

Bromsgrove District Council

Arrangements for managing standards complaints under the Localism Act 2011

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Sections 28(6) and (7) of the Localism Act 2011 require the District Council to have in place “arrangements” under which allegations that an elected Member or voting co-opted Member of the authority or of a parish council within the authority’s area, or of a committee or sub-committee of the authority or parish council, has failed to comply with the relevant authority’s Code of Conduct can be investigated and decisions made on such allegations.
- 1.2 Such arrangements must provide for the authority to appoint at least one Independent Person, whose views must be sought by the District Council before it takes a decision on an allegation which it has decided shall be investigated, and whose views may be sought by the authority at any other stage, or by the Member or co-opted Member against whom an allegation has been made.
- 1.3 These arrangements set out how a complaint that an elected or voting co-opted Member of the authority or of a parish council within the authority’s area has failed to comply with his/her authority’s Code of Conduct can be made, and how such allegations will be dealt with by the District Council.

2. The Code of Conduct

- 2.1 The District Council has adopted a Code of Conduct for Members. The Code is available on the authority’s website or on request from Reception at the Council House or the Customer Service Centre.
- 2.2 Each parish council within the authority’s area is also required to adopt a Code of Conduct. A copy of any parish council Code of Conduct can be obtained from the Clerk/Executive Officer to the relevant Parish Council.

3. Making a complaint and complaint acknowledgement

- 3.1 Complaints must be made in writing to:

Mrs C Felton
Monitoring Officer
Bromsgrove District Council
The Council House
Burcot Lane
Bromsgrove
B60 1AA
Email: c.felton@bromsgroveandredditch.gov.uk

- 3.2 The Monitoring Officer is a senior Officer of the authority who has statutory responsibility for maintaining the Register of Members' Interests and who is responsible for administering the system in respect of complaints of Member misconduct.
- 3.3 In order to ensure that the authority has all the information it needs to be able to process a complaint, the model Complaint Form should ideally be completed. The form is available on the authority's website or is available on request from Reception at the Council House or the Customer Service Centre.
- 3.4 Complainants are asked to provide their name and contact details in order that the Monitoring Officer can acknowledge receipt of the complaint and keep the complainant informed of progress with the complaint. If a complainant wishes to keep his/her details confidential this should be indicated on the form, in which case the authority will not disclose the complainant's details to the Member against whom a complaint has been made (the 'subject Member') without the complainant's prior consent. The authority would not normally investigate anonymous complaints unless there is a clear public interest in doing so.
- 3.5 The Monitoring Officer will issue a written acknowledgement to the complainant. At the same time the Monitoring Officer will write to the Member against whom the complaint has been made to notify them of the complaint (subject to point 5.4 below). Both the complainant and the subject Member will be kept informed of progress with the complaint. If the subject Member is a parish councillor the Parish Council Clerk/Executive Officer will (subject to 5.4 below) also be notified of the complaint.
- 3.6 If, at any stage during the process, a complainant wishes to withdraw his/her complaint, the Monitoring Officer will consider, in consultation with the Independent Person, whether it is appropriate for the complaint to be terminated, or whether it is in the public interest for the complaint to proceed to conclusion.

4. Review of Complaint by the Monitoring Officer and options available to the Monitoring Officer following review

- 4.1 The Monitoring Officer will review every complaint received and, following consultation with the Independent Person, will make a decision as to what action, if any, should be taken with the complaint. Where the Monitoring Officer has taken a decision, she will inform the subject Member, complainant, and if the subject Member is a parish councillor the Parish Council Clerk/Executive Officer, in writing of her decision and the reason(s) for the decision.

- 4.2 Where the Monitoring Officer requires additional information in order to come to a decision she may request information from the complainant, subject Member or any other relevant party. Examples of a relevant party include:
- a Leader of a Political Group;
 - a Chairman, Vice-Chairman or Clerk/Executive Officer of a Parish Council;
 - a representative of the Worcestershire County Association of Local Councils;
 - a representative of the Police or other relevant regulatory body;
 - the District Council's Chief Executive; or
 - any other party who the Monitoring Officer is of the opinion might be in a position to assist in providing relevant information in relation to a complaint.
- 4.3 If a complaint identifies possible criminal conduct or breach of other regulation by any person the Monitoring Officer has the power to refer the matter to the Police or other regulatory agency. A complaint identifying possible criminal conduct shall be referred to the Police by the Monitoring Officer.
- 4.4 In accordance with Police requirements, the Monitoring Officer shall take no action whatsoever in relation to the complaint until such time as the Police have concluded their investigation into the complaint and notified the Monitoring Officer of its outcome. Further, the Monitoring Officer will not notify the subject Member of the existence of the complaint or of the referral of the complaint to the police until the matter has been investigated by the police and the Monitoring Officer has been authorised by the police to consider any action at local level (as set out in para 4.6 below)
- 4.5 As regards notification of the Complainant, the Monitoring Officer shall notify the Complainant only that the complaint has been referred to the Police. It will not be possible for any further information to be provided by the Monitoring Officer regarding the complaint for however long the Police may take in concluding their investigations.
- 4.6 If at the conclusion of their investigation, the Police decide either to take action against the subject Member, or not to take any action, the Monitoring Officer will, in consultation with the Independent Person, consider whether any further action at local level may be deemed necessary on behalf of the Authority to maintain high standards of Member conduct.
- 4.7 The Monitoring Officer will establish a process for referring relevant complaints to the Police and the Form attached at Appendix A shall be used to make the referral.
- 4.8 Subject to 4.3 above, the Monitoring Officer may decide:
- that no further action be taken with respect to the complaint (which would apply where, for example, a complaint is found to

be factually incorrect and therefore has no basis, or where a complaint is unsubstantiated or does not relate to a breach of the Code of Conduct);

- to seek to resolve the complaint informally, via local resolution; or
- that a formal investigation into the complaint is required.

In all cases the Monitoring Officer will write to the relevant parties detailing her decision and the reason(s) for the decision.

- 4.9 Where the Monitoring Officer attempts to deal with a complaint informally via local resolution she will liaise with the relevant parties to seek to agree a way forward. If the subject Member accepts that his/her conduct was inappropriate and offers an apology, and/or any other remedial action is offered or undertaken by either the subject Member or the authority, the Monitoring Officer will notify the complainant of any reasonable terms offered.
- 4.10 If the complainant accepts the terms offered the Monitoring Officer will write to all relevant parties detailing the outcome and the matter will be closed.
- 4.11 If the complainant does not accept the terms offered the Monitoring Officer will, in consultation with the Independent Person and any other relevant parties, determine whether the complaint merits formal investigation.
- 4.12 **The Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person will consider whether a complaint is trivial or malicious and will consider where the Public Interest lies in deciding whether any complaint should be further investigated.**

5. Formal Investigation

- 5.1 The Council had adopted a procedure for the investigation of misconduct complaints.
- 5.2 If the Monitoring Officer decides that a complaint merits formal investigation she will appoint an Investigating Officer, who may be another Officer of the authority, an Officer of another authority or an external investigator.
- 5.3 The Investigating Officer will conduct the investigation and in doing so will liaise with any relevant parties, as appropriate. The Investigating Officer will decide whether he/she needs to meet or speak with the complainant, the subject Member or any other parties to understand the nature of the complaint and so any parties can explain their understanding of events and suggest what documents the Investigating Officer might need to see, and who the Investigating Officer may need to interview.

- 5.4 In exceptional cases, where it is appropriate to keep a complainant's identity confidential or disclosure of details of the complaint to the subject Member might prejudice the investigation, the Monitoring Officer can delete the complainant's name and address from the papers given to the subject Member, or delay notifying the subject Member until the investigation has progressed sufficiently.
- 5.5 At the end of his/her investigation, the Investigating Officer will produce a draft report and will send copies of that draft report, in confidence, to the complainant and the subject Member, to give both parties an opportunity to comment on the report and identify any matters which are not agreed or which require further attention.
- 5.6 Having received and taken account of any comments which either the complainant or the subject Member might make on the draft report, the Investigating Officer will send his/her final report to the Monitoring Officer.
- 5.7 The Monitoring Officer will review the Investigating Officer's final report and, in consultation with the Independent Person, will determine the next course of action to be taken with this. If the Monitoring Officer is not satisfied that the investigation has been conducted fully and feels that any aspect of the Investigating Officer's final report is incomplete, or requires further attention, she may ask the Investigating Officer to reconsider his/her report.

6. No evidence of a failure by the subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct

If the Investigating Officer finds that there is no evidence of a failure by the subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct and the Monitoring Officer is satisfied with the Investigating Officer's findings, the Monitoring Officer will, following consultation with the Independent Person, write to the complainant, the subject Member, and if the complaint relates to a Parish Councillor the Parish Council Clerk, confirming that she is satisfied that no further action is required. A copy of the final report will be sent to the complainant and subject Member and the matter will be closed.

7. Evidence of a failure by the subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct

- 7.1 If the Investigating Officer finds that there is evidence of a failure by the subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct and the Monitoring Officer is satisfied with the Investigating Officer's findings, the Monitoring Officer will, following consultation with the Independent Person and depending on the nature and seriousness of the failure in question, determine whether to send the matter for a local hearing of the Standards Committee or to seek to resolve the matter via local resolution.

Local Resolution

- 7.2 If the Monitoring Officer attempts to conclude the matter via local resolution she will, in consultation with the Independent Person, liaise with the relevant parties to seek to agree a fair resolution, with a view to ensuring higher standards of conduct by the subject Member in the future. If a fair resolution is agreed and the subject Member complies with the suggested resolution the Monitoring Officer will write to the relevant parties to confirm the position and will report the matter to the Standards Committee for information. The matter will then be closed.
- 7.3 If the complainant tells the Monitoring Officer that any proposed resolution is not, in their view, adequate, or if the subject Member is not prepared to undertake any proposed action, such as giving an apology, the Monitoring Officer will, in consultation with the Independent Person, determine whether to close the matter without further action or to refer it for a local hearing. The Monitoring Officer will write to the relevant parties to confirm her decision and the reasons(s) for the decision.

Local Hearing

- 7.4 The Council has adopted a procedure for local hearings.
- 7.5 The Standards Committee will decide whether the subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and, if so, whether to take any action in respect of the Member.
- 7.6 Where a local hearing is to take place, the Monitoring Officer will conduct a 'pre-hearing process' which is aimed at facilitating the smooth running of the hearing. As part of this process the subject Member will be asked to give his/her response to the Investigating Officer's report in order to identify what is agreed and what is likely to be in contention at the hearing. The Chairman of the Committee may also issue directions as to the manner in which the hearing will be conducted.
- 7.7 At the hearing, the Investigating Officer will present his/her report, call such witnesses as he/she considers necessary and make representations to substantiate his/her conclusion that the subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct. For this purpose the Investigating Officer may ask the complainant to attend and give evidence to the Committee. The subject Member will then have an opportunity to give his/her evidence, to call witnesses and to make representations to the Committee as to why he/she considers that he/she did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct.
- 7.8 The Committee may, with the benefit of any advice from the Independent Person, conclude that the subject Member did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct, and dismiss the complaint. If the Committee concludes that the subject Member did fail to comply with the Code of Conduct, the Chairman will inform the subject Member of this finding and the Committee will then consider what action, if any,

should be taken as a result of the Member's failure to comply with the Code of Conduct. In doing this, the Committee will give the subject Member an opportunity to make representations in relation to the failure and will consult the Independent Person, and will then decide what action, if any, to take on the matter.

8. Action that can be taken where a Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct

8.1 The Council has delegated to the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer authority to administer complaints in accordance with the agreed process. The following actions may be taken after a hearing:

8.1.1 Publish findings in respect of the Member's conduct;

8.1.2 Report findings to Council, or to the Parish Council, for information;

8.1.3 Recommend to the Member's Group Leader (or in the case of un-grouped Members, recommend to Council or to Committees) that he/she be removed from any or all Committees or Sub-Committees of the Council;

8.1.4 Recommend to the Leader of the Council that the Member be removed from the Cabinet, or removed from particular Portfolio responsibilities;

8.1.5 Instruct the Monitoring Officer to, or recommend that the Parish Council, arrange training for the Member;

8.1.6 Remove the Member, or recommend to the Parish Council that the Member be removed, from all outside appointments to which he/she has been appointed or nominated by the authority or by the Parish Council;

8.1.7 Withdraw, or recommend to the Parish Council that it withdraws, facilities provided to the Member by the Council, such as a computer, website and/or email and internet access; or

8.1.8 Exclude, or recommend that the Parish Council exclude, the Member from the Council's offices or other premises, with the exception of meeting rooms as necessary for attending Council, Committee and Sub-Committee meetings.

8.2 There is no power to suspend or disqualify the Member or to withdraw Members' or special responsibility allowances.

9. Decision of the Standards Committee

- 9.1 At the end of the hearing, the Chairman will state the decision of the Committee as to whether the Member failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and any actions which the Committee resolves to take.
- 9.2 As soon as reasonably practicable after the hearing, the Legal Advisor to the Committee will prepare a formal decision notice in consultation with the Chairman of the Committee. A copy of the decision notice will be sent to the complainant, the subject Member, and if the complaint relates to a Parish Councillor to the Parish Council Clerk. The decision notice will be made available for public inspection and the decision will be reported to the next convenient meeting of the Council.

10. Standards Committee Hearings

The Independent Person will be invited to attend all meetings of the Committee where a hearing is being conducted. His/her views will be sought and taken into consideration before the Sub-Committee takes any decision on whether the subject Member's conduct constitutes a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, and as to any action to be taken following a finding of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct.

11. The Independent Person

The Independent Person is a person who has applied for the post following advertisement of a vacancy for the post, and is appointed by a positive vote from a majority of all the members of Council.

A person cannot be "independent" if he/she:

- 11.1 Is, or has been within the past 5 years, a Member, co-opted Member or Officer of the authority or the County Council, Fire Authority or Police Authority.
- 11.2 Is or has been within the past 5 years, a Member, co-opted Member or Officer of a parish council within the authority's area, or
- 11.3 Is a relative, or close friend, of a person within paragraph 11.1 or 11.2 above. For this purpose, "relative" means –
- 11.3.1 Spouse or civil partner;
 - 11.3.2 Living with the other person as husband and wife or as if they were civil partners;
 - 11.3.3 Grandparent of the other person;
 - 11.3.4 A lineal descendent of a grandparent of the other person;
 - 11.3.5 A parent, sibling or child of a person within paragraphs 11.3.1 or 11.3.2;

- 11.3.6 A spouse or civil partner of a person within paragraphs 11.3.3, 11.3.4 or 11.3.5; or
- 11.3.7 Living with a person within paragraphs 11.3.3, 11.3.4 or 11.3.5 as husband and wife or as if they were civil partners.

11.4 Is actively engaged in local party political activity.

12. Revision of these arrangements

The Council may, by resolution, agree to amend these arrangements. The Chairman of the Hearings Sub-Committee may depart from these arrangements where he/she considers that it is expedient to do so in order to secure the effective and fair consideration of any matter.

13. Appeals

- 13.1 There is no right of appeal for a complainant or the subject Member of a decision of the Monitoring Officer or of the Hearings Sub-Committee. Any decision would however, be open to judicial review by the High Court if it was patently unreasonable, or if it were taken improperly, or if it sought to impose a sanction which the Council had no power to impose.
- 13.2 If a complainant feels that the authority has failed to deal with his/her complaint properly, he/she may make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.