



## **Public Interest Disclosures Procedures of Whitehorse City Council**

Established under s 58 of the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2012*

### **Information about this Document**

These Procedures have been published by Whitehorse City Council in compliance with the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2012* and the guidelines published by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC).

Requests for hard copies and further information about Whitehorse City Council's handling of the complaints or disclosures may be obtained from Council's Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator, James Thyer on 03 9262 6310 or via email at [james.thyer@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:james.thyer@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)

This document was reviewed in November 2019 and is due to be reviewed by April 2022.

## Contents

|       |  |    |
|-------|--|----|
| 1.    | About these Procedures .....   | 5  |
| 2.    | About the Act .....  | 6  |
| 3.    | Council’s Internal Reporting Structures .....  | 6  |
| 3.1   | Employees or Agents and Councillors .....  | 6  |
| 3.2   | Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator and Public Interest Disclosures Officers .....  | 7  |
| 4.    | Making a Disclosure .....  | 9  |
| 4.1   | What is a Disclosure and Who can Make a Disclosure? .....                              | 9  |
| 4.2   | How Can a Disclosure be Made? .....  | 9  |
| 4.2.1 | The Disclosure Must be Made to a Body Authorised to Receive It .....                   | 10 |
| 4.2.2 | How to Make a Disclosure to Whitehorse City Council .....                              | 10 |
| 4.3   | What Can Disclosures be Made About? .....  | 13 |
| 4.3.1 | Improper Conduct .....   | 13 |
| 4.3.2 | Detrimental Action .....   | 15 |
| 5.    | Handling Disclosures .....   | 16 |
| 5.1   | Receiving a Disclosure .....   | 16 |
| 5.2   | Assessing a Disclosure .....   | 16 |
| 5.2.1 | First Step .....   | 16 |
| 5.2.2 | Second Step .....  | 16 |
| 5.2.3 | Where Urgent Action is Required While an Assessment is Still Being Made .....          | 17 |
| 5.2.4 | Assessment Decisions .....   | 17 |
| 5.3   | Notifications .....  | 17 |
| 5.3.1 | If Council Does Not Consider the Disclosure to be a Public Interest Disclosure .....   | 17 |
| 5.3.2 | If Council Considers the Disclosure May be a Public Interest Disclosure .....          | 18 |
| 5.4   | Protections for Public Officers .....  | 18 |
| 6.    | Assessment by IBAC .....   | 18 |
| 6.1   | If IBAC Determines the Disclosure is Not a Public Interest Disclosure Complaint .....  | 18 |
| 6.2   | If IBAC Determines the Disclosure Is a Public Interest Disclosure Complaint .....      | 19 |
| 7.    | Welfare Management .....   | 19 |
| 7.1   | Support Available to Disclosers and Co-operators .....                                 | 19 |
| 7.1.1 | Appointment of a Welfare Manager .....   | 20 |
| 7.2   | Welfare Management of Persons who are the Subject of Public Interest Disclosures ..... | 21 |
| 7.3   | If Detrimental Action is Reported .....  | 21 |
| 7.4   | Protections for Persons Making a Public Interest Disclosure .....                      | 22 |
| 7.4.1 | Protections Available to Disclosers .....  | 22 |
| 7.4.2 | Loss of Protections Caused by Actions of the Discloser .....                           | 22 |
| 7.4.3 | Other Limitations on Protections Afforded to Disclosers .....                          | 22 |

|       |  |    |
|-------|--|----|
| 8.    | Confidentiality .....  | 23 |
| 8.1   | General Obligation of Confidentiality on Whitehorse City Council and All Individuals ..... | 23 |
| 8.2   | Steps Taken by Whitehorse City Council to Ensure Confidentiality .....                     | 23 |
| 8.2.1 | Information Management.....  | 23 |
| 8.2.2 | Exemption from the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (FOI Act) .....                         | 24 |
| 8.2.3 | Training .....   | 24 |
| 8.3   | Limited Exceptions Permitted by the Act .....  | 24 |
| 8.4   | Penalties Apply for Breach of Confidentiality .....  | 25 |
| 8.5   | Collating and Publishing Statistics .....  | 25 |
| 9.    | Review .....   | 25 |
| 10.   | Definition of Key Terms.....   | 25 |
| 11.   | Appendix 1: Assessing Disclosures Flow Chart .....   | 26 |

## Abbreviations and Key Terms used in these Procedures

The following abbreviations and key terms are used in these procedures:

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Act:</b>                                      | Public Interest Disclosure Act 2012  |
| <b>agent or employee:</b>                        | Includes contractors, trainees, work experience students and volunteers.   |
| <b>assessable disclosure:</b>                    | Any disclosure either made directly to the IBAC or the Victorian Inspectorate (VI), or if received by Whitehorse City Council is required under s 21 of the Act to be notified by the Council to IBAC for assessment   |
| <b>co-operators:</b>                             | people who have cooperated or intend to cooperate with an investigation of a Public Interest disclosure complaint  |
| <b>Council<br/>discloser:</b>                    | Whitehorse City Council<br>A person who make a complaint, allegation or disclosure under the Act   |
| <b>disclosure:</b>                               | Any complaint, concern, matter, allegation or disclosure made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act   |
| <b>employee or agent:</b>                        | Includes contractors, trainees, work experience students and volunteers.   |
| <b>Guidelines:</b>                               | The Guidelines published by IBAC under s 57 of the Act as at December 2019, copies of which may be downloaded from:<br><a href="https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/article/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures">https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/article/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures</a> |
| <b>IBAC Act:</b>                                 | Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011  |
| <b>IBAC:</b>                                     | Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission   |
| <b>investigative entity:</b>                     | Any one of the eight bodies authorised to investigate a Public Interest disclosure complaint, being IBAC, the Victorian Ombudsman, the Chief Commissioner of Police and the Victorian Inspectorate (VI), Judicial Commission of Victoria, the chief Municipal Inspector, the Information Commissioner, the Racing Integrity Commissioner.  |
| <b>procedures:</b>                               | This version of the procedures of Whitehorse City Council, as established under s 58 of the Act  |
| <b>Public Interest discloser:</b>                | A person who makes a disclosure of improper conduct or detrimental action as required by Part 2 of the Act   |
| <b>Public Interest<br/>disclosure complaint:</b> | A Public Interest disclosure which has been determined and assessed by IBAC to be a Public Interest disclosure complaint under s 26 of the Act   |
| <b>Public Interest disclosure:</b>               | Any complaint, concern, matter, allegation or disclosure made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act   |
| <b>Regulations:</b>                              | Public Interest Disclosure Regulations 2019  |
| <b>VI:</b>                                       | Victorian Inspectorate   |

## **1. About these Procedures**

Whitehorse City Council has prepared these procedures in accordance with S 58 of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012* and the guidelines set out by the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC).

The purpose of the procedure is to establish a system for reporting disclosure of improper conduct or detrimental action by Whitehorse City Council or its employees. Disclosures may be made by either employees of Council or members of the public.

These procedures cover:

- how disclosures may be made to Council;
- how Council manages the receipt of disclosures;
- how Council assesses disclosures it is able to receive under the Act;
- notifications Council is required to make about disclosures, to both disclosers and to IBAC;
- how Council protects certain people, including from detrimental action being taken against them in reprisal for making a Public Interest disclosure, namely:

These procedures form an essential part of Council's commitment to the aims and objectives of the Act and Council's Integrity Framework. Whitehorse City Council does not tolerate improper conduct by the organisation, its employees or agents, Councillors nor the taking of reprisals against those who come forward to disclose such conduct.

Whitehorse City Council recognises the value of transparency and accountability in its administrative and management practices and supports the making of disclosures that reveal improper conduct or the taking of detrimental action in reprisal against persons who come forward to report such improper conduct.

Whitehorse City Council will take all reasonable steps to protect people who make such disclosures from any detrimental action in reprisal for making the disclosure. It will also afford natural justice to the person or body who is the subject of the disclosure.

## **2. About the Act**

The purpose of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012* is to encourage and facilitate the making of disclosures of improper conduct and detrimental action by public officers and public bodies. It also provides certain protections for people who make a disclosure, or those who may suffer detrimental action in reprisal for making a disclosure.

## **3. Council's Internal Reporting Structures**

Whitehorse City Council supports a workplace culture where the making of Public Interest disclosures is valued by the organisation and the right of any individual to make a Public Interest disclosure taken seriously.

Whitehorse City Council will:

- maintain an Integrity Framework that incorporates this procedure, other relevant policies (Fraud and Privacy) and the leadership, culture and organisational values and standards that underpin good governance;
- ensure these procedures, including detailed information about how disclosures may be made and to whom, are accessible on its website and available internally and externally to employees or agents and any individual in the broader community;
- ensure that appropriate training is provided at all levels of the organisation to raise awareness of how a Public Interest disclosure may be made and to take all reasonable steps to ensure employees or agents and Councillors are familiar with Council's Public Interest disclosure policies, procedures and any relevant codes of conduct;
- ensure its reporting system is centralised and accessible only by appropriately authorised officers, allowing the flow of information to be tightly controlled to enhance confidentiality and minimising risks of reprisals being taken against disclosers;
- ensure the reporting system protects the confidentiality of information received or obtained in connection with a Public Interest disclosure in accordance with the Act;
- ensure the reporting system protects the identity of persons connected with a Public Interest disclosure in accordance with the Act;
- not tolerate the taking of detrimental action in reprisal against any person for making a Public Interest disclosure, including to take any reasonable steps to protect such persons from such action being taken against them;
- afford natural justice and treat fairly those who are the subject of allegations contained in disclosures;
- take the appropriate disciplinary or other action against any Councillors, employees or agents engaged in the taking of detrimental action where this is proven;
- ensure any employees or agents involved with handling Public Interest disclosures are trained to receive and manage Public Interest disclosures appropriately;
- ensure that Council as a whole handles Public Interest disclosures consistently and appropriately in accordance with its obligations under the Act, the Regulations, IBAC's Guidelines and these procedures; and
- be visible, approachable, and openly communicative and lead by example in establishing a workplace that supports the making of Public Interest disclosures within the Integrity Framework.

### **3.1 Employees or Agents and Councillors**

All employees or agents and Councillors of Whitehorse City Council have an important role to play in Public Interest Disclosures.

Employees or agents and Councillors are encouraged to raise matters of concern in relation to Whitehorse City Council, including about any employee, agent or Councillors. In particular, employees or agents and Councillors are encouraged to report known or suspected incidences of improper conduct or detrimental action in accordance with these procedures, whether such conduct or action has taken place, is suspected will take place, or is still occurring.

All persons must refrain from any activity that is, or could be perceived to be, victimisation or harassment of a person who makes a disclosure. Furthermore, they should protect and maintain the confidentiality of a person they know or suspect to have made a disclosure.

### **3.2 Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator and Public Interest Disclosures Officers**

The Public Interest Disclosures Coordinator oversees the operation of the Public Interest Disclosures Act, 2012 at Whitehorse City Council. This position is supported by two Public Interest Disclosures Officers.

If a person wishes to make a Public Interest disclosure about an employee or agent of the Whitehorse City Council, that person may make the disclosure to the Chief Executive Officer, Public Interest Disclosure Co-ordinator or Public Interest Disclosure Officers. Whitehorse City Council's Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator has the primary responsibility in the internal reporting system, and maintains oversight over the system.

The Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator will:

- make arrangements for a disclosure to be made privately and discreetly and, if necessary, away from the workplace;
- receive any disclosure made orally or in writing from internal or external sources;
- commit to writing any disclosure made orally;
- take all necessary steps to ensure the information disclosed, including the identity of the discloser and any persons involved, is secured, remains private and confidential;
- be contactable by external and internal persons making disclosures and has the authority to make enquiries of officers within the organisation;
- be the contact point for general advice about the operation of the Act and for integrity agencies such as IBAC;
- be responsible for ensuring that Whitehorse City Council carries out its responsibilities under the Act, any regulations made pursuant to the Act and any guidelines issued by IBAC;
- be Whitehorse City Council's chief liaison with IBAC in regard to the Act;
- be responsible for coordinating Whitehorse City Council's reporting system;
- take all necessary steps to ensure information received or obtained in connection with a disclosure, including the identities of the discloser and the person(s) to whom the disclosure relate, are kept secured, private and confidential at all times;
- consider each disclosure impartially to determine whether it should be notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act;
- arrange any necessary and appropriate welfare support for the discloser, including appointing a Welfare Manager to support the discloser and to protect him or her from any reprisals;
- advise the discloser, appropriately and in accordance with the Act, the stage at which the disclosure is at (e.g. whether it has been notified to IBAC for assessment);
- establish and manage a confidential filing system;
- collate statistics on disclosures made; and
- liaise with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Whitehorse City Council.

The Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator appointed by Whitehorse City Council is:

James Thyer  
Head of People and Culture  
Telephone 03 9262 6310  
[james.thyer@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:james.thyer@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)

Public Interest Disclosures Officers will:

- make arrangements for a disclosure to be made privately and discreetly and, if necessary, away from the workplace;
- receive any disclosure made orally or in writing from internal or external sources;
- commit to writing any disclosure made orally;
- take all necessary steps to ensure the information disclosed, including the identity of the discloser and any persons involved, is secured, remains private and confidential;
- be contactable by external and internal persons making disclosures and has the authority to make enquiries of officers within the organisation;
- take all necessary steps to ensure information received or obtained in connection with a disclosure, including the identities of the discloser and the person(s) to whom the disclosure relate, are kept secured, private and confidential at all times;
- consider each disclosure impartially to determine whether it should be notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act;
- arrange any necessary and appropriate welfare support for the discloser, including appointing a Welfare Manager to support the discloser and to protect him or her from any reprisals;
- advise the discloser, appropriately and in accordance with the Act, the stage at which the disclosure is at (e.g. whether it has been notified to IBAC for assessment).

The Public Interest Disclosure Officers appointed by Whitehorse City Council are:

Jenny Russell  
Team Leader Governance  
Telephone 03 9262 6337  
[jenny.russell@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:jenny.russell@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)

Marie Johnson  
Lead HR Business Partner  
Telephone 03 9262 6342  
[marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)



## 4. Making a Disclosure

### 4.1 What is a Disclosure and Who can Make a Disclosure?

A disclosure may be made about two things under the Act:

- (i) improper conduct of public bodies or public officers; and
- (ii) detrimental action taken by public bodies or public officers in reprisal against a person for the making of a Public Interest disclosure.

The conduct or action being disclosed may have taken place, is still occurring, or is believed is intended to be taken or engaged in. Disclosures may also be made about conduct that occurred prior to the commencement of the Act on 1 January 2020.

A disclosure may:

- only be made by a natural person (or a group of individuals making joint disclosures). Disclosures cannot be made by a company or an organisation;
- be made anonymously;
- be made even where the discloser is unable to identify precisely the individual or the organisation to which the disclosure relates; and
- also be a complaint, notification or disclosure (however described) made under another law.

Anonymous disclosures may create difficulties for Council to communicate with the discloser and some of the notification requirements imposed on Council in relation to disclosures will not apply in relation to an anonymously made disclosure. In addition, it may impede Council's ability to properly assess whether the complaint or allegation is a Public Interest disclosure for the purposes of the Act.

*The following are **not** Public Interest disclosures under the Act:*

- a disclosure that has not been made in accordance with all of the procedural requirements of the Act.
- a disclosure made by a discloser who expressly states in writing, at the time of making the disclosure, that the disclosure is not a disclosure under the Act;
- a disclosure made by an officer or employee of an investigative entity (e.g Police) in the course of carrying out his or her duties or functions under the relevant legislation, unless the person expressly states in writing that the disclosure is a disclosure and the disclosure is otherwise made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act.

If Whitehorse City Council receives any disclosures which do not meet all of the requirements of Part 2 of the Act or the prescribed procedures in the Regulations, Council will not be required to consider whether it is a Public Interest disclosure under the Act. However, Council will always consider whether it would be appropriate to inform the discloser how to make the disclosure in a way that would comply with the requirements of the Act and the Regulations in order to ensure that persons are properly afforded the opportunity to receive any appropriate protections available to them under the Act.

In addition, Whitehorse City Council is required to consider whether a disclosure that does not meet the requirements of the Act and the Regulations should be treated as a complaint, notification or referral to Council in accordance with any other laws or internal policies and procedures.

### 4.2 How Can a Disclosure be Made?

Disclosures may be made anonymously, orally or in writing.

Generally:

- a verbal disclosure may be made:
  - in person;
  - by telephone;
  - by leaving a voicemail message on a particular telephone answering machine; or
  - by any other form of non-written electronic communication.
- A written disclosure to IBAC and the Ombudsman can be made via an online form available at each of their respective websites:
  - <https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/reporting-corruption/report/complaints-form>
  - <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/Complaints>

A disclosure made by email from an address from which the identity of the discloser cannot be ascertained will be treated as an anonymous disclosure.

A disclosure **must** be made in private. For a verbal disclosure, this means the discloser must reasonably believe that only the following people are present or able to listen to the conversation:

- the discloser him or herself (including any other individuals making a joint disclosure at the same time);
- any lawyer representing the discloser; and
- one or more people to whom a disclosure is permitted to be made under the Act or the Regulations.

#### **4.2.1 The Disclosure Must be Made to a Body Authorised to Receive It**

Disclosures must be made to a body authorised under the Act to receive the disclosure.

Whitehorse City Council can only deal with disclosures which concern Council, its employees or agents. Disclosures about improper conduct or detrimental action by Whitehorse City Council's Councillors **must** be made to IBAC or to the Ombudsman. Those disclosures may not be made to the Council.

Disclosures about improper conduct or detrimental action by Whitehorse City Council or its employees or agents may be made to the Public Interest Disclosures Co-ordinator or one of four external authorities:

- IBAC;
- the Ombudsman in relation to limited types of disclosures;
- the VI in relation to limited types of disclosures; or
- The Chief Commissioner of Police in relation to limited types of disclosures.

In most circumstances, disclosures about Council, its employees or agents should be made to Whitehorse City Council or to IBAC.

Different procedures apply to the receiving body as detailed below from sections 4.2.3 to 4.2.7 of these procedures.

If the disclosure concerns another public body or its employees, agents, officers or members of that other public body, it has not been made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act and cannot be considered by Whitehorse City Council. However, Whitehorse is able to redirect the PID to another entity.

<https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/ibac-insights/issue-22/changes-to-the-public-interest-disclosures-act-your-questions-answered>

When in doubt, a discloser should make their disclosure to IBAC.

If a person does not wish their allegation or complaint to be treated as a disclosure made under Part 2 of the Act, the person must, at the time of making the disclosure, expressly state in writing that the disclosure is not a disclosure for the purposes of the Act.

Unless such an express statement has been made, upon receiving a disclosure (whether directly or indirectly), Whitehorse City Council's Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator or Public Interest

Disclosures Officers will determine whether the disclosure has been made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act. Part 2 of the Act and the Regulations set out how disclosures must be made in order to be a Public Interest disclosure under the Act.

#### **4.2.2 How to Make a Disclosure to Whitehorse City Council**

##### **Oral Disclosures**

An oral disclosure to Whitehorse City Council must be made in private and may be made:

- in person;
- by telephone to one of the persons authorised to receive disclosures set out below, including by leaving a voicemail message on that telephone number; or
- by some other form of non-written electronic communication. The oral disclosure must be made to one of the following persons:

- the Chief Executive Officer of Whitehorse City Council;
- the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator identified in section 3.2 of these procedures.
- the Public Interest Disclosures Officers identified in section 3.2 of these procedures.

If the disclosure is made orally, the person receiving the disclosure will make notes at the time recording the disclosure. Recording of the conversation will only be done with the discloser's permission or by giving prior warning that the conversation will be recorded.

### **Written Disclosures**

A written disclosure to Whitehorse City Council must be:

- delivered personally, marked Private and Confidential to the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator, to the office of Whitehorse City Council at 379 Whitehorse Road, Nunawading VIC 3131; or
- sent by post addressed and marked Private and Confidential to the Public Interest Disclosures Coordinator, Whitehorse City Council, Locked Bag 2, Nunawading, VIC 3131 or
- sent by email to Whitehorse City Council to Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator; [james.thyer@Whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:james.thyer@Whitehorse.vic.gov.au); or in his absence to the Public Interest Disclosure Officers; [jenny.russell@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:jenny.russell@whitehorse.vic.gov.au) or [marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)

### **4.2.3 How to Make a Disclosure to IBAC**

#### **Oral disclosures**

An oral disclosure to IBAC **must** be made in private and **may** be made:

- in person;
- by telephone, to 1300 735 135;
- by leaving a voicemail message on the telephone number of one of the specified individuals below to whom an oral disclosure may be made; or
- by some other form of non-written electronic communication.

#### **Written disclosures**

A written disclosure to IBAC must be:

- delivered personally to the office of IBAC, at Level 1, North Tower, 459 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC 3000; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of IBAC, at GPO Box 24234, Melbourne, VIC 3001; or
- sent by email to the official email address of a person specified above to whom an oral disclosure may be made under the Act;
- submitted by an online form available from:  
<https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/reporting-corruption/report/complaints-form>

### **4.2.4 How to Make a Disclosure to the Ombudsman**

#### **Oral disclosures**

An oral disclosure to the Ombudsman **must** be made in private and **may** be made:

- in person;
- by telephone, to 9613 6222 or toll free to 1800 806 314;
- by leaving a voicemail message on the telephone number of any Ombudsman officer; or
- by some other form of non-written electronic communication. The oral disclosure may be made to an Ombudsman officer.

#### **Written disclosures**

A written disclosure to the Ombudsman must be:

- delivered personally to the office of the Ombudsman, at Level 9, North Tower, 459 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC 3000; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of the Ombudsman, as above; or
- sent by email to the office of the Ombudsman at: [ombudvic@ombudsman.vic.gov.au](mailto:ombudvic@ombudsman.vic.gov.au) ; or
- sent by email to the official email address of any Ombudsman officer; or
- submitted by an online form identified in the procedures established by the Ombudsman:
  - <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/Complaints>

#### 4.2.5 How to Make a Disclosure to the Victorian Inspectorate

##### **Oral disclosures**

An oral disclosure to the VI **must** be made in private and **may** be made:

- in person;
- by telephone to 8614 3225;
- by leaving a voicemail message on the telephone number of one of the individuals specified below who is authorised to receive disclosures;
- by some other form of non-written electronic communication. The oral disclosure must be made to one of the following persons:
- the Inspector appointed under the Victorian Inspectorate Act 2011 (“VI Act”);
- an employee or officer referred to in Victorian Inspectorate Act;

##### **Written disclosures**

A written disclosure to the VI **must** be:

- delivered personally to the office of the VI; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of the VI, at PO Box 617 Collins Street West, Melbourne, VIC 8007; or
- sent by email to the office of the VI at: [info@vicinspectorate.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@vicinspectorate.vic.gov.au) ; or
- sent by email to the official email address of a person specified above to whom an oral disclosure may be made (i.e., the Inspector, employee or officers of the Victorian Inspectorate Act); or
- submitted by an online form identified in the procedures established by the Victorian Inspectorate: <https://vicinspectorate.vic.gov.au/complaints-form/>

#### 4.2.6 How to Make a Disclosure to the Chief Commissioner of Police

There are detailed procedures for making a Public Interest disclosure to the Chief Commissioner of Police. To make a Public Interest disclosure to the Chief Commissioner of Police please access the procedure set out at:

[https://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media\\_ID=96230](https://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=96230)

#### 4.2.7 Disclosures About Other Public Bodies or Public Officers

Disclosures relating to improper conduct or detrimental action involving other public bodies or officers who are not employees, agents or Councillors of Whitehorse City Council may be made to the various bodies as shown below (although the table does not comprise an exhaustive list):

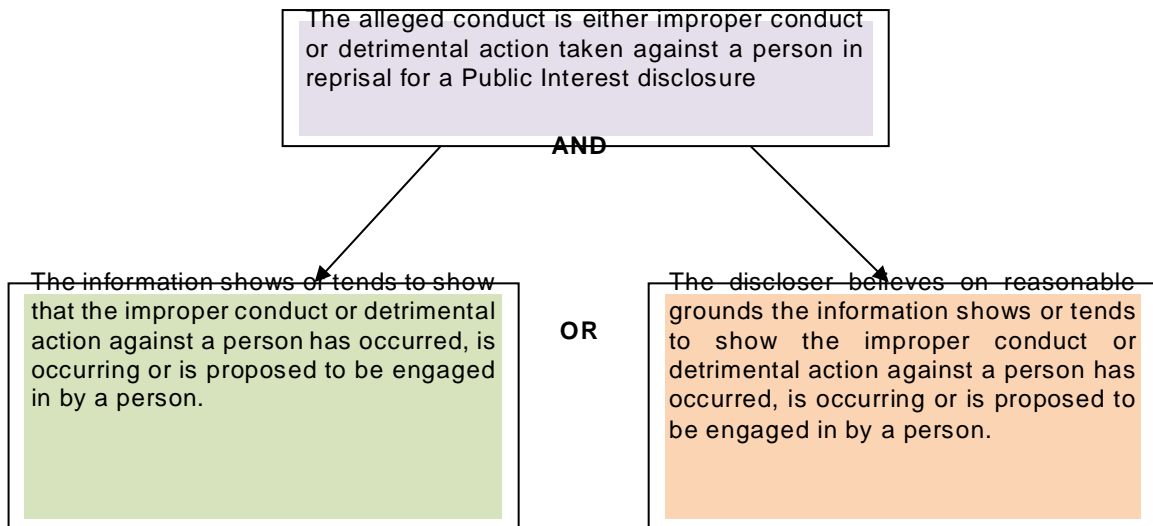
| <b>Person or body who is the subject of the disclosure</b>   | <b>Person or body to whom the disclosure must be made</b>  |
|--|--|
| Employee, agent, deputy or delegate of or a public body, including a public service body and other Councils (unless the body is one of those set out below, in which case the below takes precedence)  | That public body or IBAC in most instances, and possibly also the Ombudsman, Chief Commissioner of Police and the VI in limited specified circumstances. |
| The Chief Commissioner of Police, the Director of Public Procedures, the Chief Crown Prosecutor, the Solicitor-General, the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, the Director of Police Integrity, the Electoral Commissioner, a judicial officer, a member of VCAT who is not a judicial officer; Ministerial officers; Parliamentary advisers, electorate officers | IBAC   |
| An officer of the Ombudsman office or the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office   | IBAC or the Victorian Inspectorate   |
| Councillors, the FOI Commissioner, the Privacy Commissioner, the Health Services Commissioner or the Commissioner for Law Enforcement Data Security  | IBAC or the Ombudsman  |

| Person or body who is the subject of the disclosure                       | Person or body to whom the disclosure must be made |
|---|--|
| IBAC or an officer of IBAC  | The Victorian Inspectorate                         |
| A member of police personnel, other than the Chief Commissioner of Police | A prescribed member of police personnel or IBAC    |
| A member of Parliament or Minister in the Legislative Assembly            | The Speaker of the Legislative Assembly            |
| A member of Parliament or Minister in the Legislative Council             | The President of the Legislative Council           |

For further information, also see the Guidelines for Making and Handling Public Interest Disclosures: <https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/article/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures>

### 4.3 What Can Disclosures be Made About?

A disclosure must be about the conduct of a person, public officer or public body in their capacity as a public body or public officer as outlined in the following diagram:



In assessing whether there is improper conduct or detrimental action, Council will look critically at all available information about the alleged conduct and about the discloser. Preliminary questions the Council may seek answers to, or consider, include:

- What is the discloser's connection to the alleged conduct – is the discloser a victim, a witness, or a participant in the alleged conduct?
- How did the discloser come to know about the conduct – was or is the discloser directly involved in it, did the discloser observe it happening to another person or did someone else tell the discloser about it?
- How detailed is the information provided – is there sufficient information to enable the Council to consider whether there is improper conduct or detrimental action?
- How reliable is the information given to the Council – is it supported by other information?

#### 4.3.1 Improper Conduct

A disclosure may be made about improper conduct by a public body or public official in the performance of their functions as a public body or public officer.

Central to the notion of improper conduct is the notion of “public trust”.

“Public trust” is a concept that provides the basis *‘for obligations of honesty and fidelity in public officers that exist to serve, protect and advance the interests of the public’*.

A person acting in their official capacity is exercising 'public power' that is derived from their public office holding and may be controlled or influenced by legislative provisions, administrative directions, or constitutional principles or conventions. There is an expectation that members of the community may rely on and trust their public bodies and officials to act honestly. The expectation is that public officers will not use their positions for personal advantage, or use the influence of their public office for improper purposes where there is a duty to act objectively and impartially.

Disclosers or Council will need to identify that there is a link between the alleged improper conduct of a person or an organisation and their function as a public officer or a public body.

### **Improper Conduct**

Improper conduct includes corrupt conduct, criminal offences and specified categories of conduct without the need for the conduct to be a criminal offence or reasonable grounds for dismissal. Improper conduct also includes serious professional misconduct. Importantly, trivial conduct is excluded:

- Corrupt conduct
- Criminal offence
- Serious professional misconduct
- Dishonest performance of public functions
- Intentional or reckless breach of public trust
- Intentional or reckless misuse of information
- Substantial mismanagement of public resources
- Substantial risk to health or safety of a person
- Substantial risk to the environment
- Conduct of any person that adversely affects the honest performance by a public officer of their functions for the benefit of the other person

When assessing allegations of improper conduct, you need to identify that there is a link between the conduct and the official function of a public officer or public body.

### **Corrupt Conduct**

Corrupt conduct includes and/or any of the following:

- a criminal offence
- serious professional misconduct
  - a serious failure to exhibit the skills and experience required to perform functions of the office
  - non-compliance with professional codes of conduct or the policies, procedures and laws that govern behaviour in the public sector and workplace.
  - behaviour was engaged in the capacity as a public officer and the misconduct was serious.
- dishonest performance of public functions
- an intentional breach or reckless breach of public trust
- an intentional or reckless misuse of information or material acquired in the course of the performance of public functions
- a substantial mismanagement of public resources
- a substantial risk to the health or safety of one or more people
- a substantial risk to the environment

### **Specified Conduct**

Specified conduct is any one of the above types of conduct, **or** conduct that involves substantial mismanagement of public resources, risk to public health or safety, or risk to the environment, which **would not** constitute "corrupt conduct" but would nevertheless, if proved, constitute either:

- a criminal offence; or
- reasonable grounds for dismissing or terminating the employment of the officer who engaged or is engaging in that conduct.

It should be noted the risk in relation to mismanagement or public health and safety or the environment must be "substantial", requiring significant or considerable mismanagement, or significant or considerable risks to public health, safety or the environment.

### 4.3.2 Detrimental Action

It is an offence under the Act for a public officer or body to take detrimental action against a discloser in reprisal for a making Public Interest disclosure. There are two essential components here: whether there is in fact “detrimental action”, as defined by the Act, and whether that action is being taken in reprisal against a person for making or being connected with a Public Interest disclosure.

#### **Detrimental Action**

Detrimental action as defined by the Act includes:

- action causing injury, loss or damage;
- intimidation or harassment; and
- discrimination, disadvantage or adverse treatment in relation to a person’s employment, career, profession, trade or business, including the taking of disciplinary action.

In addition, a person can have taken detrimental action without having taken the action itself, but just by threatening to take such action. Further, the detrimental action need not necessarily have been taken (or threatened to be taken) against a person making a Public Interest disclosure, but against any person connected with a Public Interest disclosure.

Examples of detrimental action prohibited by the Act include:

- threats to a person’s personal safety or property, including intimidating, harassing a discloser or the discloser’s family or friends, otherwise causing personal injury or prejudice to the safety or damaging property of a discloser or the discloser’s family or friends;
- the demotion, transfer, isolation or change in duties of a discloser due to him or her having made a disclosure;
- discriminating or disadvantaging a person in their career, profession, employment, trade or business; or
- discriminating against the discloser or the discloser’s family and associates in subsequent applications for promotions, jobs, permits or tenders resulting in financial loss or reputational damage.

#### **Taken in Reprisal for a Public Interest Disclosure**

The person (or the person incited to take detrimental action) must take or threaten the detrimental action, because, or in the belief that the:

- other person or anyone else has made, or intends to make the disclosure;
- other person or anyone else has cooperated, or intends to cooperate with an investigation of the disclosure.

The reason for the person taking detrimental action in reprisal must be a reason for taking that action, or it will not be considered to be detrimental action.

## **5. Handling Disclosures**

These guidelines have been prepared in accordance with the guidelines from IBAC regarding handling <https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/article/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures>

### **5.1 Receiving a Disclosure**

When Council receives a complaint, report or allegation of improper conduct or detrimental action, the first step will be to ascertain whether it has been made in accordance with the Act.

### **5.2 Assessing a Disclosure**

If the disclosure satisfies the requirements of the Act, Council is required to determine whether the disclosure may be a Public Interest disclosure by going through the two step assessment process recommended by IBAC as follows.

This will be the case even if the discloser does not refer to the Act or require the protections of the Act. The initial assessment is made on the nature of the information disclosed or on the belief that the discloser has about the nature of the information and not the discloser's intention.

#### **5.2.1 First Step**

The first question Council must answer is whether the information disclosed shows, or tends to show, that there is improper conduct or detrimental action taken in reprisal for the making of a Public Interest disclosure.

This requires Council to ascertain whether the information satisfies the 'elements' of improper conduct or detrimental action, as defined in the Act and whether any of the relevant exceptions apply.

This may require Council to:

- seek further information;
- conduct a discreet initial enquiry;
- seek (further) evidence from the discloser;
- ascertain whether there is sufficient supporting material to demonstrate that the conduct or actions covered by the Act have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur.

If it is not clear that the information disclosed does show or tends to show that there is improper conduct or detrimental action, then Council will go on to the second step below.

#### **5.2.2 Second Step**

This requires Council to ask whether the discloser believes on reasonable grounds that the information shows or tends to show there is improper conduct or detrimental action. That is, does the person actually believe that the information shows, or tends to show, there is improper conduct or detrimental action? A reasonable belief requires the belief to be based on facts that would be sufficient to make a reasonable person believe there was improper conduct or detrimental action.

This reasonable belief does not have to be based on actual proof that the improper conduct or detrimental action in fact occurred, is occurring, or will occur, but there must be some information supporting this belief. The grounds for the reasonable belief can leave something to surmise or conjecture, but it must be more than just a reasonable suspicion, and the belief must be probable.

According to IBAC, simply stating that improper conduct or detrimental action is occurring, without providing any supporting information, would not be a sufficient basis for having a reasonable belief. In IBAC's view, a belief cannot be based on a mere allegation or conclusion unsupported by any further facts or circumstances.



Other matters that IBAC suggests Council can consider are:

- the reliability of the information provided by the discloser, even if it is second or third-hand. For example, how would the discloser have obtained the information?
- The amount of detail that has been provided in the information disclosed; and
- the credibility of the discloser, or of those people who have provided the discloser with information.

### **5.2.3 Where Urgent Action is Required While an Assessment is Still Being Made**

In some circumstances, the disclosure may be about improper conduct that may pose an immediate threat to health and safety of individuals, preservation of property, or may consist of serious criminal conduct.

Example of this provided by IBAC include where the disclosure may be about:

- a child protection worker allegedly sexually assaulting children in care;
- a council worker allegedly lighting bush fires; or
- a person threatening to poison the water supply.

In these cases Council can take immediate action while considering whether or not it is an assessable disclosure that must be notified to IBAC or awaiting IBAC's decision on a notified matter.

It may also be necessary to report criminal conduct to Victoria Police or the Commission for immediate investigation or take management action against an employee or agent to prevent future conduct.

The Act allows Council to disclose the content of the disclosure by a person or body "to the extent necessary for the purpose of taking lawful action in relation to the conduct that is the subject of an assessable disclosure including disciplinary process or action". However, IBAC notes that this does not allow the identity of the discloser to be revealed. Reporting the alleged conduct to the Victoria Police as criminal conduct, or taking legitimate management action against the subject of the disclosure in order to prevent future conduct, may be appropriate courses of action in these circumstances.

### **5.2.4 Assessment Decisions**

At the conclusion of the assessment, Council must decide whether it considers the disclosure to be a Public Interest disclosure. If Council decides it may be a Public Interest disclosure, it must notify IBAC of the disclosure. If Council does not consider it to be a Public Interest disclosure, then it may be a matter that Council otherwise deals with through any other relevant internal complaint or grievance management process.

See Appendix 1 for flow chart on Assessing disclosures.

## **5.3 Notifications**

### **5.3.1 If Council Does Not Consider the Disclosure to be a Public Interest Disclosure**

If Council determines the disclosure is not a Public Interest disclosure and the discloser has indicated to Council (or it otherwise appears to the Council) that the discloser wishes to receive the protections that apply to a Public Interest disclosure under the Act, the discloser will be notified in writing, within 28 days of Council receiving the disclosure, that:

- Whitehorse City Council considers the disclosure is not a Public Interest disclosure;
- the disclosure has not been notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act; and
- regardless of whether the disclosure is notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act, the protections under the Act apply.

Notifications to a discloser do not need to be provided by Whitehorse City Council in response to an anonymously made disclosure.

### **5.3.2 If Council Considers the Disclosure May be a Public Interest Disclosure**

If Council considers the disclosure may be a Public Interest disclosure under the Act, Council will, within 28 days of receiving the disclosure:

- notify IBAC that:
  - Council considers the disclosure may be a Public Interest disclosure; and
  - Council is notifying the disclosure to IBAC for assessment under the Act; **and**
- notify the discloser that:
  - the disclosure has been notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act; and
  - it is an offence under the Act to disclose that the disclosure has been notified to IBAC for assessment under the Act.

In addition, at the time of notifying IBAC, Council may also provide IBAC with any information obtained by Council regarding the disclosure in the course of its enquiries leading up to its notification of the disclosure to IBAC.

### **5.4 Protections for Public Officers**

A public officer is given specific protections under the Act to provide information to other public officers or to IBAC in dealing with a disclosure they have received. When a public officer acts in good faith and in accordance with the Act, Regulations and IBAC's Guidelines, the public officer does not commit an offence under laws imposing a duty to maintain confidentiality or restricting the disclosure of information.

## **6. Assessment by IBAC**

Once a disclosure has been notified to IBAC, they must determine whether it is a Public Interest disclosure complaint. Such a determination must be made within a reasonable time after the disclosure is notified to them.

IBAC must inform Whitehorse City Council of its determination as to whether or not the disclosure is a Public Interest disclosure complaint:

- in writing; and
- within a reasonable time after making the determination.

In making its assessment, IBAC may seek additional information from Council or from the discloser if IBAC considers there is insufficient information to make a decision.

If IBAC is of the view that the assessable disclosure is not a Public Interest disclosure, then it is not a 'Public Interest disclosure complaint'. If IBAC is of the view that the assessable disclosure is a Public Interest disclosure, then it must determine that the Public Interest disclosure is a "Public Interest disclosure complaint".

### **6.1 If IBAC Determines the Disclosure is Not a Public Interest Disclosure Complaint**

If IBAC determines the disclosure is not a Public Interest disclosure complaint, IBAC must advise the discloser in writing and within a reasonable time after the determination is made, that:

- IBAC has determined their disclosure is not a public interest complaint
- the disclosure will not be investigated as a public interest complaint
- their identity does not have to be kept confidential.
- IBAC will advise the notifying entity of its determination.
- IBAC may also consider treating the disclosure as a complaint under the IBAC Act which engages its powers to refer the matter to a more appropriate agency to investigate, including the agency the complaint is about. IBAC will consult with the discloser prior to doing so.

If this is the case, IBAC will also advise the relevant notifying entity that the discloser has been given this advice.

## 6.2 If IBAC Determines the Disclosure Is a Public Interest Disclosure Complaint

If IBAC determine the disclosure is a Public Interest disclosure complaint, IBAC must:

- advise the discloser of the determination and the action it will take. This includes advising the discloser whether IBAC has decided to investigate or refer the complaint or take no further action.
- If IBAC decides to take no further action it must give reasons for its decision.
- If IBAC decides to investigate or refer the complaint it must provide a written statement advising the discloser that it is an offence to disclose IBAC's action.
- IBAC must notify the discloser in writing and within a reasonable time. However, IBAC may decide not to notify the discloser or the entity that has notified the disclosure if it considers that notifying would have one of the adverse consequences set out in the Act including putting a person's safety at risk, or prejudicing an investigation under the IBAC Act.

## 7. Welfare Management

Whitehorse City Council is committed to the protection of genuine disclosers against detrimental action taken in reprisal for the making of Public Interest disclosures.

The protection of persons making genuine Public Interest disclosures about improper conduct or detrimental action is essential for the effective implementation of the Act. In addition, the Act extends the need for welfare management to people who have cooperated or intend to cooperate with an investigation of a Public Interest disclosure complaint ("co-operators"). Persons who are the subject of allegations will also have their welfare looked after.

Council must ensure disclosers and co-operators are protected from direct and indirect detrimental action being taken against them in reprisal for the Public Interest disclosure. Council will ensure its workplace culture supports disclosers and co-operators. Such support will extend to the relevant persons regardless of whether they are internal to the organisation (e.g. employees or agents, Councillors) or external members of the public. However, different legislative responsibilities (including those external to the Act) apply to persons internal to the organisation and to persons who may be clients or users of Council's services. Those responsibilities derive from various legislative and administrative obligations including to:

- ensure the health and wellbeing of employees or agents of a public sector body under laws including those relating to Occupational Health and Safety, the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*, the *Public Administration Act 2004*, and various Victorian Public Sector Codes of Conduct (as relevant); and
- comply with various relevant laws, policies and practices when making administrative and other decisions or taking particular actions affecting a customer, client or user of the public body's services.

Generally, for internal persons, Council will ensure a supportive work environment and respond appropriately to any reports of intimidation or harassment against these persons. For external persons, Council will take reasonable steps to provide appropriate support. Council will discuss reasonable expectations with all persons receiving welfare management in connection with a Public Interest disclosure.

### 7.1 Support Available to Disclosers and Co-operators

Council will support disclosers and co-operators by:

- keeping them informed, by providing:
  - confirmation that the disclosure has been received;
  - the legislative or administrative protections available to the person;
  - a description of any action proposed to be taken;
  - if action has been taken by Council, details about results of the action known to Council.
- providing active support by:
  - acknowledging the person for having come forward;
  - assuring the discloser or co-operator that they have done the right thing, and that Council appreciates it;
  - making a clear offer of support;

- assuring them that all reasonable steps will be taken to protect them;
  - giving them an undertaking to keep them informed as far as Council is reasonably able to.
- managing their expectations by undertaking an early discussion with them about:
  - what outcome they seek;
  - whether their expectations are realistic;
  - what Council will be able to deliver.
- maintaining confidentiality by:
  - ensuring as far as is possible that other people cannot infer the identity of the discloser or co-operator;
  - reminding the discloser or co-operator not to reveal themselves or to reveal any information that would enable others to identify them as a discloser or co-operator (except where they are able to provide information to specified categories of persons such as Fair Work Commission, WorkCover Authority, employee assistance, trade union);
  - ensuring that hardcopy and electronic files relating to the disclosure are accessible only to those who are involved in managing disclosures in Council.
- proactively assessing the risk of detrimental action being taken in reprisal (rather than reactively waiting for a problem to arise and a complaint made by the discloser or co-operator), that is, actively monitor the workplace, anticipating problems and dealing with them before they develop as far as is possible;
- protecting the discloser or co-operator by:
  - examining the immediate welfare and protection needs of the person and seeking to foster a supportive work environment;
  - listening and responding to any concerns the person may have about harassment, intimidation or victimisation in reprisal for their actions;
  - assessing whether the concerns the person may have about harassment, intimidation or victimisation might be due to other causes other than those related to the Public Interest disclosure.
- preventing the spread of gossip and rumours about any investigation into the Public Interest disclosure; and
- keeping contemporaneous records of all aspects of the case management of the person, including all contact and follow-up action.

### **7.1.1 Appointment of a Welfare Manager**

In most instances the Welfare Manager appointed by Whitehorse City Council to protect a discloser or a co-operator is:

Marie Johnson  
Lead HR Business Partner  
Telephone 03 9262 6342.  
[marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au](mailto:marie.johnson@whitehorse.vic.gov.au)

However if the Welfare Manager is acting in her capacity as a Public Interest Disclosures Officer a separate Welfare Manager will be appointed.

In most circumstances, the Welfare Manager will only be required to act where a Public Interest disclosure complaint proceeds to investigation, but each Public Interest disclosure received by Council will to be assessed on its own merits.

The Welfare Manager will, in addition to providing the general support set out above at 7.1:

- advise the discloser or co-operator of the legislative and administrative protections available to him or her, including providing practical advice;
- listen and respond to any concerns of harassment, intimidation or victimisation in reprisal for making a disclosure;

- not divulge any details relating to the Public Interest disclosure to any person other than the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator or the CEO;
- ensure all meetings between the Welfare Manager and the discloser or co-operator are conducted discreetly to protect the person from being identified as being involved in the Public Interest disclosure; and
- ensure the expectations of the discloser are realistic and reasonable, and that the discloser or co-operator understands the limits of the support Council is able to reasonably provide in the particular circumstances. This is particularly the case where a Welfare Manager has been appointed in relation to an external discloser or co-operator.

## **7.2 Welfare Management of Persons who are the Subject of Public Interest Disclosures**

Council will also meet the welfare needs of a person who is the subject of a Public Interest disclosure. It is important to remember that until a Public Interest disclosure complaint is resolved, the information about the person is only an allegation.

Council will make a decision about whether or when the subject of a disclosure will be informed about a Public Interest disclosure involving an allegation made against him or her. It is possible that the subject of the disclosure may never be told about the disclosure if it is not determined to be a Public Interest disclosure complaint, or if a decision is made to dismiss the disclosure.

### **Welfare services**

A person the subject of a disclosure who is made aware of their status as such may have a welfare manager appointed by Council, or be referred to Council's EAP program for welfare assistance. Council will consider each matter on a case by case basis, taking into account the particular circumstances of the person and the Public Interest disclosure complaint.

### **Confidentiality**

Consistently with Whitehorse City Council's confidentiality obligations under the Act as outlined in these procedures.

Council will take all reasonable steps to ensure the confidentiality of the subject of a disclosure during any assessment and any ensuing investigation. Where the disclosure is dismissed or investigations do not substantiate the allegations made against the person, the fact that the investigation was undertaken, its results, and the identity of the person subject of the disclosure will still be kept confidential.

### **Natural Justice**

Whitehorse City Council will afford natural justice to the subject of a disclosure prior to any decision being made about the allegations. IBAC has noted that affording a subject of a disclosure natural justice in this context means that if a decision is to be made about their conduct this person has the right to:

- be informed about the substance of the allegations against them;
- be given the opportunity to answer the allegations before a final decision is made;
- be informed about the substance of any adverse comment that may be included in any report arising from an investigation; and
- have his or her defence set out fairly in any report.

### **If the Allegations are Wrong or Unsubstantiated**

Whitehorse City Council will give its full support to a person who is the subject of a disclosure where the allegations contained in a disclosure are wrong or unsubstantiated. In those circumstances, Council and any investigative entity involved will ensure that there are no adverse consequences for this person arising out of the disclosure or its investigation.

## **7.3 If Detrimental Action is Reported**

If any person reports an incident of harassment, discrimination or adverse treatment that may amount to detrimental action apparently taken in reprisal for a disclosure, the Welfare Manager or Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator must record details of the incident and advise the person of their rights under the Act.

A person takes detrimental action against another person in reprisal for a Public Interest disclosure if:

- the person takes, or threatens to take, detrimental action against the other person because, or in the belief that:
  - the other person or anyone else has made, or intends to make, the disclosure; or
  - the other person or anyone else has cooperated, or intends to cooperate, with an investigation of the disclosure; or
- for either of the reasons above, the person incites or permits someone else to take or threaten to take detrimental action against the other person.

All persons are reminded it is a criminal offence to take detrimental action against another person in reprisal for a Public Interest disclosure under the Act. The penalty for committing such an offence in contravention of the Act is a maximum fine of 240 penalty units, (paid at equivalent value under the *Monetary Units Act 2004*), two years imprisonment or both.

## **7.4 Protections for Persons Making a Public Interest Disclosure**

### **7.4.1 Protections Available to Disclosers**

Protections provided to persons who make a disclosure that is a 'Public Interest disclosure', are as follows (summary):

- cannot be fired, disciplined or bullied for making a disclosure is not subject to any civil or criminal liability for making a disclosure
- is not committing an offence against the Constitution Act 1975 or any other Act that imposes obligations of confidentiality or any other restriction on the disclosure of information
- is not breaching any other obligation (made by oath, rule of law or practice) requiring him or her to maintain confidentiality or otherwise restrict confidentiality
- cannot be held liable for defamation in relation to information included in a public interest disclosure.

### **7.4.2 Loss of Protections Caused by Actions of the Discloser**

Protections do not apply if disclosers knowingly make false or misleading statements.

### **7.4.3 Other Limitations on Protections Afforded to Disclosers**

A disclosure is not Public Interest disclosure against legitimate management action being taken by Council in accordance with the Act.

In addition, although the discloser of a Public Interest disclosure is not subject to criminal or civil liability for making the disclosure, the Act specifically provides that a person remains liable for their own conduct even though the person has made a disclosure of that conduct under the Act. Therefore, the discloser will still be held liable for their own conduct that they disclose as part of making a Public Interest disclosure.

#### ***If the person making the disclosure is implicated in the improper conduct or detrimental action that is the subject of the disclosure***

Where a discloser is implicated in improper conduct, Whitehorse City Council will handle the disclosure and protect the discloser from reprisals in accordance with the Act, IBAC's guidelines and these procedures. Whitehorse City Council acknowledges that the act of disclosing should not shield disclosers from the reasonable consequences flowing from any involvement in improper conduct. However, in some circumstances, an admission may be a mitigating factor when considering disciplinary or other action.

The management of the welfare of a discloser may become complicated when that person is implicated in misconduct, whether or not that misconduct is related to the disclosure.

Taking disciplinary or other action against a person who has made a Public Interest disclosure may create the perception that it is being taken in reprisal for the disclosure. The CEO will make the final decision on the advice of the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator as to whether disciplinary or other action will be taken against a discloser. Where disciplinary or other action relates to conduct that is the subject of the disclosure, the disciplinary or other action will only be taken after the disclosed matter

has been appropriately dealt with. In all cases where disciplinary or other action is being contemplated, any such action will not be taken without Council's CEO ensuring that:

- the fact that a person has made a Public Interest disclosure is not a substantial reason for Council taking the action against the employee or agent;
- there are good and sufficient grounds that would fully justify action against any other person in the same circumstances;
- there are good and sufficient grounds that justify exercising any discretion to institute disciplinary or other action.

Council will take all reasonable steps to thoroughly document its decision-making process, including recording the reasons why the disciplinary or other action is being taken and the reasons why the action is not being taken in retribution against the discloser for making the disclosure, so that it will be able to clearly demonstrate that the disciplinary or other action was taken for the appropriate and permitted reasons under the Act.

The discloser will be clearly informed of any action proposed to be taken, be afforded natural justice and inform and be informed of any mitigating factors that have been taken into account. Such communications with the discloser will be made in plain English and reasonable steps to provide appropriate support will be offered where appropriate.

## **8. Confidentiality**

### **8.1 General Obligation of Confidentiality on Whitehorse City Council and All Individuals**

Whitehorse City Council will take all reasonable steps to protect the identity of the discloser and the matters disclosed by a discloser. Maintaining confidentiality in relation to Public Interest disclosure matters is crucial, among other things, in ensuring reprisals are not made against a discloser.

The obligation of confidentiality extends to any person receiving a disclosure or making a disclosure. It is in the interest of the discloser to ensure he or she does not discuss any related matters other than with authorised persons within Whitehorse City Council, officers of IBAC, or other persons authorised by law.

### **8.2 Steps Taken by Whitehorse City Council to Ensure Confidentiality**

#### **8.2.1 Information Management**

Whitehorse City Council will ensure all files, whether paper or electronic are kept securely. Those files will be accessible only by the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator and Public Interest Disclosures Officers. Where necessary, the Welfare Manager may be able to gain access (where appropriate) to related welfare matters.

The Welfare Manager will not divulge any details relating to the disclosed matter to any person other than the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator or Public Interest Disclosures Officers, the CEO or an investigator appropriately authorised under the Act or the IBAC Act. All meetings between any relevant persons, the Welfare Manager and disclosers will be conducted discreetly to protect the confidentiality of the person making a Public Interest disclosure.

All printed material will be kept in files that are clearly marked as Public Interest Disclosure Act matters.

All electronic files will be produced and stored securely. All other materials in connection with a Public Interest disclosure will also be stored securely with the Public Interest disclosure file.

Whitehorse City Council will not use unsecured email to transmit documents in connection with a disclosure and will ensure all telephone calls and meetings in connection to disclosures are conducted privately and in the strictest of confidence. Hard copy documents will not be delivered by internal mail to a generally accessible area and, where possible, will be delivered in person by authorised officers where possible.

## **8.2.2 Exemption from the Freedom of Information Act 1982 (FOI Act)**

The FOI Act provides a general right of access for any person to seek documents in the possession of Whitehorse City Council.

However, the Act provides that certain information related to Public Interest disclosures as contained in documents in the possession of Whitehorse City Council will be exempt from the application of the FOI Act.

Such information excluded from the operation of the FOI Act includes:

- any information relating to a disclosure made in accordance with the Act;
- any information relating to a disclosure notified to IBAC by Whitehorse City Council under s 21 of the Act for assessment; and
- any information that is likely to lead to the identification of a discloser.

Council is required to contact IBAC prior to providing any document originating from IBAC or relating to a Public Interest disclosure, if that document is sought under the FOI Act.

## **8.2.3 Training**

Whitehorse City Council will:

- ensure that employees or agents and Councillors have access to a copy of these procedures in hard or soft copy;
- incorporate into its induction procedures training about Whitehorse City Council's general obligations under the Act and the rights and obligations of all employees or agents and Councillors;
- introduce periodic refresher courses for existing employees or agents and Councillors about their rights and obligations under the Act;
- provide additional training and assistance to:
  - any employees or agents of Council with specific responsibilities and functions to handle and manage Public Interest disclosures under the Act, including the Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator, Public Interest Disclosures Officers and people involved in welfare management;
  - ensure that any complaints received will be dealt with consistently and in accordance with the Act as required;
  - ensure that under the FOI Act no prohibited information is disclosed under the Act and to ensure there is appropriate liaising with IBAC or other investigative agencies where required in response to a request for access under the FOI Act; and
  - ensure all employees or agents dealing with customers ensure any potential disclosures received from external sources can be handled appropriately in accordance with the Act and these procedures.

## **8.3 Limited Exceptions Permitted by the Act**

The Act makes it a crime to disclose information connected with a disclosure made in accordance with the Act. Limited exceptions to the prohibition on disclosure are specified by the Act, include circumstances such as:

- where disclosure is required by Whitehorse City Council (or one of its officers) in the exercise of functions of Whitehorse City Council under the Act;
- where necessary for the purpose of the exercise of functions under the Act;
- by an investigating entity for the purpose of exercising that entity's functions under the IBAC Act;
- in accordance with a direction or authorisation given by the investigating entity that is investigating the disclosure;
- to the extent necessary for the purpose of taking lawful action in relation to the conduct that is the subject of an assessable disclosure including a disciplinary process or action;
- where IBAC or the Victorian Inspectorate has determined that the assessable disclosure is not a Public Interest disclosure and the discloser or Whitehorse City Council subsequently discloses the information;
- when an investigative entity had published a report to Parliament, in accordance with its confidentiality obligations;
- for the purpose of obtaining legal advice in relation to matters specified in the Act;



- in order to enable compliance with the Act:
  - where a person does not have a sufficient knowledge of the English language, to obtain a translation from an interpreter;
  - where a person is under 18 years of age, to their parent or guardian ;
- where a person is suffering a disability and is not able to understand, to an independent person;
- in disciplinary actions or legal proceedings for certain offences in the Act or other specified Acts.

It is important to note that the Act prohibits the inclusion of any details, in any report or recommendation that is likely to lead to the identification of a discloser. The Act also prohibits the identification of the person who is the subject of the disclosure in any particulars included in an annual report or any reports to Parliament.

#### **8.4 Penalties Apply for Breach of Confidentiality**

The Act contains a number of offence provisions relating to unauthorised disclosure of information by either disclosers or persons who have received disclosures. The penalties for breaching the confidentiality required by the Act include imprisonment, financial payments or both.

#### **8.5 Collating and Publishing Statistics**

Whitehorse City Council is required to publish certain statistics about the Act in its annual reports. That information relates mainly to how these procedures may be accessed and the number of disclosures notified to IBAC for assessment during the financial year.

The Public Interest Disclosure Coordinator will establish a secure register to record such information, and to generally keep account of the status of disclosures made under the Act.

### **9. Review**

These procedures will be reviewed tri-annually or upon significant change to the Act, the Regulations or IBAC's guidelines to ensure they comply with the requirements of the Act, the Regulations and IBAC's guidelines.

### **10. Definition of Key Terms**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Improper conduct</b>                 | Includes corrupt conduct, criminal offences and other conduct specified in the procedure and the Act. A link is required to be identified between the conduct and the official function of a public officer of public body. |
| <b>Detrimental action</b>               | Includes threats of, or an action causing, injury, loss, damage, intimidation or harassment; and discrimination, disadvantage or adverse treatment in relation to a person's employment, career, profession, trade          |
| <b>Public Interest Disclosure (PID)</b> | Disclosure by a natural person of information that shows/tends to show, or information that the person reasonably believes shows/tends to show improper conduct or detrimental action.                                      |
| <b>Public Interest Complaint (PIC)</b>  | A public interest disclosure that has been determined by IAC, The Victorian Inspectorate, or the Integrity and Oversight Committee to be a public interest Complaint.   |

## 11. Appendix 1: Assessing Disclosures Flow Chart

### **PUBLIC INTEREST DISCLOSURE FLOWCHART**

Whitehorse City Council is a public body authorised to receive disclosures and must comply with the provisions of the *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012*.

