



Protected Disclosures Procedures of Strathbogie Shire Council

established under s 58 of the *Protected Disclosure Act 2012*

Information about this document

These Procedures have been published by Strathbogie in compliance with s 58 of the *Protected Disclosure Act 2012* and the Guidelines published by the *Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission* as at June 2013.

Version 1: 20 February 2015

Protected Disclosures Procedures

Council Plan Reference

The Protected Disclosure Procedures links to the following Objective contained within the Council Plan 2013-2017.

‘A Shire that builds trust and recognises community needs through transparent, accountable and democratic decision making’

Introduction

Strathbogie Shire Council (“Strathbogie”) is a public body subject to the *Protected Disclosures Act 2012* (“Act”). The purpose of the Act is to encourage and facilitate the making of disclosures of improper conduct by public officers and public bodies, including the Council as a public body, its staff, employees and Councillors.

Strathbogie is committed to the aims and objectives of the Act. It recognises the value of transparency and accountability in its administrative and management practices, and supports the making of disclosures that reveal improper conduct. It does not tolerate improper conduct by the organisation, its employees, officers, or Councillors, nor the taking of reprisals against those who come forward to disclose such conduct.

Application period

Date policy/strategy approved by Council: 16 September 2014

Date policy/strategy due for review: September 2016

Legislative Context

The prime legislative drivers of the Protected Disclosure Procedures is the Protected Disclosure Act 2012 in compliance of s58 and the Guidelines published by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission as at June 2013.

Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act

In developing this procedure, the subject matter has been considered to determine if it raises any human rights issues. In particular, whether the scope of any human right established under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 is in any way limited, restricted or interfered with by the contents of this policy.

It is considered that the Protected Disclosure Procedures are consistent with, and advances rights outlined in the Charter.

The human rights most relevant to these procedures are the rights to:

- recognition and equality before the law (section 8)
- freedom of expression (section 15)
- take part in Public Life (section 18)

Other Relevant Documentation

- Staff Code of Conduct
- Councillor Code of Conduct
- Fraud and Corruption Policy
- Acceptance of Gifts and Hospitality Policy

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Abbreviations and key terms used in these Procedures

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

Act:	<i>Protected Disclosure Act 2012</i>
assessable disclosure:	Any disclosure either made directly to the IBAC or the VI, or if received by Strathbogie is required under s 21 of the Act to be notified by the Council to the IBAC for assessment
discloser:	A person who (purports to) make(s) a complaint, allegation or disclosure (however described) under the Act
disclosure:	Any complaint, concern, matter, allegation or disclosure (however described) purported to be made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act
Guidelines:	The Guidelines published by the IBAC under s 57 of the Act as at June 2013, copies of which may be downloaded from http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report-corruption-or-misconduct/protected-disclosure
IBAC Act:	<i>Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission Act 2011</i>
IBAC:	Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission
investigative entity:	Any one of the four bodies authorised to investigate a protected disclosure complaint, being the IBAC, the Victorian Ombudsman, the Chief Commissioner of Police and the VI.
procedures:	This version of the procedures of Strathbogie, as established under s 58 of the Act
protected discloser:	A person who makes a disclosure of improper conduct or detrimental action in accordance with the requirements of Part 2 of the Act
protected disclosure complaint:	A protected disclosure which has been determined and assessed by the IBAC to be a protected disclosure complaint under s 26 of the Act
protected disclosure:	Any complaint, concern, matter, allegation or disclosure (however described) made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act
Regulations:	<i>Protected Disclosure Regulations 2013</i>
VI:	Victorian Inspectorate

I. About these Procedures

Strathbogie is required to establish and publish procedures under s 58 of the Act and in accordance with the Guidelines of the IBAC published under s 57 of the Act.¹ The Council is required to ensure these procedures are readily available to members of the public as well as internally to all Councillors, employees, and staff of the Council.

These procedures are a resource for disclosers and potential disclosers, whether an internal Council member, employee or staff or an external member of the public; essentially, any individual who wants to find out how to make a disclosure, receive the protections available under the Act, and how the discloser and their disclosure may be managed and handled by the Council.

These procedures cover:

- how disclosures may be made to the Council;
- how the Council manages the receipt of disclosures;
- how the Council assesses disclosures it is able to receive under the Act;
- notifications the Council is required to make about disclosures, to both disclosers and to the IBAC;
- how the Council protects certain people, including from detrimental action being taken against them in reprisal for making a protected disclosure, namely:
 - protected disclosers,
 - persons who are the subject of protected disclosures and protected disclosure complaints, and
 - other persons connected to protected disclosures, such as witnesses or persons cooperating with an investigation.

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

Strathbogie 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.

Strathbogie 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.

¹ The IBAC has published 2 Guidelines under s 57 of the Act as at 20 June 2013. Further information about those Guidelines, including links to the full Guidelines, may be found at: <http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report-corruption-or-misconduct/protected-disclosure> (last accessed 22 June 2013).

2. About the Act

The Act commenced operation on 10 February 2013.

The purpose of the Act is to encourage and facilitate the making of disclosures of improper conduct and detrimental action by public officers and public bodies. It does so by providing certain protections for people who make a disclosure, or those who may suffer detrimental action in reprisal for making a disclosure. An essential component of this protection is to ensure that information connected to a protected disclosure, including the identity of a discloser and the contents of that disclosure, are kept strictly confidential.

Protected disclosures may be made about any of the public officers or bodies as defined in s 3 of the Act and s 6 of the IBAC Act. They include:

- government departments;
- statutory authorities;
- Councils established under the *Local Government Act 1989*;
- the Electoral Boundaries Commission;
- government-appointed boards and committees;
- government-owned companies;
- universities and TAFEs;
- public hospitals;
- a body performing a public function on behalf of the State, a public body or a public officer;
- state-funded residential care services;
- employees, staff and members of public bodies including those set out above;
- police and protected service officers;
- teachers;
- public servants;
- Councillors;
- Members of Parliament, including Ministers;
- Judicial officers, including coroners, members of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, associate judges and judicial officers;
- IBAC officers;
- statutory office holders, including the Auditor-General, the Ombudsman and the Director of Public Prosecutions; and
- the Governor, Lieutenant-Governor or Administrator of the State.

However, a protected disclosure cannot be made about:

- a Public Interest Monitor;
- the VI or officers of the VI; nor
- the conduct or actions of a Court.

3. The Council's internal reporting structures

Strathbogie supports a workplace culture where the making of protected disclosures is valued by the organisation and the right of any individual to make a protected disclosure taken seriously.

Strathbogie will:

- 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 staff, members, employees 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 protected disclosure may be made, and to take all reasonable steps to ensure staff, employees and Councillors are familiar with the Council's protected 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 protected disclosure in accordance with the Act;
- ensure the reporting system protects the identity of persons connected with a protected disclosure in accordance with the Act;
- not tolerate the taking of detrimental action in reprisal against any person for making a protected 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 and other action against any staff, Councillors or employees engaged in the taking of detrimental action;
- ensure any staff involved with handling protected disclosures are trained to receive and manage protected disclosures appropriately;
- ensure that the Council as a whole handles protected disclosures consistently and appropriately in accordance with its obligations under the Act, the Regulations, the IBAC's Guidelines and these procedures; and
- be visible, approachable, openly communicative and lead by example in establishing a workplace that supports the making of protected disclosures.

3.1 Employees, staff, members and Councillors

Employees, staff and Councillors are encouraged to raise matters of concern in relation to Strathbogie, including about any employee, staff or Councillors. In particular, employees, staff, 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 employees, staff and Councillors of Strathbogie have an important role to play in supporting those who have made a legitimate disclosure in accordance with the Act. 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 Direct and indirect supervisors and managers

Employees of the Council who wish to make a protected disclosure may make that disclosure to their direct or indirect supervisor or manager.

If a person wishes to make a protected disclosure *about* an employee of Strathbogie, that person may make the disclosure to that employee's direct or indirect supervisor or manager.

The supervisor or manager receiving the disclosure will:

- immediately bring the matter to the attention of the Protected Disclosure Coordinator for further action in accordance with the Act;
- commit to writing down any disclosures 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; and
- offer to remain a support person for the discloser in dealing with the Protected Disclosure Coordinator.

3.3 Protected Disclosure Officers

Strathbogie has appointed one protected disclosure officer to receive disclosures and be a contact point for general advice about the operation of the Act for any person wishing to make a disclosure. Protected disclosure officers are available to receive disclosures made internally within Strathbogie or from external sources. For internal staff and employees, they provide a confidential avenue of advice about the Act where staff or employees wish to raise a concern about their line managers, colleagues or supervisors.

Protected Disclosure 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;
- forward all disclosures and supporting evidence to the Protected Disclosure Coordinator for further action in accordance with the Act;
- 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;
- impartially assess the allegation and consider whether it is a disclosure required to be notified to the IBAC for assessment under s 21 of the Act; and
- offer to remain a support person for the discloser in dealing with the Protected Disclosure Coordinator.

The Protected Disclosure Officer appointed by Strathbogie and their contact details are:

Mr David Woodhams
Director, Corporate and Community
Strathbogie Shire Council
109A Binney Street, Euroa, 3666
Phone: 5795 0000

From time to time, it may be necessary to appoint other or additional Protected Disclosure Officers. Strathbogie will take all reasonable steps to publicise the contact details of those persons as widely as possible.

3.4 Protected Disclosure Coordinator

Strathbogie's Protected Disclosure Coordinator has a central role in the internal reporting system, and maintains oversight over the system.

The Protected Disclosure Coordinator is:

- contactable by external and internal persons making disclosures and has the authority to make enquiries of officers within the organisation;
- to receive all disclosures forwarded from Strathbogie's Protected Disclosure Officers;
- the contact point for general advice about the operation of the Act and for integrity agencies such as the IBAC;
- responsible for ensuring that Strathbogie carries out its responsibilities under the Act, any regulations made pursuant to the Act and any guidelines issued by the IBAC;
- Strathbogie's chief liaison with the IBAC in regard to the Act;
- responsible for coordinating Strathbogie's reporting system;
- to 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;
- required to consider each disclosure impartially to determine whether it should be notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act;
- responsible for arranging 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;
- to advise the discloser, appropriately and in accordance with the Act, the stage at which the disclosure is at (whether it has been notified to the IBAC for assessment, etc);
- to establish and manage a confidential filing system;
- to collate statistics on disclosures made;
- to liaise with the Chief Executive Officer (“**CEO**”) of Strathbogie.

The Protected Disclosure Coordinator appointed by Strathbogie is:

Mr Phil Howard
Director, Sustainable Development
Strathbogie Shire Council
109A Binney Street, Euroa, 3666
Phone: 5795 0000

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4. Making a disclosure

4.1 What is a disclosure and who can make a disclosure?

A disclosure may be made about 2 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 protected disclosure.

The term disclosure is interpreted under the Act in the ordinary sense of the word, for example, as a “revelation” to the person receiving it. The IBAC considers that a complaint or allegation that is already in the public domain will not normally be a protected disclosure. Such material would, for example, include matters which have already been subject to media or other public commentary.

The conduct or action being disclosed about may be one which has 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 10 February 2013.

A disclosure may:

- only be made by a natural person (or a group of individuals making joint disclosures),² disclosures cannot be made by a company or an organisation;
- be made anonymously;³
- 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.

The following are not protected disclosures under the Act:

- a disclosure that has not been made in accordance with all of the procedural requirements of Part 2 of the Act and the prescribed procedures in the Regulations (also see section 4.2 of these procedures below);
- 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;

² It should be noted that some of the protections set out in the Act protecting a protected discloser are available only to the person who makes a disclosure. The IBAC has pointed out that the consequence of this is, if a person makes a disclosure by ‘notifying’ the agency on behalf of another individual, then it is the ‘notifier’ who may receive those protections, and not the person on whose behalf they have made the disclosure. The person on whose behalf the disclosure has been made will only be entitled to protections against detrimental taken against them in reprisal for the disclosure made by the notifier.

³ Although this may create difficulties in the Council being able to communicate with the discloser, and some of the notification requirements imposed on the Council in relation to disclosures will not apply in relation to an anonymously made disclosure. In addition, it may impede the Council’s ability to properly assess whether the complaint or allegation is a protected disclosure for the purposes of the Act.

- a disclosure made by an officer or employee of an investigative entity 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 Strathbogie receives any disclosures which do not meet all of the requirements of Part 2 of the Act or the prescribed procedures in the Regulations, Strathbogie will not be required to consider whether it is a protected disclosure under the Act. However, the 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, Strathbogie 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 the Council in accordance with any other laws or internal policies and procedures.

4.2 How can a disclosure be made?

4.2.1 A disclosure must be made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act

A disclosure must be made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act.

Part 2 of the Act permits disclosures to be made anonymously, orally or in writing, and need not necessarily identify the person or organisation complained about.

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 the IBAC and the Ombudsman can be made via an online form available at each of their respective websites:
 - <https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report-corruption-or-misconduct/online-form>;
 - <http://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/www/html/215-complaint-form.asp>;

Disclosures cannot be made by fax.

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.

4.2.2 The disclosure must be made to a body authorised to receive it

One of the requirements in Part 2 of the Act is that the disclosure has been made to a body authorised under the Act to receive the disclosure.

Strathbogie can only deal with disclosures which concern Strathbogie, its employees, staff or officers.

Disclosures about improper conduct or detrimental action by the Strathbogie's Councillors **must** be made to the IBAC or to the Ombudsman. Those disclosures may not be made to the Council.

Disclosures about improper conduct or detrimental action by Strathbogie or its employees and staff may be made to Strathbogie or one of 4 external authorities:

- the 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 the Council, its employees, officers or staff should be made to Strathbogie or to the 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 employees, members, officers or staff of that other public body, it has not been made in accordance with Part 2 of the Act and cannot be treated as a protected disclosure under the Act. However, if such a disclosure is made to Strathbogie, the Council will take reasonable steps to direct the discloser to the (or an) other body which is able to receive a disclosure about that person or body under the Act (also see the table below at 4.2.8). This may not be possible if, for example, the allegation received is made from an anonymous source and the source has not provided any contact details to Strathbogie. Where in doubt, a discloser should make their disclosure to the 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), Strathbogie's Protected Disclosure Coordinator 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 protected disclosure under the Act.

4.2.3 How to make a disclosure to Strathbogie

Oral disclosures

An oral disclosure to the Strathbogie **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 CEO of Strathbogie;
- one of the Protected Disclosure Officers identified in section 3.3 of these procedures;
- the Protected Disclosure Coordinator identified in section 3.4 of these procedures;
- to the direct or indirect manager of the discloser, if the discloser is an employee of Strathbogie; or
- to the direct or indirect manager of the person to whom the disclosure relates, if that person is an employee of Strathbogie.

For the telephone numbers of the Protected Disclosure Officers and the Protected Disclosure Coordinator, please see sections 3.3 and 3.4 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 disclosure's permission or by giving prior warning that the conversation will be recorded.

Written disclosures

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

- delivered personally to the office of the Strathbogie at 109A Binney Street, Euroa; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of the Strathbogie at PO BOX 177, Euroa, 3666; or
- sent by email to the official email address of:
 - the direct or indirect supervisor or manager of the discloser, if the discloser is an employee of the Strathbogie;
 - the direct or indirect supervisor or manager of the person to whom the disclosure relates, where that person is an employee of Strathbogie;
 - a Protected Disclosure Officer identified in section 3.3 of these procedures;
 - a Protected Disclosure Coordinator specified in section 3.4 of these procedures.

The Council recommends that the discloser ensures, where a written disclosure is being provided personally or by post to the official office location or address of the Council, that the disclosure be sealed in an envelope which is clearly marked with one or more of the following:

- “Private & Confidential: Protected disclosure”;
- “Private & Confidential - CEO”;
- “Private & Confidential - Protected Disclosure Coordinator”; or
- “Private & Confidential - Protected Disclosure Officer”.

4.2.4 How to make a disclosure to the IBAC

Oral disclosures

An oral disclosure to the 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.

The oral disclosure must be made to one of the following persons:

- the Commissioner of the IBAC;
- the Deputy Commissioner of the IBAC;
- the CEO of the IBAC;
- an employee referred to in s 35(1) of the IBAC Act; or
- any staff referred to in s 35(2) of the IBAC Act.

Written disclosures

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

- delivered personally to the office of the IBAC, at Level 1, North Tower, 459 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC 3001; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of the IBAC, at GPO Box 24234, Melbourne, VIC 3000; 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 Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner, the CEO, or employee or staff referred to in s 35 of the IBAC Act); or
- submitted by an online form available from <https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report-corruption-or-misconduct/online-form>

4.2.5 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 3001; 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;
or
- sent by email to the official email address of any Ombudsman officer; or
- submitted by an online form (if any) identified in the procedures established by the Ombudsman under s 58(1) of the Act.

4.2.6 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 s 18(1) of the *Victorian Inspectorate Act 2011* (“**VI Act**”);
- an employee referred to in s 28(1) of the VI Act; or
- any staff referred to in s 28(2) of the VI Act.

Written disclosures

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

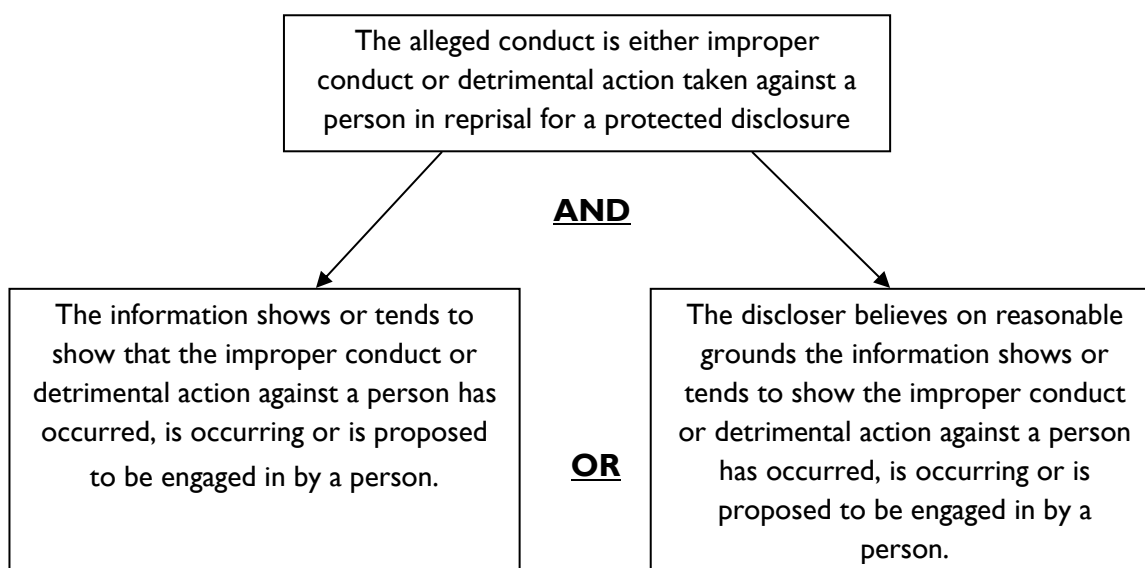
- delivered personally to the office of the VI; or
- sent by post addressed to the office of the VI, at PO Box 617 Collins Street West, Melbourne Vic 8007; or
- sent by email to the office of the VI at: info@vicinspectorate.vic.gov.au; or
- sent by email to the official email address of a person specified above to whom an oral disclosure may be made (i.e., the Inspector, employee or staff referred to in s 28 of the VI Act); or
- submitted by an online form (if any) identified in the procedures established by the VI under s 58(1) of the Act.

4.2.7 How to make a disclosure to the Chief Commissioner of Police

There are no particular Regulations at this time prescribing detailed procedures for making a disclosure to the Chief Commissioner of Police. The standard procedures as set out in Part 2 of the Act and as outlined in these procedures still apply where relevant.

4.3 What can a disclosure 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, the 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 conduct alleged about?
- 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 the “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’.⁴

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 the 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 is defined in the Act to mean either corrupt conduct or specified conduct (both terms are also defined by the Act and the IBAC Act).

Corrupt conduct

Corrupt conduct means any one of the following:

- conduct of any person that adversely affects the honest performance by a public officer or public body of his or her or its functions as a public officer or public body;
- conduct of a public officer or public body that constitutes or involves the dishonest performance of his or her or its functions as a public officer or public body;
- conduct of a public officer or public body that constitutes or involves knowingly or recklessly breaching public trust;
- conduct of a public officer or a public body that involves the misuse of information or material acquired in the course of the performance of his or her or its functions as a public officer or public body, whether or not for the benefit of the public officer or public body or any other person; *or*
- conduct that could constitute a conspiracy or an attempt to engage in any of the conduct referred to above; **and**

if that conduct could be proved beyond reasonable doubt at a trial, amounts to:

- an indictable offence; *or*
- one of the following 3 types of common law offences committed in Victoria:
 - perverting the course of justice
 - attempting to pervert the course of justice
 - bribery of an official.

⁴ *R v Bembridge* (1783) 99 ER 679, cited by the IBAC on p 14 and footnote 7 in its Guidelines for Making and Handling Protected Disclosures (<http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/docs/default-source/guidelines/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures-june-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=2>)

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 protected 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 protected 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 protected disclosure, but against any person connected with a protected 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 protected 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 'substantial' reason for taking that action, or it will not be considered to be detrimental action.

5. Handling disclosures

5.1 Receiving a disclosure

When the 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 Part 2 of the Act.

If the disclosure satisfies Part 2 of the Act, the discloser is entitled to receive protections under Part 6 of the Act (see section 7.3.1 of these procedures).

5.2 Assessing a disclosure

If the disclosure satisfies the requirements of Part 2 of the Act, the Council is required to determine whether the disclosure may be a protected disclosure by going through the 2 step assessment process recommended by the 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 the 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 protected disclosure.

This requires the 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 the 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 tend to show that there is improper conduct or detrimental action, then the Council will go on to the second step below.

5.2.2 Second step

This requires the 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 the 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 the IBAC's view, a belief cannot be based on a mere allegation or conclusion unsupported by any further facts or circumstances.

Other matters that the IBAC suggests the 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 the 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 the 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 for immediate investigation, or take management action against an employee to prevent future conduct.

The Act allows the 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, the 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, the Council must decide whether it considers the disclosure to be a protected disclosure. If the Council decides it may be a protected disclosure, it **must** notify IBAC of the disclosure. If the Council does not consider it to be a protected disclosure, then it may be a matter that the Council otherwise deals with through any other relevant internal complaint or grievance management processes.

5.3 Notifications

5.3.1 If the Council does not consider the disclosure to be a protected disclosure

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

- Strathboogie considers the disclosure is not a protected disclosure;
- the disclosure has not been notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act; and
- regardless of whether the disclosure is notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act, the protections under Part 6 of the Act apply.

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

5.3.2 If the Council considers the disclosure may be a protected disclosure

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

- notify the IBAC that:
 - the Council considers the disclosure may be a protected disclosure; and
 - the Council is notifying the disclosure to the IBAC for assessment under s 21 of the Act; **and**
- notify the discloser that:

- the disclosure has been notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act; and
- it is an offence under s 74 of the Act to disclose that the disclosure has been notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act.

In addition, at the time of notifying the IBAC under s 14 of the Act or at any later time, the Council may also provide the IBAC with any information obtained by the Council regarding the disclosure in the course of its enquiries leading up to its notification of the disclosure to the 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 the 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 the 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 the IBAC

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

The IBAC must inform Strathgogie of its determination as to whether or not the disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint:

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

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

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

6.1. If the IBAC determines the disclosure is not a protected disclosure complaint

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

- the IBAC has determined that the disclosure is not a protected disclosure complaint; and
- as a consequence of that determination:
 - the disclosure will not be investigated as a protected disclosure complaint; and
 - the confidentiality provisions under Part 7 of the Act no longer apply in relation to the disclosure; and
- regardless of whether the IBAC has determined that the disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint, the protections under Part 6 apply to a protected disclosure.

In addition, if the IBAC is of the view that the disclosure, although not a protected disclosure complaint, may be able to be dealt with by another entity, the IBAC may advise the discloser that:

- the matter which is the subject of the disclosure may be able to be dealt with by that entity other than as a protected disclosure complaint; and
- if the discloser wishes to pursue the matter, to make a complaint directly to that entity.

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

The IBAC is also able to consider whether it wishes to treat the assessable disclosure as a notification made to the IBAC under the IBAC Act.

6.2 If the IBAC determines the disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint

6.2.1 Notification to the discloser

If the IBAC determines the disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint, the IBAC must advise the discloser in writing and within a reasonable time after the determination is made, that:

- the IBAC has determined that the disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint;
- regardless of the determination, the protections available to a discloser of a protected disclosure under Part 6 of the Act apply;
- the discloser has rights, protections and obligations under the Act as contained in ss 72, 74 and Parts 6 and 7 of the Act, including an explanation of the effect of those sections and Parts of the Act; and
- it is an offence under s 74 of the Act to disclose that the IBAC has determined that the disclose is a protected disclosure complaint.

Whether or not IBAC determines the disclosure to be a protected disclosure complaint, the protections under Part 6 of the PD Act apply to the discloser.

Once the IBAC has determined that a disclosure is a protected disclosure complaint, the discloser cannot withdraw that disclosure. However, under the IBAC Act, the IBAC can decide not to investigate a protected disclosure complaint if the discloser requests that it not be investigated.

6.2.2 Further actions the IBAC may take⁵

Under the IBAC Act, the IBAC may dismiss, investigate, or refer a protected disclosure complaint.

If the IBAC dismisses a protected disclosure complaint, then it must do so on one of the grounds specifically set out in the IBAC Act. In particular, the IBAC **must** dismiss a protected disclosure complaint if the matter disclosed is a matter that neither the IBAC nor an investigating entity may investigate.

⁵ This section of the procedures comprises a summary of points drawn from pp 23 to 25 of the IBAC's Guidelines for Making and Handling Protected Disclosures (<http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/docs/default-source/guidelines/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures-june-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=2>). For further information, please refer to those Guidelines.

The IBAC may choose to investigate the alleged conduct if it is reasonably satisfied that it is “serious corrupt conduct”.

The IBAC may also choose to refer the protected disclosure complaint to other appropriate and relevant investigative entities.

Depending on the action decided to be taken by the IBAC, the IBAC must also provide certain other information to the discloser. That information is set out at the chart on p 24 of the IBAC’s Guidelines for Making and Handling Protected Disclosures.⁶

6.2.3 Other information about investigative entities’ investigations of a protected disclosure complaint⁷

If the IBAC or another investigative entity is conducting an investigation of a protected disclosure complaint, it may be in contact with the Council or person about which the disclosure has been made. This will be for the purpose of conducting investigative enquiries.

The Council or person will be able to disclose information about the protected disclosure complaint to the investigative entity without breaching the confidentiality requirements of the Act.

The relevant investigative entity may also disclose the identity of the discloser and the content of the disclosure if necessary to do so for the purposes of their investigative action. If this is the case, then the Council or person to whom the information has been disclosed, is bound by the confidentiality requirements of Part 7 of the PD Act.

In addition, if the Council or public officer is advised of the identity of the discloser, then they will be required to look after the welfare of the discloser and provide protection against possible detrimental action.

At the conclusion of its investigation, the relevant investigative entity must generally provide the discloser with information about the results of its investigation, including any action taken by the investigative entity and any recommendation by the investigative agency that action or further action be taken.

The investigative entity may provide written information about the commencement, conduct or result of an investigation, including any actions taken and any recommendation made that any action or further action be taken to the relevant principal officer. However, the investigative entity must not provide any information that is likely to lead to the identification of a discloser.

The investigative entity does not have to provide this information to either the discloser or the relevant principal officer in specified circumstances set out in the IBAC Act or the *Ombudsman Act 1973*.

⁶ Available at <http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/docs/default-source/guidelines/guidelines-for-making-and-handling-protected-disclosures-june-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=2>,

⁷ See footnote 5 above.

7. Welfare management

Strathgogie is committed to the protection of genuine disclosers against detrimental action taken in reprisal for the making of protected disclosures.

The protection of persons making genuine protected 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 protected disclosure complaint (“**cooperators**”). Persons who are the subject of allegations will also have their welfare looked after.

The Council must ensure disclosers and cooperators are protected from direct and indirect detrimental action being taken against them in reprisal for the protected disclosure. The Council will ensure its workplace culture supports disclosers and cooperators. Such support will extend to the relevant persons regardless of whether they are internal to the organisation (e.g., employees, Councillors, other officers) 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 the Council’s services. Those derive from various legislative and administrative obligations to:

- ensure the health and wellbeing of employees 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. The IBAC uses the example of a public housing tenant client of the Department of Human Services to illustrate this point. If the tenant makes a disclosure about an officer of the Department allocating a house to a relative of the officer, without them having to go through the normal application process, then the IBAC’s view is that the Department has legislative and administrative obligations to meet in handling the welfare of the discloser.⁸

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

⁸ Pages 7-8, Guidelines for protected disclosure welfare management, <http://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/docs/default-source/guidelines/guidelines-for-protected-disclosure-welfare-management-june-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

7.1 Support available to disclosers and cooperators

The Council will support disclosers and cooperators 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 the Council, details about results of the action known to the Council;

- providing active support by:
 - acknowledging the person for having come forward
 - assuring the discloser or cooperator that they have done the right thing, and the 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 the 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 the 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 cooperator;
 - reminding the discloser or cooperator not to reveal themselves or to reveal any information that would enable others to identify them as a discloser or cooperator;
 - ensuring that hardcopy and electronic files relating to the disclosure are accessible only to those who are involved in managing disclosures in the 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 cooperator), that is, actively monitor the workplace, anticipating problems and dealing with them before they develop as far as is possible;

- protecting the discloser or cooperator 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 protected disclosure;

- preventing the spread of gossip and rumours about any investigation into the protected 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 appropriate circumstances, the Council will appoint a suitable welfare manager to protect a discloser or a cooperator. The following matters will be taken into consideration by the Council when deciding whether to appoint a welfare manager in a particular case:

- are there any real risks of detrimental action against the discloser or cooperator, taking into account their particular circumstances?
- whether the Council can will take the discloser or cooperator seriously and treat them with respect?
- whether the Council will give the discloser or cooperator effective support, including keeping the discloser informed of the status of the disclosure?
- can the Council protect the person from suffering repercussions, by dealing with the matter discreetly and confidentially, and responding swiftly and fairly to any allegations that the discloser or cooperator has in fact suffered retribution?

If the answer to the first question is 'yes' then the IBAC recommends the appointment of a dedicated welfare officer. If the answer to the first question is 'no' and the Council can meet the needs set out in the remainder of the questions, the IBAC suggests there may be no need for a dedicated welfare officer to be appointed for that particular case.

In most circumstances, a welfare officer will only be required where a protected disclosure complaint proceeds to investigation, but each protected disclosure received by the Council will to be assessed on its own merits. In particular, a Welfare Manager will be appointed where the Council believes that one is required to ensure that the appropriate support as set out in s 7.1 above can be provided to the discloser or cooperator.

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

- advise the discloser or cooperator 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 protected disclosure to any person other than the Protected Disclosure Coordinator or the CEO;
- ensure all meetings between the Welfare Manager and the discloser or cooperator are conducted discreetly to protect the person from being identified as being involved in the protected disclosure;

- ensure access to Council's Employee Assistance Program for internal disclosers and cooperators, as relevant or applicable; and
- ensure the expectations of the discloser are realistic and reasonable, and that the discloser or cooperator understands the limits of the support the 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 cooperator.

7.2 Welfare management of persons who are the subject of protected disclosures

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

The Council will make a decision about whether or when the subject of a disclosure will be informed about a protected 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 protected disclosure complaint, or if a decision is made to dismiss the disclosure.

The Act limits the disclosure of information about the content of an assessable disclosure and the identity of the discloser to certain specified circumstances set out in Part 7 of the Act. The Council may give information about the disclosure to the subject of the disclosure if it is directed or authorised to do so by the investigative entity investigating the protected disclosure complaint, or for the purpose of taking action with respect to the conduct alleged, including disciplinary action.

Investigative entities may also inform the subject of the protected disclosure complaint in the course of their investigation for the purposes of conducting that investigation, or any actions that they propose to take as a result of the investigation.

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 the Council, or be referred to the Council's EAP program for welfare assistance. Alternatively, the Protected Disclosure Coordinator will provide support and advice to a person the subject of a disclosure, particularly in relation to their rights and obligations under the Act, Strathbogie's internal reporting system, these procedures, and any other relevant law or code of conduct. The Council will consider each matter on a case by case basis, taking into account the particular circumstances of the person and the protected disclosure complaint.

Confidentiality

Consistently with Strathbogie's confidentiality obligations under the Act as outlined in these procedures, the fact that a disclosure has been made, whether it has been notified to the IBAC for assessment, any information received from the IBAC or another investigative entity and the identities of persons involved will not be divulged.

The 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

Strathbogie will afford natural justice to the subject of a disclosure prior to any decision being made about the allegations. If the matter has been investigated by an investigative entity, then the investigative entity will be responsible for ensuring consultations with the subject include the provision of natural justice to him or her. The 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

Strathbogie 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, the 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. This is particularly crucial in a situation where there has been publicly disclosed information identifying the subject, but also where such information has become well-known across the Council and the subject is an employee, Councillor or staff of the Council.

Further, if the matter has been publicly disclosed by Strathbogie, the CEO will consider any request by that person to issue a statement of support setting out that the allegations were clearly wrong or unsubstantiated /for compensation/additional supported needs.

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 Protected 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 protected 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 protected disclosure under the Act. The penalty for committing such an offence in contravention of the Act is a maximum fine of 240 penalty units, usually increasing 1 July every year in accordance with arrangements made under the *Monetary Units Act 2004*, two years imprisonment or both.

In such circumstances, the Council will be careful about making preliminary enquiries or gathering information concerning such an allegation of detrimental action so that, to the extent it is reasonably able to, it protects the integrity of any evidence that might be later relied upon in a criminal prosecution.

In addition, the taking of detrimental action in reprisal for making a disclosure can be grounds for a person to make a further disclosure with respect to that conduct. The disclosure of this allegation will then be assessed by the Council as a new disclosure under Part 2 of the Act. Where the detrimental action is of a serious nature likely to amount to a criminal offence, the Council will also consider reporting the matter to the police or the IBAC (if the matter was not already the subject of a disclosure notified to the IBAC).

A discloser of a protected disclosure may also:

- take civil action against the person who took detrimental action against the discloser and seek damages;
- take civil action against Strathbogie jointly and severally to seek damages if the person who took detrimental action against the discloser took that action in the course of employment with, or while acting as an agent of Strathbogie; and
- apply for an order or an injunction from the Supreme Court.

7.4 Protections for persons making a protected disclosure

7.4.1 Part 6 protections available to disclosers

Part 6 of the Act sets out the protections provided to persons who make a disclosure that is a 'protected disclosure', i.e., one that is made in accordance with Part 2 of the PD Act. In summary, they are as follows:

- the discloser is not subject to any civil or criminal liability for making the protected disclosure;
- the discloser is not subject to any administrative action (including disciplinary action) for making the protected disclosure;
- by making the protected disclosure, the discloser is not committing an offence against the *Constitution Act 1975* or any other law that imposes obligations of confidentiality or otherwise restricts the disclosure of information;
- by making the protected disclosure, the discloser is not breaching any other obligation (made by oath, rule of law or practice) requiring him or her to maintain confidentiality; and
- the discloser cannot be held liable for defamation in relation to information included in a protected disclosure made by him or her.

The protections in Part 6 apply from the time at which the disclosure is made by the discloser. They apply even if the Council receiving the disclosure does not notify the disclosure to the IBAC, and even if the IBAC has determined that the protected disclosure is not a protected disclosure complaint.

The protections also apply to further information relating to a protected disclosure made by the original discloser, if the further information has been provided, verbally or in writing, to:

- the entity to which the protected disclosure was made;
- the IBAC; or
- any investigating entity investigating the protected disclosure.

7.4.2 Loss of protections caused by actions of the discloser

However, a discloser is not protected if they commit an offence under s 72 or s 73 of Act, as follows:

- provide false or misleading information, or further information that relates to a protected disclosure, that the person knows to be false or misleading in a material particular, intending that the information be acted on as a protected disclosure (maximum penalty: a fine of 120 penalty units, usually increasing 1 July every year in accordance with arrangements made under the *Monetary Units Act 2004*, 12 months imprisonment, or both);
- claim that a matter is the subject of a protected disclosure knowing the claim to be false (maximum penalty: a fine of 120 penalty units, 12 months imprisonment, or both);

- falsely claim that a matter is the subject of a disclosure that IBAC has determined to be a protected disclosure complaint (maximum penalty: a fine of 120 penalty units, 12 months imprisonment, or both).

7.4.3 Other limitations on protections afforded to disclosers

A discloser is not protected against legitimate management action being taken by the Council in accordance with the Act.

In addition, although the discloser of a protected 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 protected disclosure.

Where a discloser is implicated in improper conduct, Strathbogie will handle the disclosure and protect the discloser from reprisals in accordance with the Act, the IBAC's guidelines and these procedures. Strathbogie 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 protected disclosure invariably creates the perception that it is being taken in reprisal for the disclosure. The CEO will make the final decision on the advice of the Protected 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 the Council's CEO ensuring that:

- the fact that a person has made a protected disclosure is not a substantial reason for the Council taking the action against the employee;
- 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.

The 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 Strathbogie and all individuals

Strathbogie will take all reasonable steps to protect the identity of the discloser and the matters disclosed by a discloser. Maintaining confidentiality in relation to protected 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 Strathbogie, officers of the IBAC, or other persons authorised by law.

8.2 Steps taken by Strathbogie to ensure confidentiality

8.2.1 Information management

Strathbogie will ensure all files, whether paper or electronic, are kept securely. Those files will be accessible only by the Protected Disclosure Coordinator or a Protected Disclosure Officer involved in a particular matter/and the Protected Disclosure Officers. Where necessary, a 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 Protected Disclosure Coordinator or an investigator appropriately authorised under the Act or the IBAC Act. All meetings between any relevant persons, including Protected Disclosure Officers, the Welfare Manager and disclosers will be conducted discreetly to protect the confidentiality of the person making a protected disclosure.

All printed material will be kept in files that are clearly marked as Protected Disclosure Act matters, and warn of the criminal penalties that apply to any unauthorised access, use or divulging of information concerning a protected disclosure.

All other materials in connection with a protected disclosure will also be stored securely with the protected disclosure file.

Strathbogie 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 Strathbogie.

However, the Act provides that certain information related to protected disclosures as contained in documents in the possession of Strathbogie 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 the IBAC by Strathbogie under s 21 of the Act for assessment; and
- any information that is likely to lead to the identification of a discloser.

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

8.2.3 Training for all staff

Strathbogie will:

- ensure that staff, employees, officers and members have access to a copy of these procedures in hard or soft copy;
- incorporate into its induction procedures training about Strathbogie’s general obligations under the Act and the rights and obligations of all employees, staff and members;
- introduce periodic refresher courses for existing staff, employees and members about their rights and obligations under the Act;
- provide additional training and assistance to:
 - any members of the Council with specific responsibilities and functions to handle and manage protected disclosures under the Act, including the Protected Disclosure Coordinator and people involved in welfare management;
 - its complaint handling staff to ensure that any complaints received will be dealt with consistently and in accordance with the Act as required;
 - any staff with functions and duties under the FOI Act or with responsibilities for information management, to ensure that no prohibited information is disclosed under the Act and to ensure there is appropriate liaising with the staff of the IBAC or other investigative agencies where required in response to a request for access under the FOI Act; and

- all staff and employees dealing with customers to 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 Strathbogie (or one of its officers) in the exercise of functions of Strathbogie 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 the IBAC or the VI has determined that the assessable disclosure is not a protected disclosure and the discloser or Strathbogie 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 a parent or guardian of a;
 - 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.

The criminal offences set out in the Act relating to confidentiality include:

1. divulging information obtained in connection or as a result of the handling or investigation of a protected disclosure without legislative authority. Maximum penalty: 60 penalty units, six months imprisonment, or both.
2. Disclosing that a disclosure has been notified to the IBAC for assessment under the Act. Maximum penalty: 60 penalty units, six months imprisonment, or both.
3. Disclosing that a disclosure has been assessed by the IBAC or the VI to be a protected disclosure complaint under the Act. Maximum penalty: 60 penalty units, six months imprisonment, or both.

9. Collating and publishing statistics

Strathbogie 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 the IBAC for assessment under s 21 of the Act during the financial year.

The Protected 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.

10. Review

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

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 Steve Crawcour
 Chief Executive Officer

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 Date