

STRATHFIELD COUNCIL

PUBLIC INTEREST
DISCLOSURES &
INTERNAL
REPORTING
SYSTEM

June 2021

RESPONSIBILITY	Office of the CEO		
DATE ADOPTED	3 February 1998	MINUTE	45/98
REVISED	June 2021	REVIEW	June 2023
ECM No			
ASSOCIATED POLICIES	Strathfield Council Code of Conduct Strathfield Council Business Ethics Statement Prevention of Fraud and Corrupt Conduct Policy		
ASSOCIATED LEGISLATION	<i>Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009</i> <i>Independent Commission Against Corruption Act 1988</i> <i>Local Government Act 1993</i> <i>Ombudsman Act 1974</i> <i>Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994</i> <i>Public Interest Disclosures Regulation 2011</i> <i>State Records Act 1998</i>		
ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS	Strathfield Council Procedures for the Administration of the Code of Conduct		

Introduction

1.0 Purpose

The purpose of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994* (PID Act) is to:

- encourage and facilitate the disclosure, in the public interest, of corrupt conduct, maladministration and serious and substantial waste in the public sector
- ensure that any public official who wishes to make a disclosure receives legal protection from reprisals, and that the matters raised in any disclosure are properly investigated.
- encourage staff and councillors to report known and suspected wrongdoing under
- Council's policy reporting framework which includes Code of Conduct.

- encourage staff and councillors to support those who have made reports of wrong doing, by protecting and maintaining their confidentiality and not victimising or harassing anyone who has made a report.

1.1 Objectives

The objectives of this Policy are to:

- establish an internal reporting system for the reporting of disclosures of corrupt conduct, maladministration or serious and substantial waste of public money by Strathfield Council, members of Council staff and Councillors. This enables protected disclosures to be made to the Disclosure Coordinator, Disclosures Officer, the Mayor or the General Manager.
- complement the normal means of communication between managers and members of Council staff. Members of Council staff are encouraged to continue to raise appropriate matters at any time with their managers but they also have the right to make protected disclosures in accordance with this policy.
- ensure that Council will take all reasonable steps to protect any Councillor or member of Council staff or Council contractor who makes a disclosure from any detrimental action in reprisal for making that disclosure.

1.2 Coverage of the Policy

The policy applies to all public officials of Strathfield Council.

1.3 Implementation strategies

This policy is supported by:

- procedural process documents
- inclusion of information on public disclosures and the policy requirements in induction and refresher training and handbooks for staff and councillors
- availability of information for staff and councillor on relevant intranets
- information published on Council's website

Policy Statement

2.0 Council Commitment

Strathfield Council is committed to the highest levels of ethical and accountable conduct and will not tolerate any form of wrongdoing. This policy is endorsed by the Mayor, General Manager and by adopted by resolution of Council.

Strathfield Council will promote and act in accordance with Council's Code of Conduct and the PID Act by:

- encouraging staff to report if they have witnessed what they consider to be wrongdoing within the Council
- creating a climate of trust and support to ensure that Council staff are confident about reporting wrongdoing
- keeping the identity of the staff member disclosing wrongdoing confidential, wherever possible and appropriate
- protecting staff who make disclosures from any adverse action motivated by their report
- dealing with reports thoroughly and impartially and if some form of wrongdoing has been found, taking appropriate action to rectify it
- keeping staff who make reports informed of their progress and the outcome
- encouraging staff to report wrongdoing within Council, but respecting any decision to disclose wrongdoing outside Council, provided that disclosure outside Council is made in accordance with the PID Act
- ensuring managers and supervisors at all levels in Council understand the benefits of reporting wrongdoing, are familiar with this policy, and aware of the needs of those who report wrongdoing
- providing adequate resources to:
 - encourage reports of wrongdoing
 - protect and support those who make them
 - provide training for key personnel
 - investigate allegations
 - properly manage any workplace issues that the allegations identify and correct any problem that is identified
 - reassess or review the policy frequently to ensure it is still relevant and effective.

2.1 Roles and responsibilities in Council

This policy applies to:

- Council employees including full-time, part-time, temporary or casual
- Mayor and Councillors
- Council's consultants and contractors

The policy may also apply to other people who perform public official functions and their conduct and activities could be investigated by an investigating authority. This can include volunteers and those contracted to work for Council.

Members of Council staff are encouraged to support those who have made disclosures, as well as protect and maintain their confidentiality. Staff must not victimise or harass anyone who has made a disclosure.

2.2 Responsibilities of General Manager

Under the PID Act, Council's General Manager is responsible for ensuring that:

- Council has an internal reporting policy
- Councillors and Council staff are aware of the contents of the policy and the protection under the PID Act for people who make public interest disclosures
- Council complies with the policy and its obligations under the PID Act, and
- Other members of staff are delegated responsibility for receiving public interest disclosures and that the Code of Conduct Complaints Coordinator is also appointed as the Disclosures Coordinator for public interest disclosures.

2.3 What should be reported?

Public officials should report any suspected wrongdoing you see within Strathfield Council. Reports about the five categories of serious wrongdoing – corrupt conduct, maladministration, serious and substantial waste of public money, government information contravention, and local government pecuniary interest contravention – will be dealt with under the PID Act as public interest disclosures and according to this policy.

2.3.1 Corrupt conduct

Corrupt conduct is the dishonest or partial exercise of official functions by a public official. For example, this could include:

- the improper use of knowledge, power or position for personal gain or the advantage of others
- acting dishonestly or unfairly, or breaching public trust
- a council official using their position in a way that is dishonest, biased or breaches public trust.

For more information about corrupt conduct, refer to the NSW Ombudsman's guideline on what can be reported at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.3.2 Maladministration

Maladministration is conduct that involves action or inaction of a serious nature that is contrary to law, unreasonable, unjust, oppressive or improperly discriminatory or based wholly or partly on improper motives. For example, this could include:

- making a decision and/or taking action that is unlawful

- refusing to grant an approval for reasons that are not related to the merits of their application.

For more information about maladministration, refer to the NSW Ombudsman's guideline on what can be reported at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.3.3. Serious and substantial waste in local government

Serious and substantial waste is the uneconomical, inefficient or ineffective use of resources that could result in the loss or wastage of local government money. This includes all revenue, loans and other money collected, received or held by, for or on account of the Council. For example, this could include:

- poor project management practices leading to projects running over time
- having poor or no processes in place for a system involving large amounts of public funds.

For more information about serious and substantial waste, refer to the NSW Ombudsman's guideline on what can be reported at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.3.4 Government information contravention

A government information contravention is a failure to properly fulfil functions under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (GIPA Act). For example, this could include:

- destroying, concealing or altering records to prevent them from being released
- knowingly making decisions that are contrary to the legislation
- directing another person to make a decision that is contrary to the legislation.

For more information about government information contravention, refer to the NSW Ombudsman's guideline on what can be reported at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.3.5 Local government pecuniary interest contravention

A local government pecuniary interest contravention is a failure to fulfil certain functions under the *Local Government Act 1993* relating to the management of pecuniary interests. These include obligations to lodge disclosure of interest returns, lodge written declarations and disclose pecuniary interests at council and council committee meetings. A pecuniary interest is an interest that a person has in a matter because of a reasonable likelihood or expectation of appreciable financial gain or loss to the person. For example, this could include:

- a senior council staff member recommending a family member for a council contract and not declaring the relationship
- a general manager holding an undisclosed shareholding in a company competing for a council contract

For more information about local government pecuniary interest contravention, refer to the NSW Ombudsman's guideline on what can be reported at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

2.3.6 Other wrongdoing

Although reports about the previous five categories of conduct can attract the specific protections of the PID Act, you should report all activities or incidents that you believe are wrong. For example, these could include:

- harassment or unlawful discrimination
- reprisal action against a person who has reported wrongdoing
- practices that endanger the health or safety of staff or the public.

These types of issues should be reported to a supervisor, in line with Strathfield Council's Code of Conduct and complaints and grievance processes.

Even if these reports are not dealt with as public interest disclosures, Strathfield Council will consider each matter and make every attempt to protect the staff member making the report from any form of reprisal.

2.4 When will a report be protected?

Council will support any person that reports wrongdoing. For a report to be considered a public interest disclosure, it has to meet all of the requirements under the PID Act. These requirements are:

- the person making the disclosure must honestly believe on reasonable grounds that the information shows or tends to show wrongdoing.
- the report has to be made to a position nominated in this policy (refer clause 2.8) or an investigating authority (refer clause 2.9).
- Reports by staff and councillors will not be considered to be public interest disclosures if they:
- mostly question the merits of the policy of the governing body of the Council.
- are made with the sole or substantial motive of avoiding dismissal or other disciplinary action.

2.5 How to make a report

Reports of wrongdoing may be made in writing or verbally, though it is encouraged to make a report in writing as this can help to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation.

If a report is made verbally, the person receiving the report must make a comprehensive record of the disclosure and ask the person making the disclosure to sign this record. The individual making the report should keep a copy of this

record.

2.6 Can a report be anonymous?

There will be some situations where you may not want to identify yourself when you make a report. Although these reports will still be dealt with by Council, it is best if you identify yourself. This allows us to provide you with any necessary protection and support, as well as feedback about the outcome of any investigation into the allegations.

It is important to realise that an anonymous disclosure may not prevent you from being identified. If we do not know who made the report, it is very difficult for us to prevent any reprisal action.

2.7 Maintaining confidentiality

Strathfield Council realises many staff will want their report to remain confidential. This can help to prevent any action being taken against you for reporting wrongdoing.

Council is committed to keeping your identity, and the fact you have reported wrongdoing, confidential. However there may be situations where this may not be possible or appropriate. We will discuss with you whether it is possible to keep your report confidential.

If confidentiality cannot be maintained, we will develop a plan to support and protect you from risks of reprisal. You will be involved in developing this plan. You will also be told if your report will be dealt with under the Council's Code of Conduct, as this may mean certain information will have to be tabled at a council meeting.

If you report wrongdoing, it is important that you only discuss your report with the staff of Council responsible to deal with it. This will include the Disclosures Coordinator and the General Manager. In the case of a report about the Chief Executive Officer, you should only discuss your report with the Disclosures Coordinator and the Mayor.

Where your complaint is made under Council's Code of Conduct and relates to the Chief Executive Officer or a councillor, you may be required to discuss it with a conduct reviewer.

2.8 Who can receive a report within Strathfield Council?

You are encouraged to report general wrongdoing to your supervisor. However the PID Act requires that for a report to be a public interest disclosure, it must be made to a public official in accordance with Council's disclosure procedures. This means this policy and any supporting procedures.

Any supervisor who receives a report that they believe may be a public interest disclosure must refer the individual making the report to one of the positions listed

below. The broader responsibilities of these positions will be outlined in the procedures supporting this policy.

If your report involves a councillor, you should make it to the Chief Executive Officer. If your report relates to the Chief Executive Officer, you should make it to the Mayor.

The following positions are the only staff within Strathfield Council who can receive a public interest disclosure.

Chief Executive Officer

You can report wrongdoing directly to the Chief Executive Officer. The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for:

- deciding if a report is a public interest disclosure
- determining what needs to be done next, including referring it to other authorities
- deciding what needs to be done to correct the problem that has been identified.
- ensuring there are systems in place in to support and protect people who report wrongdoing
- dealing with disclosures made under the council's code of conduct in accordance with the council's adopted code of conduct procedures
- referring actual or suspected corrupt conduct to the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

Council's Chief Executive Officer can be contacted by phone 9748 9924.

Mayor

If you are making a report about the Chief Executive Officer, you should make your report to the Mayor. They are responsible for:

- deciding if a report is a public interest disclosure
- determining what needs to be done next, including referring it to other authorities
- deciding what needs to be done to correct the problem that has been identified.
- dealing with disclosures made under Council's Code of Conduct in accordance with the Code of Conduct procedures

The Mayor must make sure there are systems in place in the Council to support and protect people who report wrongdoing.

If the report is about the Chief Executive Officer, the Mayor is also responsible for referring actual or suspected corrupt conduct to the ICAC.

The Mayor can be contacted by phone 9748 9924 or email: mayor@strathfield.nsw.gov.au

Disclosures coordinator

The Disclosures Coordinator has a central role in dealing with reports made by staff and councillors. They receive them, assess them, and refer them to the people within or contracted by Council to be dealt with appropriately.

Council's Disclosure Coordinator is the Council's General Counsel, who can be contacted by phone 9748 9963 or email tellus@strathfield.nsw.gov.au

Disclosures officers

Disclosures officers are responsible for receiving, forwarding and/or dealing with reports made in accordance with this policy.

Council's Disclosure Officer is the Director Corporate and Financial Services, who can be contacted by phone 9748 9637 or email tellus@strathfield.nsw.gov.au.

2.9 Who can receive a report outside of Council

Staff and councillors are encouraged to report wrongdoing within Strathfield Council, but internal reporting is not your only option. If you follow the guidance below, you can make a public interest disclosure to:

- an investigating authority. If your report is about both the general manager and the Mayor, you may wish to consider making the report to an investigating authority.
- a Member of Parliament or a journalist, but only in limited circumstances outlined below.

2.9.1 Investigating authorities

The PID Act lists a number of investigating authorities in NSW that staff and councillors can report wrongdoing to and the categories of wrongdoing each authority can deal with. In relation to council, these authorities are:

- the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) — for corrupt conduct
- the Ombudsman — for maladministration
- the Director-General of the Office of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet — for disclosures about local government agencies
- the Information Commissioner — for disclosures about a government information contravention.

You should contact the relevant authority for advice about how to make a disclosure to them. Contact details for each investigating authority are provided at the end of this policy.

You should be aware that it is very likely the investigating authority will discuss the case with Council. We will make every effort to assist and cooperate with the investigating authority to ensure the matter is dealt with appropriately and there is a satisfactory outcome. We will also provide appropriate support and assistance to individuals who report wrongdoing to an investigating authority.

2.9.2 Members of Parliament or journalists

To have the protections of the PID Act, a person reporting wrongdoing to a Member of Parliament (MP) or a journalist must have already made substantially the same report to one of the following:

- the General Manager
- a person nominated in this policy
- an investigating authority in accordance with the PID Act.

Also, Council or investigating authority that received the report must have either:

- decided not to investigate the matter
- decided to investigate the matter, but not completed the investigation within six months of the original report
- investigated the matter but not recommended any action as a result
- not told the person who made the report, within six months of the report being made, whether the matter will be investigated.

Most importantly, to be protected under the PID Act, if you report wrongdoing to an MP or a journalist you will need to be able to prove that you have reasonable grounds for believing that the disclosure is substantially true and that it is in fact substantially true.

If you report wrongdoing to a person or an organisation that is not listed above, you will not be protected under the PID Act. This may mean you will be in breach of legal obligations or Council's code of conduct, for example, disclosing confidential information.

For more information about reporting wrongdoing outside Strathfield Council, contact the Disclosures Coordinator or the NSW Ombudsman's Public Interest Disclosures Unit. Their contact details are provided at the end of this policy.

2.10 Feedback to the individual who reported wrongdoing

The individual who reported wrongdoing will be told what is happening in response to their report. When you make a report, you will be given:

- an acknowledgement that your disclosure has been received
- the timeframe for when you will receive further updates

- the name and contact details of the people who can tell you what is happening.

Council will provide an acknowledgement letter and a copy of this policy within ten working days after you have made your report. We will attempt to get this information to you within two working days from the date you make your report.

After a decision is made about how your report will be dealt with, you will be given:

- information about the action that will be taken in response to your report
- likely timeframes for any investigation
- information about the resources available within Council to handle any concerns you may have
- information about external agencies and services you can access for support.

This information will be given to you within 10 working days from the date you make your report. During any investigation, you will be given:

- information on the ongoing nature of the investigation
- information about the progress of the investigation and reasons for any delay
- advice if your identity needs to be disclosed for the purposes of investigating the matter, and an opportunity to talk about this.

At the end of any investigation, you will be given:

- enough information to show that adequate and appropriate action was taken and/or is proposed to be taken in response to your disclosure and any problem that was identified
- advice about whether you will be involved as a witness in any further matters, such as disciplinary or criminal proceedings.

Behaviour of all people involved in the PID process needs to adhere to Council's Code of Conduct.

A breach of the Code of Conduct could result in disciplinary action.

3.0 Protection against reprisals

The PID Act provides protection for people reporting wrongdoing by imposing penalties on anyone who takes detrimental action substantially in reprisal for them making the public interest disclosure. It may also be a breach of the council's code of conduct.

Strathfield Council will not tolerate any reprisal action against a person who report wrongdoing. The criminal penalties that can be imposed include imprisonment or

finances. Detrimental action is also misconduct that justifies disciplinary action. People who take detrimental action against someone who has made a disclosure can also be required to pay damages for any loss suffered by that person.

Detrimental action means action causing, comprising or involving any of the following:

- injury, damage or loss
- intimidation or harassment
- discrimination, disadvantage or adverse treatment in relation to employment
- dismissal from, or prejudice in, employment
- disciplinary proceedings.

3.1 Responding to reprisals

Strathfield Council will act to protect those who report wrongdoing from reprisals.

When a report is received, we will ensure that a thorough risk assessment is conducted. This will identify any risks to the member of staff or councillor who reported the wrongdoing, as well as strategies to deal with those risks.

If you believe that detrimental action has been or is being taken against you or someone else who has reported wrongdoing in reprisal for making a report, you should tell your supervisor, the Disclosures Coordinator or the Chief Executive Officer immediately, or in the case of an allegation of reprisal action by the Chief Executive Officer, the Mayor.

All supervisors must report any suspicions they have that reprisal action against a staff member is occurring, or any reports that are made to them, to the Disclosures Coordinator or the General Manager, or in the case of an allegation of reprisal by the Chief Executive Officer, to the Mayor.

If the Disclosures Coordinator becomes aware of or reasonably suspects that reprisal action is or has been taken against a person who has made a disclosure, they will ensure that the matter is reported under Council's Code of Conduct and dealt with in accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct procedures.

If you report reprisal action, you will be kept informed of the progress of any investigation and the outcome. The Chief Executive Officer may issue specific directions to help protect against reprisals, including:

- issuing warnings to those alleged to have taken reprisal action against the individual who made the disclosure
- relocating the member of staff who made the disclosure or an officer the subject of the allegations within the current workplace

- transferring the member of staff who made the disclosure or the staff member who is the subject of the allegations to another position for which they are qualified
- granting the member of staff who made the disclosure or the subject officer leave of absence during the investigation of the disclosure.

In relation to staff who make reports, such directions will only be made if the member of staff agrees to it. The disclosures coordinator will make it clear to other staff that this action was taken in consultation with the staff member and with management support – and it is not a punishment.

If you have reported wrongdoing and feel that any reprisal action is not being dealt with effectively, contact the Ombudsman, the ICAC, or the Chief Executive of the Office of Local Government, depending on the type of wrongdoing you reported. Contact details for all these investigating authorities are included at the end of this policy.

3.2 Protection against legal action

If you make a disclosure in accordance with the PID Act, you will not be subject to any liability and no action, claim or demand can be taken against you for making the disclosure. You will not have breached any confidentiality or secrecy obligations and you will have the defence of absolute privilege in defamation.

3.3 Support for those reporting wrongdoing

Council will make sure that staff who have reported wrongdoing, regardless of whether they have made a public interest disclosure, are provided with access to any professional support they may need as a result of the reporting process – such as stress management, counselling services, legal or career advice.

Council has staff that will provide support for those who report wrongdoing such as the Disclosures Coordinator and Disclosures Officer. They are responsible for initiating and coordinating support, particularly to those who are suffering any form of reprisal.

All supervisors must notify the Disclosures Coordinator if they believe a staff member is suffering any detrimental action as a result of disclosing wrongdoing.

3.4 Sanctions for making false or misleading disclosures

It is important that all staff and councillors are aware that it is a criminal offence under the PID Act to willfully make a false or misleading statement when reporting wrongdoing. It may also be a breach of Council's Code of Conduct and may result in disciplinary action. In the case of councillors, such disciplinary action may be taken under the misconduct provisions of the *Local Government Act 1993* and may include suspension or disqualification from civic office.

3.5 Support for the subject of a report

Council is committed to ensuring people who are the subject of a report of wrongdoing are treated fairly and reasonably. If you are the subject of a report, you will be:

- treated fairly and impartially
- told your rights and obligations under our policies and procedures
- kept informed during any investigation
- given the opportunity to respond to any allegation made against you
- told the result of any investigation.

4.0 Review

This Policy will be reviewed by Council every two years. For any advice or guidance about this review, contact the NSW Ombudsman's Public Interest Disclosures Unit.

5.0 More information

More information around public interest disclosures is available on the Council website or Council staff intranet. Staff and councillors can also access advice and guidance from the Disclosures Coordinator and the NSW Ombudsman's website at www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

6.0 Resources

The contact details for external investigating authorities that staff and councillors can make a public interest disclosure to or seek advice from are listed below.

For disclosures about corrupt conduct:

Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC)
Phone: 02 8281 5999
Toll free: 1800 463 909
Tel. typewriter (TTY): 02 8281 5773
Facsimile: 02 9264 5364
Email: icac@icac.nsw.gov.au
Web: www.icac.nsw.gov.au
Address: Level 7, 255 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000

For disclosures about maladministration:

NSW Ombudsman
Phone: 02 9286 1000
Toll free (outside Sydney metro): 1800 451 524
Facsimile: 02 9283 2911
Email: nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au
Web: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au
Address: Level 24, 580 George Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000.

<p>For disclosures about breaches of the GIPA Act: Information and Privacy Commissioner Toll free: 1800 472 679 Email: ipcinfo@ipc.nsw.gov.au Web: www.ipc.nsw.gov.au Address: Level 17, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000</p>	<p>For disclosures about council: Director-General, Office of Local Government Phone: 02 4428 4100 Tel. typewriter (TTY): 02 4428 4209 Facsimile: 02 4428 4199 Email: olg@olg.nsw.gov.au Web: www.olg.nsw.gov.au Address: 5 O'Keefe Avenue, Nowra, NSW 2541</p>
<p>For disclosures about police misconduct: Police Integrity Commission (PIC) Phone: 02 9321 6700 Toll free: 1800 657 079 Facsimile: 02 9321 6799 Email: contactus@pic.nsw.gov.au Web: www.pic.nsw.gov.au Address: Level 3, 111 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000</p>	

Document History

Date	Details	Council Meeting Date
6 September 2011	Review due to Amendment of Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994 and issue of NSW Ombudsman guidelines.	Council resolution 141/11
6 June 2014	Reviewed with NSW Ombudsman model internal reporting policy	Council resolution 128/14
30 July 2015	Administrative amendment	
2 September 2017	Periodic Review	
15 November 2018	Update reporting officers and reporting details	CEO
September 2020	Review	CEO
June 2021	Review	CEO/Mayor