Pele Trust
 - i. Gerry Miller
 - ii. g.miller@peletrust.org.uk

12. EXTERNAL CONTACT LIST

- a. Advice or guidance about how to pursue matters of concern may be obtained from any of the people named below.
- b. If you have used the appropriate procedures and are not satisfied with any action taken in relation to your concerns and if you feel it is right to take the matter outside the Trust, further possible contact points are given below. It is stressed that the list below is not exhaustive and you are free to contact any organisation which you feel will be able to deal properly with your concerns.
- c. Audit Commission Anti-fraud and Corruption Hotline
020 7630 1019
- d. Standards Board for England
0845 0788181
- e. External auditor
Azets
Contact number - 01642 221331
- f. Northumbria Police:
Hexham - 01434 604111
- g. Professional bodies (examples):
 - i. Your trade union
- h. Regulatory organisations (examples):
 - i. Environment Agency
0645 333111
 - ii. Health and Safety Executive
0191 2026200
 - iii. OfSTED
0207 421 6800
- i. Voluntary organisations (examples):
 - i. Barnardos
0191 281 5024
 - ii. NSPCC
0800 028 0285
 - iii. Your local Citizens Advice Bureau:
See Yellow Pages for local numbers

- j. If you are unsure whether or how to use this procedure or want independent advice, you may contact the independent charity **Public Concern at Work on 020 7404 6609**. Their lawyers can give you free confidential advice at any stage on how to raise a concern about serious malpractice at work

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