

INSIGHT

Whistleblowing in the civil service: good practice guide

Methodology appendix

Our scope

1 This appendix accompanies the National Audit Office's (NAO) good practice guide, *Whistleblowing in the civil service*, published in February 2024. This document describes the guide's scope and the evidence base for its insights.

2 Our objective is to provide a practical 'how to' handbook to help improve how government organisations manage whistleblowing processes and the experience of whistleblowers. Our guide collates insights on what matters for organisations to get right and gives people working in whistleblowing roles ideas on how to do that. It provides case examples of good practice, practical tips, and prompt questions for people to use for further reflection and learning. Our insights are for organisations to adapt to their context, rather than recommendations for individual departments to implement.

3 Many factors contribute to good whistleblowing processes and a positive experience for whistleblowers. We chose to focus this guide on three specific themes that our published work about whistleblowing since 2014 has highlighted as repeated challenges for government organisations. The three themes are:

- raising awareness of whistleblowing and encouraging people to raise concerns;
- helping whistleblowers have a positive experience of raising a concern; and
- using whistleblowing to support organisational learning and improvement.

4 The guide's content uses perspectives gathered in two focus groups with people that work in and manage whistleblowing processes in government organisations. It also uses learning from our previous reports into whistleblowing in government. The next section of this appendix provides more information on our evidence base.

Our evidence base

5 The insights for our good practice guide were developed by analysing evidence collected primarily between February and July 2023.

Research methods

Focus Groups

6 We held two focus groups with a total of seventeen staff who work in and manage whistleblowing in government organisations. We used these focus groups to identify and discuss the challenges they face in their roles and how they address them. We designed the focus groups to be a useful learning resource for focus group participants and to generate insights to inform our good practice guide.

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Participant selection

7 We contacted sixteen central government departments to invite officials to take part in the focus groups. We aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives, reflecting a mix of department roles and sizes. We asked departments to volunteer 1 – 2 people who are responsible for supporting whistleblowers or managing cases on a day to day basis, for example, a nominated officer or manager that oversees whistleblowing cases. Our focus groups were attended by seventeen people from 9 central government departments. A limitation of our approach is that organisations self-selected to participate.

8 The two focus groups took place in June 2023, were carried out online, and each lasted approximately 2 hours. They were structured around our three themes (described in the scope section of this appendix) and designed to explore participants' perspectives on what aspects of whistleblowing are working well and what can be improved. We provided participants with an agenda before the session to help them prepare. The focus group used various facilitation approaches including a mix of group discussions and individual contributions. We took detailed notes of the discussion and recorded participants contributions using electronic whiteboards and the meeting's chat and polling functionalities. We used the same approach in both focus groups.

Analytical approach

9 We logged and organised participants' contributions in a matrix after the focus group to enable comprehensive and consistent analysis. Each contribution was categorised as either an operational factor that is working well or a barrier to improving. We analysed the data to identify which of the three themes the contribution aligned with. The contributions were then assessed and grouped against common sub-categories of whistleblowing barriers or good practice to draw out common sub-themes and insights.

10 Our focus groups were the primary new evidence gathering methodology for informing the insights in the good practice guide. We used our analysis to:

- identify challenges experienced by people supporting whistleblowers and managing whistleblowing processes in government;
- identify good practices or approaches to managing whistleblowing in the civil service; and
- identify potential examples of good practice which we could explore in more detail and turn into useful case studies.

11 Our analytical approach had some limitations. Although the attendees at the focus groups were able to provide their perspective on the experiences of whistleblowers, we did not speak directly to whistleblowers. We considered whether there was additional fieldwork we could carry out directly with whistleblowers. However, the methodological, practical and ethical challenges involved in identifying, contacting and seeking views from a representative group of civil service whistleblowers were prohibitive.

Case examples

12 The aims of our case examples were to:

- provide practical, real-life examples of the good practices referenced in the guide;
- identify, showcase, and promote some of the good practices used by people providing whistleblowing processes; and
- share learning across government by allowing people with whistleblowing roles to learn from the experience of others.

13 Each case example includes a description of the 'reason for action' which is typically the problem that teams had to overcome or the opportunity for improvement, the approach taken to address the problem or to achieve the improvement, and the impact or benefit of the change made.

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Case example selection

14 We generated ideas for potential case examples through our focus group discussions and a document review of previous NAO reports and their evidence base. From this extended list we selected case examples that:

- related to our three thematic areas and the key points that had emerged during our focus group discussions;
- reflected principles of good practice that we had identified in our previous work; and
- provided a sufficient level of detail to be considered a useful learning tool.

Fieldwork and analysis

15 For each case example we held an interview with an official or officials from the team involved in implementing the operational practice or approach under consideration. We used the interview to gather specific details and draft a case example of their practice or approach. We shared the draft case example with the government organisations to ensure it was fair and accurate. In one case we did not carry out an interview (for the Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport) and instead used evidence collected for our investigation on whistleblowing in the civil service.

16 The case examples used in the guide are self-reported and are examples of practices or approaches that people in government told us worked well for them. We have not audited or validated the case examples, for example by obtaining documented evidence of their benefits.

Document review

Background review

Focus and purpose

17 We reviewed publicly available information to help define the boundaries of our good practice guide and deepen our understanding of the key issues for managing whistleblowing processes and the experience of whistleblowers. The documents included previous NAO reports, government and third-party publications, and international research. Our initial review identified the three thematic areas for the guide which we used to focus our detailed document review.

Analytical approach

18 For our initial literature review, which informed the scope of the guide, we captured a broader understanding of previous work on the topic rather than using set criteria. Using our identified three themes, we adapted our document review to extract information relevant to:

- raising awareness of whistleblowing and encouraging people to raise concerns;
- helping whistleblowers have a positive experience of raising a concern; and
- using whistleblowing to support organisational learning and improvement.

Review of NAO publications

Focus and purpose

19 We carried out a review of the NAO's previous publications, which covered the period 2014 – 2023, to gather additional material for our guide and compare the emerging insights from our focus groups with previous NAO findings on whistleblowing in government. We also reviewed previous NAO publications to identify possible case examples and other evidence of good practice to include in our guide.

Analytical approach

20 We reviewed the NAO publications using a framework for our three themes to identify good practice or barriers to whistleblowing to include in our guide. We identified potential case examples in the publications and assessed them against our three themes to determine which examples to include.

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Synthesis, quality assurance and reporting of evidence collected

21 After gathering insights and evidence from multiple research methods, we began the process of synthesising the key points, testing and evolving the guide's key themes, and how to report them. We adopted and adapted the synthesis framework approach used in our 'How to improve operational services' good practice guides.

22 Our synthesis framework allowed us to decide what good practice to focus our guide on and how to report it. The framework helped us see similar issues and draw out common themes from our different evidence sources. We used the framework to decide which insights to report under our guide's three themes, ensure there was no duplication, and check the insights were coherent across the themes. We also used the synthesis framework to test our focus group evidence. We took assurance over the quality of our focus group insights by comparing them with common findings and themes from our previous assessments of whistleblowing in the civil service.