

PROCEDURES FOR THE ASSESSMENT AND REVIEW OF ALLEGATIONS OF BREACHES OF THE MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT

Receipt of complaint and acknowledgement to complainant

1. Complaints will only be considered where the proper complaint form has been completed **in full**, whether electronically or in hard copy, including the screening questions. Complaints will not be considered where the complainant is unprepared to enter the process accepting that the final decision will not be subject to further challenge.
2. Receipt of a completed form will be acknowledged within five working days. Notification that a complaint which has been submitted is incomplete and cannot be progressed will be notified within the same timescale.

Complainant requests to protect their identity

3. It is normal that subject members will have a right to know the name of the person who is complaining about them. The Monitoring Officer will consider any request made by the complainant to protect their identity.
4. Where the Monitoring Officer agrees to the request, the complaint shall proceed on that basis.
5. Where the Monitoring Officer does not agree to the request, then the subsequent steps in this procedure shall be suspended until such time as it has been established whether the complainant is willing for the complaint to proceed on the basis that their identity shall not be protected.
6. In the event that the Monitoring Officer does not accept the request and the complainant is unprepared for their identity to be revealed to the subject member, then the complaint shall be dismissed. The complainant shall be notified within five working days of this decision.

Notification to the subject member

7. The subject member will also be notified of the complaint within five working days of receipt. They will be provided with:
 - (a) A summary of the complaint, including which part of the Members' Code of Conduct it is alleged they have breached;
 - (b) The name of the complainant, unless the Monitoring Officer has agreed to a request to protect their identity; and
 - (c) Their right to consult with an Independent Person. The definition of an Independent Person and the terms of any consultation with subject members is detailed in Appendix A.

Monitoring Officer Initial Consideration

8. The Monitoring Officer will consider whether the complaint relates to any other proceedings, such as court matters, that would make it inappropriate for consideration through the Councillor Complaints process. If the Monitoring Officer considers it would not be appropriate for consideration, the complainant will be advised as soon as practicable.
9. An *Independent Person Advisory Panel* will be made aware of the complaint and will recommend to the Monitoring Officer whether, in its view, the complaint is so serious that it should be escalated to the *Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage*. The Monitoring Officer will make a determination following consideration by the advisory panel.

Initial Screening Stage

10. The *Initial Screening Stage* will be undertaken by either the Monitoring Officer or by an officer within Legal and Democratic Services on behalf of the Monitoring Officer. Any final determination to not proceed with a complaint on the basis that it is subject to other investigatory proceedings, or to refer the complaint to a political group, will be made by the Monitoring Officer.
11. Subject to Paragraph 12, the decision following the *Initial Screening Stage* will be one of the following:
 - (a) To refer a matter to a political group, where the subject is a member of that group, on the basis that the complaint has the potential to be considered politically influenced. The grounds for this finding are detailed in Appendix B; or
 - (b) To progress the complaint to the *Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage*.
12. No decision shall be taken to refer a matter to a political group without first consulting the Independent Advisory Panel.
13. Where it has been determined to refer a complaint under paragraph 11(a), the complainant and the group will be notified within five days of the decision. The process for this is detailed in Appendix C.

Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage

14. The Monitoring Officer shall consider the complaint during the *Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage* and determine whether it warrants progression to the *Independent Person Consultation Stage*.
15. During this assessment, the Monitoring Officer may dismiss the complaint on the basis of any of the following:
 - (a) The subject of the complaint was not an elected member of the authority at the time of the event(s) detailed in the complaint, or is no longer an elected member of the authority;

- (b) The subject of the complaint was acting in a personal capacity rather than in their capacity as an elected member of the authority at the time of the event(s) detailed in the complaint. Guidance on this is detailed in Appendix D;
- (c) The subject of the complaint has since taken steps to remedy the situation, and those steps are proportionate to the allegations and result in there not being a public interest in the complaint being pursued;
- (d) A similar complaint has been received and/or the complaint may be considered to be part of a series of complaints and/or the complaint could be considered to be vexatious;
- (e) The complaint, even if proven, would not constitute a breach of the paragraph in the Members' Code of Conduct as identified by the complainant.

16. Where it has been determined that any of the grounds for dismissing the complaint detailed in Paragraph 15 apply, the complainant and subject member shall be notified within five working days.

17. Where it has been determined that none of the grounds under Paragraph 15 apply, the matter will progress to the *Independent Person Consultation Stage*.

Independent Person Consultation Stage

18. An Independent Person, as defined in Appendix A, shall be provided with a copy of the complaint and notified of the various grounds for referral or dismissal which it has been determined do not apply.

19. The Independent Person shall recommend one of the following courses of action to the Monitoring Officer:

- (a) That the matter should not be pursued and no further action should be taken on the basis that one or more of the following apply:
 - a. The complaint does not cross the threshold of seriousness to warrant an investigation;
 - b. The Independent Person is not satisfied that even if the complaint was proven, it would result in a breach of the part of the Members' Code of Conduct which the complainant has identified; or
 - c. It is not in the public interest to pursue the matter.
- (b) That a remedy or informal resolution, such as an apology from the subject member, should be pursued as an alternative to an investigation, on the basis that it is likely that there has been a breach but that an informal intervention would spare the time and expense of an investigation;
- (c) That the complaint is sufficiently serious that it would be in the public interest to undertake an investigation.

20. The Monitoring Officer shall determine the outcome in consideration of the Independent Person's advice.

21. Where it has been determined to pursue Paragraph 19(a), both the complainant and subject member shall be notified within five working days.

22. Where it has been determined to pursue Paragraph 19(b) and following completion of the informal resolution, both the complainant and the subject member shall be notified that the matter has now concluded.
23. Where it has been determined to pursue Paragraph 19(b) but where the subject member does not agree to the proposed informal resolution, the Monitoring Officer may re-consult with the Independent Person on whether Paragraph 19(a) or 19(c) should be applied.
24. Where it has been determined to pursue Paragraph 19(c), the matter shall progress to an investigation and a report will be prepared for consideration by the committee. In the event that a member of the committee is either subject to a complaint or a complainant, their attendance at the meeting shall be in that capacity only and not as part of the decision-making body.

Monitoring Officer referrals

25. Under certain circumstances, it may be necessary for the Monitoring Officer to refer matters to the Standards Committee which have not been raised as complaints. This may arise, for example, when the Monitoring Officer has been made aware of conduct which may constitute a breach.
26. In these circumstances, the Monitoring Officer will report the matter for information and the committees powers shall not extend beyond noting the report. For further action to be taken, it will be necessary for a complaint to be raised through the normal process.

Appendix A – Independent Persons

1. An Independent Person may be any of the following:
 - (a) An Independent Person appointed to the Standards Committee by Council;
 - (b) A person appointed to undertake this role by the Monitoring Officer due to unavailability of a person detailed at paragraph 1(a).
2. Independent Persons will undertake three distinct roles during the consideration and assessment of complaints, as follows:
 - (a) A panel of Independent Persons shall form an Independent Person Advisory Panel. The panel's discussions may be summoned in person or conducted over email/telephone. The composition of the panel shall be determined by the Monitoring Officer;
 - (b) An individual Independent Person shall provide support and/or advice to a subject member;
 - (c) An individual Independent Person shall provide support and/or advice to the Monitoring Officer on actions arising from complaints that have progressed beyond the *Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage*.
3. The Independent Persons undertaking roles detailed in 2(b) and 2(c) shall not be the same person in any individual investigation, but the same Independent Person may undertake either of those roles across different investigations and be part of the Independent Person Advisory Panel.
4. Where an Independent Person is undertaking the role detailed in 2(b), their remit shall be:
 - (a) To answer any questions the subject member may have about the complaint;
 - (b) To assist the subject member by talking through the complaint or by challenging the subject member to assist them in understanding whether they may have breached the Code of Conduct, or whether they have a strong defence to show that there has not been a breach;
 - (c) To take notes to assist the subject member and provide any guidance. Any notes will need to be agreed by both parties before being submitted as any form of evidence.
5. All Independent Persons duly appointed to the Standards Committee shall be entitled to attend a Standards Committee hearing where any investigation is discussed, but will be required to declare the role they have undertaken.

Appendix B – Finding that matter has potential to be politically influenced

1. Consideration shall be given to the responses provided by the complainant to the screening questions when determining whether a complaint may be politically influenced.
2. **Determination that a complaint has the potential to be politically influenced is not confirmation that the complaint is necessarily politically motivated. However, the existence of the potential creates risks around the matter being adjudicated by an officer of the council.**
3. It is acceptable for other sources to be used when considering this matter, such as opinion that has been published in the name of the complainant, and public records of candidates and signatories in local, European and General Elections.
4. A complaint may be considered to have the potential to be politically influenced when it has been submitted by any of the following, or when such persons have assisted in the preparation of a complaint:
 - A current councillor, MP or MEP;
 - A candidate in elections for any of the above within the previous three years;
 - A person who is (or has in the last three years been) closely linked to any of the persons detailed above, including political agents and active supporters of political parties and groups.
5. The decision of the Monitoring Officer shall be final.

Appendix C – Procedure for notifying political groups of complaint referrals

1. A matter shall only be referred where the complaint relates to a subject who is a member of a political group of the local authority. Complaints made against ungrouped or independent councillors shall not be referred to political groups.
2. Only the relevant political group as detailed in Paragraph 1, above, shall be notified of the complaint.
3. The referral shall be made by the Monitoring Officer, or an officer acting on behalf of the Monitoring Officer, providing a member of the political group, as detailed in Paragraph 4, below, with:
 - (a) A copy of the complaint, subject to any necessary redactions where the Monitoring Office has previously agreed to an individual's identity being redacted;
 - (b) Notification of the basis for the referral.
4. The member of the political group who is notified of the referral shall be any one of the following:
 - (a) The leader of that group;
 - (b) The deputy leader of that group;
 - (c) The Group Whip;
 - (d) A member of the group who has been nominated by their group specifically for the purposes of receiving such notifications; or
 - (e) A member of the group who has been appointed to the Standards Committee.
5. Where the subject member is one of the individuals detailed in Paragraph 4, that person shall not be the group representative who receives the notification.
6. It is for the political group to utilise its disciplinary proceedings in handling the complaint. Except in the specific circumstances detailed in Paragraph 7, below, the council and its officers shall not become involved in any discussions with any person, including the complainant, regarding:
 - (a) The disciplinary procedures operated by the political group;
 - (b) The application of those procedures; or
 - (c) The outcome of the referral.
7. Notwithstanding the independence of procedures which groups can apply as detailed above, groups handling complaints will be required:
 - (a) To confirm to the complaint and to the Monitoring Officer and/or a representative of the Monitoring Officer that a process has been applied within four weeks of receiving the complaint;
 - (b) To confirm to the complaint and to the Monitoring Officer that the matter has been resolved and to provide a written summary detailing the outcome and what actions have been taken as a result within 12 weeks of receiving the complaint.

8. Where the Monitoring Officer has agreed to a request that the complainant's identity be protected, officers will assist to communicate any updates and the final decision to the complainant. This line of communication shall not extend to seeking updates from the political group on behalf of the complainant beyond those detailed in paragraph 7.

Appendix D – Members' operating on council business

1. Complaints shall be dismissed during the *Monitoring Officer Assessment Stage* where it is deemed that the councillor was operating on a personal basis at the time of the incident(s) detailed in the complaint, subject to the clause in paragraph 4, below. This Appendix seeks to offer guidance but is not an exhaustive list.
2. Councillors shall be deemed to be operating on council business where they are:
 - Attending the Council House or other council premises;
 - Undertaking duties at a council committee;
 - Undertaking duties on an outside body or organisation to which Council has appointed them;
 - Undertaking duties on an outside committee to which the Council did not appoint them, but the basis of their appointment was as an elected member of the council;
 - Undertaking case work on behalf of local constituents;
 - Attending councillor surgeries;
 - Attending Councillors on Patrol or other council-supported neighbourhood activities;
 - Delivering leaflets/letters that have been produced by the council;
 - Making known their elected position and potentially seeking to utilise that authority under any other circumstances.
3. Councillors shall not necessarily be deemed to be operating on council business where they are:
 - Going about ordinary everyday tasks not specific to their role as a councillor;
 - Approached by a member of the public to discuss casework outside of a surgery or formal setting;
 - Travelling before or after undertaking council business;
 - Delivering leaflets on behalf of a political party or candidate.
4. The Monitoring Officer may deem to pursue a complaint even when a councillor was acting in a personal capacity when the allegation is sufficiently serious that, if proven, the councillor could be deemed to have brought the authority into disrepute. The Monitoring Officer may consult the appointed Independent Person before making such a determination.
5. The Monitoring Officer shall make the final determination on whether a councillor was operating on official business or in a personal capacity at the time of an incident leading to a complaint.