

Council Whistleblowing Hotline a Success

Edinburgh Council has declared the whistleblower hotline a success. They say it has been effective in sharply reducing the instances of mismanagement and risk within the Council, due to the independent investigations of staff complaints.

A recent Council report stated “Many of the recommendations that have resulted from investigations have led to amendments to policy, improvements to procedures and processes, the development and sharing of best practice and improved service delivery.”

There have been, believe it or not, fewer scandals since the hotline was launched on 12 May 2014. (Cameron House was an old one.). The revelations that staff make through the hotline are, predictably, kept confidential at the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee, which takes its reports in private. Only one has made it to the press- about the Castlebrae High School Biology teacher who had sent inappropriate messages to one pupil and assaulted another, both of whom were under 16. Staff had repeatedly complained about him to school and council management yet nothing was done. One of the first calls to the hotline was by a worker at Castlebrae who was angry that no action was being taken. The Biology teacher was, thanks to the hotline, dismissed (details below).

Edinburgh is the only local authority in Scotland to have this independent hotline to take staff reports of mismanagement and malpractice. It was only implemented after a year-long campaign by Council employee Pete Gregson, who was sick of seeing colleagues bullied out of their jobs for raising legitimate concerns.

In Jan 2012 he opened a petition seeking the hotline to the Council’s Petitions Committee, headed “A safer mechanism for reporting Edinburgh Council mismanagement”. By walking the streets and collecting signatures from angry citizens, ██████████ obtained 515 signatures, 15 more than the 500 needed to get his petition heard at Committee. The Petition was heard by Committee in April and passed to the Corporate Management Team for action.

The CMT response was to recommend a helpline, which ██████████ immediately saw as no better than useless in protecting staff from victimisation, in that the helpline only suggested staff take their disclosures to their line manager. Who, history had shown, often responded by disciplining them.

Through the Evening News, by mobilising citizens to lobby their councillors, and by organising a second petition to the Scottish Parliament, he campaigned for a scheme that properly protected staff who sought to disclose mismanagement. The Evening News’s ██████████ wrote a powerful leader supporting the hotline he proposed.

Following on from the Edinburgh Lifelong Learning Project (ELLP) and the Property Conservation Scandal, where both Council whistleblowers were disciplined by bosses for speaking out, the Councillors realised that if they were ever to regain control of risk, they needed a hotline that staff felt safe enough to use. Eventually Mr Gregson persuaded Councillors to reject the CMT helpline, and get a proper hotline installed. The current arrangements were approved in Sept 2013 by the Finance Committee, and reported in the Evening News.

The hotline ensures staff disclosures are independently assessed before being taken direct to the governance committee, missing out Council mandarins who might suppress embarrassing disclosures.

This committee is one of only two Council committees not controlled by the Administration (the other being the Petitions Committee). It is chaired by opposition Tory councillor ██████████, who is able to act on matters that may otherwise have proven too contentious for his Labour/SNP colleagues.

The hotline is run by an independent London company Safecall and last year cost £45,775. Over the two years it has been running it has investigated many reports from the Council workforce of 16,000 staff.

After every staff call about mismanagement, malpractice, environmental damage, bullying, misconduct or suspected fraud, Safecall determines whether a concern qualifies for investigation and if it is a “major/significant” or “minor/operational” disclosure.

For major disclosures, Safecall is always responsible for the investigation and reporting of the call to the governance committee, while for minor ones it has discretion to ask a council manager to investigate and report back to them.

The Safecall findings are presented to Committee every three months, via [REDACTED] the Council’s Monitoring Officer.

The first Whistleblowing Annual Report was published in January and showed that in the previous year there had been 18 disclosures, 12 of which were investigated by Safecall. Their findings were duly reported to the governance committee, who took action.

Of the twelve qualifying disclosures, two were major/significant disclosures and ten were minor/operational ones. Six investigations were completed over the year and six investigations are ongoing. There were six non-qualifying disclosures, where the Whistleblowing Team sought assurances from Council management that the concerns raised were being addressed via the appropriate channels eg. customer complaints process or grievance procedure, where appropriate.

The service was reviewed last summer and yet again the Council’s CMT tried to get it watered down. Senior officers were unhappy that the hotline provider was able to decide if it should investigate a concern itself, externally, rather than handing it over to them for internal processing. They felt that decision should be made by them.

Luckily the Councillors saw through this guise and voted to keep the hotline just the way it was. In August 2015, the Finance & Resources Committee agreed that the hotline was valuable and had led to the investigation of matters that would otherwise not have come to light. The Committee took a report assessing the service from Morton Fraser and agreed to keep the hotline in its original form for a further year. The report stated that all those interviewed considered that there was value in having an external whistleblowing service and that such an arrangement should continue.

One case the hotline had been instrumental in bringing to light was the Castlebrae cover-up. One of the first calls Safecall took in May 2014 was from a member of staff at Castlebrae High School. A vulnerable student’s complaint about improper behaviour by one of her teachers was effectively ignored for four months. A Biology teacher had sent inappropriate messages to one pupil and assaulted another, both of whom were under 16. The student complained to senior school staff in January 2014. No action. In March 2014 the pupil turned to another staff member for help and this worker went to [REDACTED] Director of Education. No action. Eventually, 5 weeks later, in desperation, the staff member blew the whistle to the hotline. Safecall undertook a major investigation. Result: the governance committee Councillors got involved. Action- the teacher was sacked.

[REDACTED] said of the Annual Report and the decision not to water down the hotline:

“I am so pleased that the hotline is being used and that it is working in the way I intended it to, when I started the petition for it back in January 2013. I had approached Council Leader [REDACTED] about it after the property conservation whistleblower was sacked; he said he would discuss it with the Chief Exec, but as usual nothing came of it. Then I put forward a motion for the Unison AGM, but my Council

bosses threatened me for that, so my seconder dropped out and no-one would dare take his place. Eventually, in desperation, I started my Petition and set up a stall outside Waverley Court to get Council staff to sign. I think at that point I earned the epithet "Crazy Pete" - for who else would be mad enough to challenge mismanagement so openly? I was pleased that the Evening News came that day and snapped a picture of me handing a flyer to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] had been allowed to discipline the man who had blown the whistle on him for "losing" £0.4M of public cash as secretary at ELLP. I said to him at the time- "Here's a way to protect whistleblowers, [REDACTED] please sign." He saw the News photographer and couldn't move fast enough. That was a moment, I thought, rich in irony.

"I think it has helped the Council avoid scandals because problems have been addressed internally. I don't think there could be another Edinburgh Lifelong Learning Project fraud, Property Conservation mess or even a grandiose vanity project tram line now. For these are all disclosures that got whistleblowers punished. I am pleased that staff now have a route to elected Council leaders that doesn't risk them getting the sack from management for causing trouble"

- Ends -

More info:

Pete Gregson [REDACTED]

Councillor Jeremy Balfour, Convener, Governance Risk & Best Value Committee 07 [REDACTED]



