



WEDDIN SHIRE COUNCIL

POLICY NUMBER: 14.22.4

POLICY FOR PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLOSURES

Adopted: 17 August 2017

POLICY FOR PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLOSURES (NO. 14.22.4)

1. **Title:** Policy for Public Interest Disclosures

2. **Number:** Policy Number 14.22.4

3. **Purpose:**

To protect by the Act, a disclosure must be made by a member of staff or Councillor to:

- an investigating authority;
- the General Manager; or
- to another nominated officer of the Council in accordance with the Internal Reporting System established under this Policy for the purposes of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act*.

This Policy establishes an internal reporting system for the reporting of disclosures of corrupt conduct, maladministration or serious and substantial waste of public money by the Council, its staff, and Councillors. The system enables such internal disclosures to be made to the Disclosure Co-ordinator, a nominated Disclosure Officer, or the Mayor, as an alternative to the General Manager.

The policy is designed to complement normal communication channels between supervisors and staff. Staff are encouraged to continue to raise appropriate matters at any time with their supervisors, but as an alternative have the option of making a protected disclosure in accordance with this policy.

4. **Application:**

The policy applies to both council staff and councillors, permanent employees, whether full-time or part-time, temporary or casual employees, consultants, individual contractors working for the council.

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 the council.

Staff should be encouraged to report known and suspected wrongdoing within your council. They should be reminded that this policy is just one of several relating to grievances and complaints, and provided with links and relevant information for the other policies. This should include the council code of conduct.

Staff should also be encouraged to support those who have made disclosures, as well as protect and maintain their confidentiality. They must not victimise or harass anyone who has made a disclosure.

5. **Associated legislation and other references:**

Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994.

6. Policy

6.1 What should be reported

You should report any wrongdoing you see within the Weddin Shire Council. Reports about the four categories of serious wrongdoing – corrupt conduct, maladministration, serious and substantial waste of public money, and government information contravention – will be dealt with under the PID Act as protected disclosures and according to this policy.

i. Corrupt conduct

Corrupt conduct is the dishonest or partial exercise of official functions by a public official.

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 member of the public influencing or trying to influence a public official to use their position in a way that is dishonest, biased or breaches public trust.

ii. 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.

This could include:

- making a decision and/or taking action that is unlawful
- refusing to grant someone a licence for reasons that are not related to the merits of their application.

iii. 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.

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.

iv. Government information contravention

A government information contravention is a failure to properly fulfil functions under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* (GIPA Act).

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.

v. Other wrongdoing

Although reports about the previous four categories of conduct can attract the specific protections of the PID Act, you should report all activities or incidents that you believe are wrong.

These 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 the Weddin Shire Council's policies.

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

6.2 When will a report be protected

The Weddin Shire Council will support any staff who report wrongdoing. For a report to be considered a protected 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 one or more of the following:
 - a position nominated in this policy – see section 9 (b), (c) & (d) below
 - the General Manager
 - one of the investigating authorities nominated in the PID Act – see section 10 below

Reports by staff and councillors will not be considered to be protected disclosures if they:

- mostly question the merits of government policy, including the policy of the governing body of the council.
- are made with the sole or substantial motive of avoiding dismissal or other disciplinary action.

6.3 How to make a report

You can report wrongdoing in writing or verbally. You are 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 staff member should keep a copy of this record.

If you are concerned about being seen making a report, ask to meet in a discreet location away from the workplace.

6.4 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 the Weddin Shire 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.

6.5 Maintaining confidentiality

The Weddin Shire 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.

We are 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, you should only discuss your report with those dealing with it. This will include the disclosures coordinator and the General Manager. If you discuss your report more broadly, you may affect the outcome of any investigation.

6.6 Who can receive a report within the Weddin Shire Council

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

Any supervisor who receives a report that they believe may be a protected disclosure must refer the staff member making the report to one of the positions listed below.

If you are council staff and your report involves a councillor, you should make it to the General Manager or the Mayor. If you are a councillor and your report is about another councillor, you should make it to the General Manager or the Mayor.

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The following positions are the only staff within the Weddin Shire Council who can receive a protected disclosure.

a. General Manager

You can report wrongdoing directly to the General Manager. The General Manager is responsible for:

- deciding if a report is a protected 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.

The General Manager must make sure there are systems in place in the Weddin Shire Council to support and protect staff who report wrongdoing.

They are also responsible for referring actual or suspected corrupt conduct to the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

b. Mayor

If you are making a report about the General Manager, you should make your report to the Mayor. They are responsible for:

- deciding if a report is a protected 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.

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

If the report is about the General Manager, the Mayor is also responsible for referring actual or suspected corrupt conduct to the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

c. Disclosures coordinator

The disclosures coordinator has a central role in dealing with reports made by staff. They receive them, assess them, and refer them to the people within the Weddin Shire Council who can deal with them appropriately.

d. Disclosures officers

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

6.7 Who can receive a report outside of the Weddin Shire Council

Staff are encouraged to report wrongdoing within the Weddin Shire Council, but internal reporting is not your only option. If you follow the guidance below, your report can still be a protected disclosure.

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You can choose to make your report to an investigating authority. You can do this first, or at any stage after your initial report to the Weddin Shire Council. If your report is about the General Manager or the Mayor, you should consider making it to an investigating authority.

You can also choose to make a report to a Member of Parliament or a journalist, but only in limited circumstances.

a. Investigating authorities

The PID Act lists a number of investigating authorities in NSW that staff 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 Police Integrity Commission (PIC) — for police misconduct
- the PIC Inspector — for disclosures about the PIC or its staff
- the Division of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet — for serious and substantial waste in local government (reports about serious and substantial waste in State government agencies should be made to the Auditor General)
- the ICAC Inspector — for disclosures about the ICAC or its staff
- 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 the Weddin Shire 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 staff who report wrongdoing to an investigating authority.

b. Members of Parliament or journalists

To have the protections of the PID Act, staff 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, the Weddin Shire 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 Weddin Shire Council code of conduct – by, for example, disclosing confidential information.

For more information about reporting wrongdoing outside the Weddin Shire 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.

6.8 Feedback to staff who report wrongdoing

Staff who report 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.

This information will be given 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 Weddin Shire 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.

6.9 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 protected disclosure.

The Weddin Shire Council will not tolerate any reprisal action against staff who report wrongdoing. The criminal penalties that can be imposed include imprisonment or fines. 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.

a. Responding to reprisals

The Weddin Shire Council will act to protect staff 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 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 General Manager immediately.

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.

If the disclosures coordinator becomes aware of reprisal action against a person who has made a disclosure, they will:

- ensure a senior and experienced member of staff, who has not been involved in dealing with the initial disclosure, will investigate the suspected reprisal
- give the results of that investigation to the General Manager for a decision

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- give the results of that investigation to the Mayor for a decision if the allegation of reprisal action is about the General Manager
- if it has been established that reprisal action is occurring against someone who has made a disclosure, take all steps possible to stop that activity and protect the member of staff who made the disclosure
- take appropriate disciplinary or criminal action against anyone proven to have taken or threatened any action in reprisal for making a disclosure.

If you report reprisal action, you will be kept informed of the progress of any investigation and the outcome.

The General Manager may issue specific directions to help protect against reprisals. If the allegation of reprisal action is about the General Manager, the Mayor may issue similar directions. These may include:

- issuing warnings to those alleged to have taken reprisal action against the member of staff who made the disclosure
- relocating the member of staff who made the disclosure or the subject officer within the current workplace
- transferring the member of staff who made the disclosure or the staff member who is the subject of the allegation 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.

These directions will only be taken if the member of staff who made the disclosure 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 or the ICAC – depending on the type of wrongdoing you reported. Contact details for all these investigating authorities are included at the end of this policy.

b. 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.

6.10 Support for those reporting wrongdoing

The Weddin Shire Council will make sure that staff who have reported wrongdoing, regardless of whether they have made a protected 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.

We also have staff who will support those who report wrongdoing. They are responsible for initiating and coordinating support, particularly to those who are suffering any form of reprisal.

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

6.11 Sanctions for making false or misleading disclosures

It is important that all staff are aware that it is a criminal offence under the PID Act to wilfully make a false or misleading statement when reporting wrongdoing.

6.12 Support for the subject of a report

The Weddin Shire Council is committed to ensuring staff 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.

7. Review and Amendment

- This policy shall be reviewed by September 2017 and thereafter at four (4) yearly intervals, to ensure it meets all statutory requirements and the needs of Council.
- This policy may be amended or cancelled by Council at any time without prior notice or obligation to any employee.

8. Adoption

- This policy commences as from the date of adoption by Council, being 17 August 2017.
- This policy replaces a previous policy adopted on 15 September 2011

9. History

Version	Details
14.22.1	Adopted 16 December 1999
14.22.2	Adopted 15 September 2011
14.22.3	Adopted 21 June 2013
14.22.4	Adopted 17 August 2017