



Commissioner for **Older People**
for Northern Ireland

COPNI

Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure

(Raising Concerns)

Date Reviewed	8 th October 2025
Approved by the Accounting Officer	Siobhan Casey
Date	24/11/25
Periodic Review Date	November 2027
Version	7

1. Introduction

COPNI is committed to the highest possible standards in the delivery of its functions and services. When concerns arise, it is important that COPNI respond appropriately, correcting failures and learning lessons.

Raising a concern, often referred to as “whistleblowing”, refers to someone notifying a COPNI about something going wrong: error, risk, danger, malpractice, wrongdoing or illegality.

The purpose of this policy and procedure document is to explain how COPNI will handle any concerns raised with them, and to encourage and provide reassurance to members of the public and COPNI staff (and others) who want to raise concerns.

COPNI encourages people to raise concerns because that way we can, if necessary, put things right; the person raising a concern has performed an act of public service.

This policy sets out what we mean by ‘concerns’, and how different kinds of concerns will be dealt with.

The purpose of this guidance is:

- a) To reassure COPNI staff that they can raise genuine concerns about potential wrongdoing in confidence, through a clear internal reporting process, without putting their position at risk; and
- b) To provide arrangements through which anyone who is not a member of staff (for example members of the public and other external stakeholders) can raise concerns about the proper conduct of public business by COPNI.

The sections below explain the types of concerns covered by the Whistleblowing Policy, how staff members and members of the public can raise concerns, and how these concerns will be managed by COPNI.

Protect, a charitable organisation, provides free, impartial and confidential advice. Any person thinking of raising a concern can contact [Protect](#).

2. Types of Concerns covered

- 2.1. All of us at one time or another may have concerns about what is happening within a workplace. Raising concerns under this policy is drawing attention to something going wrong in COPNI. A whistleblowing concern is about a risk, malpractice or wrongdoing that may affect others. It could be something which adversely affects other staff, COPNI and/or the public.
- 2.2. A simple way to establish whether your concern falls under the whistleblowing policy is to consider the nature of the concern. If the concern refers to 'others' e.g. COPNI, other staff, clients, the wider public, then it is a whistleblowing concern and will be dealt with under this policy.
- 2.3. If a concern is about possible fraud, reference should be made as soon as possible to COPNI's Fraud Policy and Fraud Response Plan.
- 2.4. If the concern relates to you as an individual e.g. a personal grievance about terms of employment, pay, unfair treatment (COPNI staff – refer to COPNI's Grievance Policy), or a poor level of service received (member of the public or external stakeholder – COPNI's Complaints Policy) – this is not a whistleblowing concern.
- 2.5. Generally, a whistleblower has no self interest in the issue being raised, however each whistleblowing concern should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis to determine whether it fits within the 'whistleblowing' classification. As a general rule, a person making a complaint will be referring to their own case and/or will have some personal interest in the issue, whereas a person raising a concern does so in the public interest.
- 2.6. Similarly, whistleblowing does not cover complaints about the COPNI's performance or standards of service, for which separate procedures exist. These are set out in the COPNI's Complaints Handling Procedure.

2.7 A full list of the types of concern covered by the Whistleblowing arrangements is detailed in the [The Public Interest Disclosure \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk).

2.8 The types of concerns expected to be raised under this policy include, but are not restricted to:

- errors in the implementation or operation of policies and processes;
- 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 purposes);
- maladministration (e.g., not adhering to procedures, negligence);
- failing 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);
- endangering an individual's health and safety;
- breach of COPNI's Standards of Conduct;
- abuse of power (e.g. bullying/harassment);
- poor value for money;
- other unethical conduct; and
- deliberate concealment of information (tending to show any of the above).

- 2.8 This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to illustrate the sort of issues that may be raised and dealt with under COPNI's policies.
- 2.9 Many, if not most, of these could potentially constitute a breach of COPNI's Standards of Conduct by an individual COPNI employee, and this policy framework ought to be read alongside COPNI's Standards of Conduct Policy. If a COPNI employee believes that he or she is being required to breach the Standards of Conduct Policy, this should also be raised as a concern.
- 2.10 COPNI staff who raise a genuine concern under this policy will not be at risk of losing their job or suffering any form of mistreatment as a result. They are not required to have firm evidence before raising a concern and it does not matter if they are mistaken. However, should they raise a matter that they know to be untrue with malicious intent, then this will be regarded as a serious matter, potentially misconduct, which could result in disciplinary action.
- 2.11 COPNI does not condone, nor will it tolerate, the harassment or victimisation of anyone who raises a genuine concern within COPNI. Workers who raise such a concern about their employer are protected by law. With these assurances, it is hoped that individuals will raise their concerns openly.
- 2.12 If a member of staff expresses concerns that they are being victimised by other members of staff as a result of the concerns that they have raised, COPNI must take this seriously and ensure that appropriate action is taken.
- 2.13 If someone wishes to raise concerns confidentially, either from the outset or at any stage during the process, COPNI will do all they can to ensure that is possible. There may be circumstances where an individual's identity cannot be kept confidential (for instance, if COPNI is required to disclose it by law, to the police for example, or if the nature of the concern makes it apparent who has

raised it). If such a situation arises where confidentiality may not be maintained, then COPNI will discuss this with the person.

- 2.14 Individuals can choose to raise their concern anonymously, without giving anyone their name. Concerns raised anonymously will be considered in the same way as any other concern. Anyone considering raising concerns anonymously needs to be mindful that, if they cannot be contacted for further information or clarification, investigation of their concerns may be difficult or even impossible. There is also a chance the documents or information provided might, unknown to the COPNI, reveal the identity of the person raising a concern.
- 2.15 Access to information and documentation relating to the concern will be restricted in order to protect the identity of all those involved, including those against whom allegations are made. All personal information will be handled in line with the UK-GDPR requirements.
- 2.16 If a member of staff feels unable to raise a concern internally or has done so but feels that the matter has not been adequately addressed, they have the option of approaching an external organisation.
- 2.17 There are a number of 'prescribed persons', bodies to whom staff may report a serious concern on relevant matters with protection afforded by public interest disclosure legislation. The list can be accessed at the [The Public Interest Disclosure \(Prescribed Persons\) \(Amendment\) Order \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)
- 2.18 [Protect](#) will also be able to advise members of staff on making external disclosures and on the circumstances in which they may be able to contact an outside body.

3. Raising a Whistleblowing Concern: Members of Staff

- 3.1 It is important to understand that you do not need to have firm evidence to support your concern prior to raising it. However, you should be able to explain as fully as possible the circumstances that gave rise to your concern.
- 3.2 The Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 provides protection for workers who raise concerns. If you are a contractor, trainee, agency worker, volunteer or independent consultant working for or providing advice to COPNI you are also protected under the Order, and you should raise concerns in the same way as COPNI staff. A disclosure of information about a concern may be protected if it meets certain criteria. Not all concerns will be 'protected disclosures' under this legislation, but COPNI must be alert to the possibility. The legal definition of a protected disclosure is:

“disclosure of information which, in the reasonable belief of the worker making the disclosure, is made in the public interest and 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, or*
- *that information tending to show any matter falling within any one of the preceding paragraphs has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed.”*

3.3.1 Any concerns can be raised orally or in writing to the COPNI's Chief Executive, who acts as COPNI's Designated Officer:

COPNI Chief Executive
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast
BT2 7DP

If the concern is about the Chief Executive, the matter should be escalated orally, or in writing, to the Commissioner. Contact details are available upon request.

If the concern is about the Commissioner, you should contact the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC). COPNI will provide contact details for the Chair on request.

It should be possible for someone to escalate a concern, if they have reason to believe that the original error, risk, danger, malpractice, wrongdoing or illegality remains unchanged. In which case, they should contact DfC's Designated Officer.

3.4 COPNI recognise there may be circumstances where you consider it more appropriate to report a concern to a body outside of COPNI. COPNI's sponsoring body is the Department for Communities. Any concerns can be raised either orally or in writing to the following:

- The Head of Governance/DfC Designated Officer
Kevin Rogan
028 90 250969

- Dedicated email inbox
Raising.concerns@communities-ni.gov.uk

4. Raising a Whistleblowing Concern: Members of the Public

- 4.1 If you are not a member of COPNI staff you can raise your concern orally or in writing with COPNI's Chief Executive, who acts as COPNI's Designated Officer:

COPNI Chief Executive
Equality House
7-9 Shaftesbury Square
Belfast
BT2 7DP

If the concern is about the Chief Executive, the matter should be escalated orally, or in writing, to the Commissioner. Contact details are available upon request.

If the concern is about the Commissioner, you should contact the Chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC). COPNI will provide contact details for the Chair on request.

COPNI must also 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 an information line or general contact address.

- 4.2 COPNI recognise there may be circumstances where you consider it more appropriate to report a concern to a body outside of COPNI. COPNI's sponsoring body is the Department for Communities. Any concerns can be raised either orally or in writing to the following:

- The Head of Governance/DfC Designated Officer
Kevin Rogan

028 90 250969

- Dedicated email inbox

Raising.concerns@communities-ni.gov.uk

4.2 While the Public Interest Disclosure (NI) Order 1998 applies to workers (as defined in the Order) COPNI will endeavour, as far as possible, to apply the same principles in respect of concerns raised by non-staff members. Concerns raised will be treated in the strictest confidence. Where concerns raised lead to criminal proceedings, you may be required to give evidence in a court of law.

5. How will COPNI handle my concern?

5.1 All concerns raised will be taken seriously when they are received and must be dealt with appropriately. The same principles apply to both concerns raised by members of the public and those raised by COPNI staff and other workers.

5.2 Concerns will be handled primarily with a view to putting right anything that has gone wrong.

5.3 Once the individual has reported their concern, it will be passed to COPNI's Chief Executive, who is the Designated Officer within COPNI.

5.4 If, at the outset, the concern clearly falls more properly within COPNI's Complaints Procedure, Grievance Policy, Dignity at Work Policy, or other COPNI HR Policy; or is considered to be normal COPNI business/correspondence, the Designated Officer will advise the individual who raised the concern of this, and the issue will be passed to the appropriate business area to be handled in line with the appropriate policy.

5.4 It may not always be clear that the concern falls within one of these other procedures; COPNI's Designated Officer will assess the concern to determine what action is appropriate, for example:

- a) explaining the context of the issue may be enough to alleviate the concerns of the person raising them;
- b) minor concerns might be passed on immediately to be dealt with by line management;
- c) the facts of the case may need to be established through a more detailed consideration of the issues being raised;
- d) there may be a need for a formal investigation;
- e) a review by internal audit as part of planned audit work might be sufficient to address the issue;
- f) there may be a role for external audit in addressing the concerns raised and either providing assurance or recommending changes to working practices.

5.5 Unless the case is immediately clear (such as instances at a) and b) above, COPNI (the Designated Officer, a member of the responsible team, or the Nominated Review Officer, depending on circumstances) shall, where possible, offer the person raising the concern a meeting to discuss their concern and provide any evidence they may have. This will ensure that the concerns are fully and accurately recorded prior to any detailed consideration or investigation and that they will further discuss with/interview the individual during the investigation to establish or clarify facts.

5.6 A concern may include an allegation against an individual, or an allegation against an individual may come to light. An allegation against a member of staff may in due course need to be treated as a disciplinary matter, so the handling of any concerns will take into account the possibility that the allegations could lead to disciplinary action against an individual.

5.7 Should the Designated Officer's initial assessment conclude that the issue ought to be given more detailed consideration, the Designated Officer will engage

directly with the Department for Communities to establish appropriate next steps, including whom it appropriate to appoint as the Nominated Review Officer. This may be within the responsible business area or another business area, or it may be the Designated Officer or a member of the responsible team; the person who originally raised the concern will be told who that is when direction is provided by the Department for Communities. The purpose of this detailed consideration is to establish the facts with more certainty. The Nominated Review Officer will offer to meet the person raising the concern to discuss the concern, obtain further information if required and agree feedback arrangements insofar as that is possible. However, given the wide range of issues which can be raised under this policy it is not possible to specify here who will review / investigate the concern.

- 5.8 There may be instances where the Department for Communities believes that it is appropriate for the detailed consideration to be conducted by an official outside of COPNI, in order to manage a real or potential conflict of interests. In such a case, COPNI's Designated Officer should seek the advice of their Data Protection Officer in respect of the sharing of personal data with an external Nominated Review Officer.
- 5.9 Where the consideration of the issue by the Nominated Review Officer concludes that there is a question of individual conduct to be addressed, that Officer should engage COPNI's Head of Corporate Services.
- 5.10 The Nominated Review Officer will report back to the Designated Officer who will make the final determination on the concern raised. This may include reaching a conclusion on whether something had actually gone wrong and how COPNI should respond to the concern.
- 5.11 If the consideration of the concern also engages a question in respect of the actions of any individuals (whether at the conclusion of the consideration or

earlier), the Designated Officer shall refer the case to the appropriate line manager or team.

- 5.12 At the conclusion of any detailed consideration, if the concern was not raised anonymously, the person may be given feedback as appropriate (in writing if requested). However, there will be a limit to what feedback can be provided, especially in light of the duty of confidence owed to others and UK-GDPR requirements
- 5.13 The Designated Officer should be alive to the possibility that a case may require formal investigation by trained investigators, and this option ought to be pursued at the earliest appropriate point in order to ensure that the investigation is handled in line with best practice and meets evidential standards. The Department for Communities will advise at the outset if they believe this is the appropriate approach.

6. Roles and Responsibilities

6.1 COPNI's Designated Officer will:

- a) seek to ensure a consistent approach to the handling of concerns across COPNI;
- b) Engage immediately with the Department for Communities in respect of a new whistleblowing allegation;
- c) assess concerns to determine and direct the appropriate action;
- d) be responsible for determining COPNI's conclusion in respect of any concern raised, on the advice of a Nominated Review Officer, an investigator, the responsible team or any other partner, as they determine;
- e) be responsible for directing any matter that engages the conduct of an individual to the appropriate official or team.

- f) be responsible for the resourcing, briefing and training of the team handling concerns;
- g) secure the maintenance of the COPNI's central database of concerns, including a record of how they are handled, whether the concern was upheld, and what the outcome was;
- h) monitor concerns, analysing patterns and trends, and report to the Department for Communities and Audit and Risk Assurance Committee on the number and types of concerns being raised;
- i) advise the Department for Communities or Audit and Risk Assurance Committee on how improvements made as a result of concerns raised might be publicised.

6.2 COPNI will:

- a) receive concerns (both through business areas and through any central channel) – COPNI staff will complete the form in Annex A to capture details of the concerns;
- b) appoint a Designated Officer, who is best placed to handle the issue being raised;
- c) administer the agreed handling decisions through consultation with the Department for Communities;
- d) advise any Nominated Review Officer about their role and the requirements upon them;
- e) maintain records in respect of issues raised as concerns;
- f) compile reports and respond to questions about numbers and types of concerns.

6.3 As directed by the Department for Communities, the Designated Officer will pass the concern to a Nominated Review Officer, who will:

- a) establish, as far as possible, the facts in a case;

- b) liaise with the person raising the concern;
- c) liaise as required with legal representatives, COPNI's Human Resources team and/or Internal Audit where a case engages matters of conduct, criminality, fraud, or other significant complexity;
- d) update the Designated Officer and their team with proportionate frequency; and
- e) report their conclusions to the Designated Officer.

6.4 COPNI's Accounting Officer will ensure that there are effective arrangements to:

- to receive notice of concerns raised by staff and members of the public;
- to handle concerns received;
- to correct things that have gone wrong as identified through concerns raised; and
- to assess the effectiveness of governance and accountability controls in light of the evidence of concerns raised.

6.5 COPNI's Audit and Risk Committee will:

- seek assurance as to the effectiveness of the arrangements for handling concerns;
- be informed on a regular basis about the profile of concerns being raised (number, type, time taken to close cases, etc., as appropriate);
- assess the significance of any features and trends (as appropriate); &
- advise the Accounting Officer as to the level of assurance to be taken from the arrangements.

6.6 All staff will:

- be mindful of the value of following up any concerns that reach them, by whatever route, in order to correct something going wrong;

- pass any issues that reach them that may be treated as concerns to their line manager as soon as possible; and
- engage with their line manager and/or the Designated Officer to inform their consideration of how to treat a case.

6.7 COPNI's Chief Executive is the organisation's 'Speak-Up Champion'. They will be responsible for raising general awareness about the value of receiving and responding to concerns. They will encourage a culture of curiosity and challenge within COPNI. And they will respond effectively to concerns and to learn from instances when things go wrong. The Speak-Up Champion will lead COPNI's consideration of how improvements made as a result of concerns raised can be publicised to ensure staff see the positive value of raising concerns.

6.8 If your concern falls more properly within the Grievance Policy, Dignity at work Policy or Complaints Handling Policy, we will tell you.

6.9 Where it is considered appropriate, the matters raised may be referred to external agencies to investigate, e.g. the Police, NIAO or through some other form of independent inquiry. COPNI's Designated Officer will provide the individual with details if this is going to happen.

6.10 If the concern has not been raised anonymously, within 10 working days of a receiving a concern, COPNI's Designated Officer will write to the individual who lodged the concern:

- Acknowledging that the concern has been received;
- Telling them who is dealing with the matter and how to contact them;
- Indicating whether further assistance may be needed.

6.11 Any information you give us is greatly appreciated, will be appropriately investigated and all action deemed necessary will be taken. We will give you as

much feedback as we can, but it is important to note that there are strict legislative controls over the release of information, therefore you may not be advised of the outcome of any investigations and/or any actions taken.

- 6.12 Any concerns raised directly with the ARAC will be reviewed by the Chair. If the Chair considers it appropriate the concerns will be forwarded to COPNI's Designated Officer, and the whistleblower will be informed where this is the case. Otherwise, the Chair of ARAC will notify the Department for Communities to determine who will investigate the concerns.

7. Conclusion

COPNI cannot guarantee that the consideration and investigation of a concern will conclude in the way that the person who originally raised it may wish. Raising a concern is a public service and it is for the Department to determine the appropriate response. However, the NI Departments are committed to ensuring that all cases are handled fairly, properly and consistently.

8. Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed every two years and will be provided to the Accounting Officer and Chief Executive for approval.

9. Variation

COPNI reserves the right to vary this policy as it deems appropriate to include compliance with any legal requirements. The appropriate staff/Union(s) will be notified of any proposed variation and consulted in advance. However, in the absence of any agreement, COPNI reserves the right to vary this Policy on 4 weeks notice.

Annex A

Information Form - to be completed by staff or the general public when raising a Whistleblowing Concern

Name	
Telephone Number	
Email address	
Full details of the alleged whistleblowing concern:	

Signature:

Date: