



Raising concerns in the workplace

AGRI-FOOD
& BIOSCIENCES
INSTITUTE

Raising a Concern Policy
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afbi

RAISING A CONCERN POLICY

The purpose of this policy is to outline the procedures for reporting disclosures about potential wrongdoing, risk or malpractice which might be taking place within AFBI.

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Version Control

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Version 3.0	18 Mar 2016	Inclusion of version control section. Inclusion of Appendix 1 – summary flowchart, related documents and contact details
Version 4.0	10 Nov 2017	Review and Reissue
Version 5.0	26 Jun 2018	Updated details for raising a whistleblowing concern externally
Version 6.0	30 Sept 2021	Review against current best practice and update in references and in AFBI policy format.
Version 7.0	31 May 2024	Reviewed and updated to reflect DAERA Raising a Concern Policy v1.0 (28 March 2023). Revised processes and responsibilities. Contact details updated. Templates refreshed. Approved by Board 2 July 2024

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1 Purpose of policy

Zero Tolerance

AFBI is committed to the highest possible standards of openness, probity and accountability in the delivery of its services. Whilst AFBI has a wide range of governance procedures in place unfortunately wrongdoing, abuse and malpractice may still occur. AFBI is committed to tackling the issue and operates a zero-tolerance attitude to any malpractice, abuse or wrongdoing.

AFBI is committed to develop a culture where raising a concern is regarded as natural and routine. When concerns arise, AFBI will respond appropriately, correcting failures and learning lessons.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is:

- to encourage and enable members of staff to raise concerns relating to disclosures about serious malpractice, abuse, neglect or wrongdoing, notably when the interests of others or AFBI are at risk - at an early stage and in the right way, rather than overlook and ignore a problem
- to reassure staff that they can raise genuine allegations or concerns about potential wrongdoing in confidence, through a clear internal reporting process, without putting their position at risk, fear of victimisation, discrimination or disadvantage
- to provide guidance on how to deal with disclosures received from members of the public who may have concerns
- to outline the procedures for reporting disclosures about potential wrongdoing which might be taking place within AFBI

Whistleblowing

Raising a Concern, often referred to as “whistleblowing,” refers to someone drawing attention to a suspected risk, danger, malpractice, wrongdoing or illegality in or by AFBI. The [Northern Ireland Audit Office \(NIAO\) Raising Concerns Good Practice Guide](#) identifies that there is some confusion over the term “whistleblowing” but it is essentially the action of raising a concern.

2 Scope of Policy

2.1 Who does this policy apply to?

This policy invites those who may have a concern in relation to any activity within AFBI to come forward and voice those concerns.

This includes staff, (permanent, temporary, visiting workers, students) and Non-Executive Board members, alongside others that AFBI deals with (e.g. consultants, stakeholders, contractors and volunteers).

This policy should also be applied if a concern is received from a member of the public, where they may have witnessed or have concerns about alleged wrongdoing, corruption, fraud and malpractice within AFBI and/or involving AFBI officials.

2.2 What types of concern can I raise under this policy?

You can raise a concern about any issue relating to suspected or actual malpractice, risk, abuse or wrongdoing within AFBI which you feel should be disclosed in the public interest.

You need only have a reasonable belief that the issue has occurred, is occurring, or is likely to occur in the future. It is best to raise the concern as early as possible, even if it is only a suspicion, to allow the matter to be investigated promptly. You do not need to have evidence or proof of wrongdoing. If you have an honest belief, it does not matter if you are mistaken.

The following list is not exhaustive, but illustrates the types of concerns that you can raise:

- health and safety risks, either to the public or other employees
- any unlawful act, (e.g. theft)
- the unauthorised use of public funds (e.g. expenditure for improper purpose)
- maladministration (e.g. not adhering to procedures, negligence)
- failure to safeguard personal and/or sensitive information (data protection)
- damage to the environment (e.g. pollution)
- fraud and corruption (e.g. to give or receive any gift/reward as a bribe)
- the abuse of children and/or vulnerable adults (physical or psychological)
- any deliberate concealment of information tending to show any of the above

2.3 What type of concern can I NOT raise under this policy?

This guidance does not deal with:

1. **AFBI's performance or standards of service** – these are set out in separate guidance
2. **Personal grievances or dissatisfaction in respect of employment issues unless a member of staff's particular case is in the public interest** - issues which affect staff personally, such as a breach of their individual employment rights or bullying, should be dealt with using the various policies and procedures contained in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Handbook and AFBI's Human Resource policies and procedures.
3. **Fraud** - AFBI will deal with the concern by referring to the Counter-Fraud Policy Statement and Fraud Response Plan.
4. **Misconduct in Research** - AFBI will follow AFBI's Research Misconduct Policy.

2.4 Who can I contact if I'm unsure?

Line Manager

If you are unsure if your concern falls within the scope of this guidance, speak with your line manager.

AFBI Designated Officer

If you prefer you can seek advice from the AFBI Designated Officer (see section 7.1 for contact details).

Independent Advice

Alternatively, you can contact Protect, a charity specialising in providing advice for whistleblowers, for independent advice at www.protect-advice.org.uk (see section 7.3 for contact details).

3 Raising a concern

3.1 Why should I raise a concern?

The decision to raise a concern can be difficult. However, reporting a matter promptly can reduce the potential for financial loss, avoid reputational damage and stop an abuse of position.

You are not required to have firm evidence before raising a concern, merely a reasonable suspicion of wrongdoing. Once you raise a concern AFBI will investigate it. Remember if in doubt – Speak Out!

The benefits to AFBI include:

- enabling the Department to identify wrongdoing as early as possible
- exposing weak or flawed processes or procedures which make the Department vulnerable to loss, criticism or legal action
- ensuring critical information is passed to the right people who can deal with the concerns
- avoiding financial loss and inefficiency
- maintaining a positive reputation
- reducing the risk to the environment or the health and safety of staff or the wider community
- improving accountability
- deterring employees from engaging in improper conduct

3.2 Raising a concern internally

Confidentiality

If you want to raise the matter in confidence, you should confirm this at the outset so that appropriate arrangements can be made. If someone wishes to raise concerns confidentially, either from the outset or at any stage during the process, we will do all that we can to ensure that your confidentiality and anonymity is maintained.

Evidence

Please remember that you do not need to have firm evidence of wrongdoing before raising a concern. However, we would ask that you explain as fully as you can the information or circumstances that give rise to your concern.

Process

Step one If you have a concern, raise it first with your line manager or with their immediate manager (if preferred you may raise it with your Head of Branch/department). This may be done orally or in writing, but you are recommended to follow up any verbal disclosure in writing. Your manager will liaise with the AFBI Designated Officer to consider and agree the way forward.

Step two If, for whatever reason, you feel that raising a concern with your line manager or their immediate manager is not appropriate or has not worked, raise the matter with the AFBI Designated Officer (see section 7.1 for contact details).

Step three If the above channels have been followed and you believe there is an ongoing risk, or if you feel the matter is so serious that you

cannot discuss it with your line management you should contact the AFBI CEO, Dr Stanley McDowell, who can be contacted as follows:

- ① +44 (0) 2890 255687
- ✉ stanley.mcdowell@afbi.gov.uk
- 📄 Dr Stanley McDowell, CEO, Agri Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI), Finance and Corporate Affairs Division, 18A Newforge Lane Belfast BT9 5PX

Alternatively, you can contact the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, Mr Tom Wright:

- ① +44 (0) 7710 001600
- ✉ tom.wright@afbini.gov.uk
- ① Mr Tom Wright, Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, Agri Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI), Finance and Corporate Affairs Division, 18A Newforge Lane Belfast BT9 5PX

or the Head of Internal Audit, Mr Brian Clerkin:

- ① +44 (0) 2890 249222
- ✉ Brian.clerkin@asmbelfast.com
- ① Mr Brian Clerkin, Head of Internal Audit, Agri Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI), Finance and Corporate Affairs Division, 18A Newforge Lane Belfast BT9 5PX

Independent advice

Protect, a charitable organisation, provides free, impartial and confidential advice on the concern you may have. For more information, you can visit their website at www.protect-advice.org.uk (see section 7.3 for contact details).

3.3 Raising a concern directly with DAERA

AFBI would prefer to hear about your concerns directly but recognises that there may be circumstances in which staff may instead wish to report a serious wrongdoing to an outside body. Indeed, AFBI would rather staff raise a matter elsewhere than not at all.

If, for whatever reason, you feel that raising a concern within AFBI is not appropriate or has not worked, you can raise the matter with the DAERA Designated Officer,

Declan McCarney, Head of Governance and EU Funding Branch:

- 📞 Extn 20915
- 📧 designatedofficer@daera-ni.gov.uk
(the Designated Officer mailbox is monitored by a small team within Governance and EU Funding Branch)

3.4 Raising a concern externally

If you feel unable to raise a whistleblowing concern internally or have done so but feel that the matter has not been adequately addressed, you have the option of approaching an external organisation, known as a 'prescribed person'. A full list of prescribed persons and organisations, and the issues they are prescribed to deal with, is available on the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) website at: http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/index/contact_us/whistleblowing_disclsoures.htm

For example, you may raise concerns about:

- the proper conduct of public business
- value for money
- fraud and corruption

You can raise concerns with NIAO:

- 📞 028 9025 1000
- 📧 raisingconcern@niauditoffice.gov.uk
- 📍 The Comptroller and Auditor General, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 106 University Street. BELFAST BT7 1EU

Independent advice

Protect, a charitable organisation, provides free, impartial and confidential advice on the concern you may have. For more information, you can visit their website at www.protect-advice.org.uk (see section 7.3 for contact details).

3.5 Concerns raised by the Public/Third Parties

Members of the public may report concerns about possible wrongdoing within AFBI directly to the AFBI Designated Officer. Members of the public can also raise a concern orally or in writing to the CEO. Raising a Concern Guidance is available on the internet for the public or third parties.

Staff must be ready to recognise when a concern has been raised by a member of the public through any other channel. This may be in writing or orally, and may come through any official, or through an information line or a general AFBI contact address. Remember that anonymous disclosures should not be treated any

differently. They should be taken seriously and acted upon accordingly and recorded.

When dealing with a telephone call from a member of the public who wishes to raise a concern, it is important to have a positive and encouraging attitude towards the caller and respect the caller's right to remain anonymous if that is their preference. You should obtain and record as much detail as possible about their concern and where necessary probe the caller to be more specific about their concerns.

If the concern does not fall into a line of business concern it should be discussed with your line manager and brought to the attention of the AFBI Designated Officer for further consideration and action.

4 Line of Business Concerns (Business as Usual)

Line managers and business areas dealing with issues and concerns relating to enforcement and protection (e.g. environment and animal welfare) should consider these issues and concerns as normal line of business activity/Business as Usual (BAU).

Where the issue needs escalated or "red flagged," then staff should discuss the issue with their line manager and follow this guidance.

Criteria for Escalation or "Red Flags"

On occasions there will be a need to escalate a concern received in the normal line of business so that appropriate action can be taken. The criteria or instances of "red flags" that may warrant an escalation of a concern raised under normal line of business are:

- an issue is arising on more than one occasion and there is an identifiable trend
- there is a significant and/or immediate risk to public health
- the issue requires input from business areas within or outside AFBI
- there is significant and/or immediate risk for reputational damage to AFBI

The criteria are not an exhaustive list. However, it is important to consider the criteria in conjunction with policy and procedures that exist within the business area and discussing the issues with line management. For example, in some cases multiple concerns may be received in relation to an animal welfare or environmental issue but it may not need to be escalated.

In all cases of concerns about serious malpractice, abuse, neglect or wrongdoing within AFBI, line managers should contact the AFBI Designated Officer.

Recording

If a line of business concern is deemed appropriate for escalation, the following information should be recorded and escalated to allow progression to be monitored, tracked and reviewed, as necessary via the Central Register:

- date the concern/issue was identified
- staff member escalating the concern
- description of the concern/issue
- why is the concern/issue being escalated
- who is the concern/issue being escalated to
- proposed actions and timeframes and progress against these
- independent reviewer comments

5 What we will do when we receive a concern

The AFBI Designated Officer

When an allegation of wrongdoing is received in a business area, the matter should be immediately brought to the attention of the AFBI Designated Officer.

The AFBI Designated Officer will consider how the matter should be dealt with and whether the matter falls within the remit of this Raising a Concern policy or other relevant policies such as Complaints Policy, Enforcement Policy (Line of Business), Fraud Policy or Grievance Policy.

The Nominated Review Officer

Should it be determined that a concern is to be investigated, overall responsibility for ensuring this will be allocated to a Nominated Review Officer and the person who originally raised the concern will be told who that is. The most appropriate Nominated Review Officer will be agreed by the appropriate Divisional or Group Director and the AFBI Designated Officer. The Nominated Review Officer will ensure all necessary records are maintained throughout the investigation process, including providing updates on the case to the AFBI Designated Officer.

Communicating with you

The AFBI Designated Officer will tell you:

- if your concern better aligns with other procedures and pass this to the appropriate team
- what action may be appropriate

The Nominated Review Officer may:

- contact you to discuss the concern
- seek to obtain further information
- agree feedback arrangements

If the Nominated Review Officer writes to you or speaks to you seeking further information, it is important that you respond as quickly as possible as this will allow the concern to be dealt with in a timely matter. In cases where you have not responded after 14 calendar days, we will issue a reminder. However, if you do not respond within 30 calendar days of that reminder, we may close the case. In that instance we will write to advise you of closure actions.

AFBI will investigate your concern in accordance with its procedures and provide you with written feedback on the outcome of any investigation.

While we will respond to all concerns, we cannot guarantee that the outcome of the investigation will be what you wish or expect. We will, however, strive to ensure that all cases are managed fairly and properly.

6 Protection for Staff Raising as Concern

AFBI will ensure that anyone employed by it can confidentially raise concerns which relate to possible illegal or improper behaviour that they have witnessed, or suspect is taking place within AFBI, without putting their position at risk.

Protection for staff raising a concern (Protected Disclosures) are set out in [The Public Interest Disclosure \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#) ('the Order'), which protects workers who 'blow the whistle' in relation to wrongdoing. The Order amends the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and makes provision about the kinds of disclosures which may be protected; the circumstances in which such disclosures are protected; and the persons who may be protected.

The Department for the Economy has produced a short [guide](#) to the provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure (NI) Order 1998, which applies to AFBI as it does to other employers. The guide includes information on making qualifying disclosures to the employer or via internal procedures; legal adviser; Minister and prescribed person. The guide provides further guidance on the role of the prescribed person (organisation).

The Order sets out what disclosures qualify for protection. A "qualifying disclosure" means any disclosure of information which, in the reasonable belief of the worker making the disclosure, tends to show one or more of the following:

- that a criminal offence has been committed, is being committed or is likely to be committed
- that a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which he is subject
- that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur
- that the health or safety of any individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered
- that the environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged
- that information tending to show any matter falling within any one of the preceding sub-paragraphs has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed

AFBI or the law cannot extend protection to someone who seeks to make vexatious, baseless or repeated complaints about others or someone who maliciously raises a matter which they know or should reasonably believe is untrue. False and malicious allegations made in the circumstances without any reasonable belief will be treated as a serious disciplinary offence.

7 Roles & Responsibilities

7.1 All staff

All staff members are encouraged to raise concerns relating to disclosures about serious malpractice, abuse, neglect or wrongdoing, notably when the interests of others or AFBI are at risk - at an early stage and in the right way, rather than overlook and ignore a problem. Guidance and procedures in this document should be followed.

7.2 Line Managers

Line Managers must fulfil their responsibilities in a way that will support and encourage a member of staff to provide them with full details of the concern. You should ensure the member of staff understands the process that will be followed.

The Line Manager must immediately bring the concern to the AFBI Designated Officer for consideration and agreement on the way forward.

Further guidance and procedures are detailed in Raising A Concern – Policy & Procedures for Management.

7.3 AFBI Designated Officer

The AFBI Designated Officer is responsible for managing the processes for dealing with concerns.

When an allegation of wrongdoing is received in a business area, the matter should be immediately brought to the attention of the AFBI Designated Officer. The AFBI Designated Officer will consider how the matter should be dealt with and whether the matter falls within the remit of this Raising a Concern policy or other relevant policies such as Complaints Policy, Enforcement Policy (Line of Business), Fraud Policy or Grievance Policy.

The AFBI Designated Officer is also a 'speak-up champion and responsible for raising general awareness about the value of receiving and responding to concerns.

Further guidance and procedures are detailed in Raising A Concern – Policy & Procedures for Management.

The AFBI Designated Officer is the Head of Governance & Performance, Glenn Montgomery, who can be contacted as follows:

- 📞 +44 (0) 2890255494; Mobile 07917848970
- 💻 glenn.montgomery@afbini.gov.uk
- 📄 Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance & Performance, Agri Food & Biosciences Institute (AFBI), Finance and Corporate Affairs Division, 18A Newforge Lane Belfast BT9 5PX

7.4 Nominated Review Officer

Should it be determined that a concern is to be investigated, overall responsibility for ensuring this will be allocated to a Nominated Review Officer and the person who originally raised the concern will be told who that is.

The most appropriate Nominated Review Officer will be agreed by the appropriate Divisional or Group Director and the AFBI Designated Officer.

The Nominated Review Officer will ensure all necessary records are maintained throughout the investigation process, including providing updates on the case to the AFBI Designated Officer.

The Nominated Review Officer may contact you to discuss the concern, seek to obtain further information and agree feedback arrangements.

Further guidance and procedures are detailed in Raising A Concern – Policy & Procedures for Management.

7.5 Protect

Protect, a charitable organisation, provides free, impartial and confidential advice on the concern you may have.

For more information, you can visit their website at www.protect-advice.org.uk.

☰ Protect, The Green House, 244-254 Cambridge Heath Road, London
E2 9DA
📞 Tel: 020 3117 2520

8 Further information:

NICS [Raising a Concern a Policy Framework](#) was published on the 25 January 2023 which provides guidance on: What are 'concerns', What is not a 'concern', Confidentiality and anonymity; Independent advice; How members of the public can raise a concern; How members of staff can raise a concern; How Concerns will be handled; Designated Officers; Concerns received regarding a Department's Arm's Length Body (ALB); and 'Speak-Up Champions. This guidance is intended to supplement this framework, not replace or replicate it, and should be read and considered in conjunction with it.

Further guidance and procedures for Line Managers are detailed in 'Raising A Concern – Policy & Procedures for Management'.

9 Monitoring and Review

This policy will be reviewed every three years. Interim reviews may also be prompted by feedback, challenge or change in guidance or legislation.

10 Glossary

AFBI	Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute
BAU	Business as Usual
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office

ANNEX A – PROCESS MAP FOR HANDLING A CONCERN

