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Wiltshire Council

Arrangements for dealing with Code of Conduct Complaints under the Localism Act 2011

1 Context

- 1.1 These arrangements are made under Section 28 of the Localism Act 2011. They set out the process for dealing with a complaint that an elected or co-opted member of Wiltshire Council or of a parish, town or city council within its area has failed to comply with their Code of Conduct.
- 1.2 An overview of the complaints process is attached at Appendix A.
- 1.3 These arrangements are subject to the Council's Procedure for dealing with vexatious complaints.
- 1.4 The Monitoring Officer will determine as a preliminary issue whether a complaint relates to the Code of Conduct and is to be dealt with under these arrangements.
- 1.5 The Monitoring Officer will encourage complainants to explore whether the matter can be resolved without the need to submit a formal complaint under this process.

2 Interpretation

- 2.1 'Member' means a member or a co-opted member of Wiltshire Council, or of a parish, town or city council within its area, against whom a complaint has been made under the Code of Conduct.
- 2.2 'Council' means Wiltshire Council.
- 2.3 'Investigating Officer' means the person appointed by the Monitoring Officer to undertake an investigation of an allegation of misconduct by a Member.
- 2.4 '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 arrangements for dealing with complaints of member misconduct. It includes any officer nominated by the Monitoring Officer to act on his or her behalf in that capacity.

- 2.5 'Independent Person' means a person appointed under Section 28(7) of the Localism Act:
- a. whose views must be sought and taken into account before a decision is made on an allegation of member misconduct under these arrangements;
 - b. who may be consulted by the Member about the complaint.
- 2.6 In order to avoid any conflict of interest two Independent Persons will be allocated to each complaint, one to advise and assist the Monitoring Officer and the Hearing Sub-Committee, and the other to be available for consultation by the Member.
- 2.7 'Parish Council' means a parish, town or city council within the area of Wiltshire Council.
- 2.8 'Code of Conduct' means the code of conduct for members which the Council and Parish Councils are required to adopt under Section 27 of the Localism Act 2011.
- 2.9 'Days' means working days.
- 2.10 'Parties' includes the Complainant, Member and the Investigating Officer.
- 2.11 The 'Hearing Sub-Committee' is a sub-committee of the Council's Standards Committee appointed to determine complaints of member misconduct under these arrangements.
- 2.12 The 'Review Sub-Committee' is a sub-committee of the Council's Standards Committee appointed to review a decision of the Monitoring Officer under sections 4 and 6 of these arrangements.
- 2.13 Where a complaint is made against a member of a Parish Council the Clerk to the Parish Council will be notified of the complaint and kept informed of the progress and outcome of the matter.
- 2.14 Documents will be deemed to have been received by the Parties on the seventh day after the date of posting.

3 Making a Complaint

- 3.1 A complaint against a Member under the Code of Conduct must be made in writing on the Council's standard form (*available from the Council's web-site and offices*) and addressed to the Monitoring Officer [*address / e-mail*] within 12 weeks of the date on which the complainant became aware of the matter giving rise to the complaint.
- 3.2 The Monitoring Officer will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within 5 days of receiving it, and will send a copy to the Member.

- 3.3 The Member will be invited to submit a written response to the complaint within 10 days of the date on which it is sent to them.
- 3.4 The Member may seek advice and assistance in connection with the complaint from a friend or professional legal adviser, in confidence, and may at any time during the process consult the Independent Person designated for that purpose.

4. Initial Assessment

- 4.1 The Monitoring Officer will review the complaint within 5 days of receiving the Member's response and, after consultation with the Independent Person, will decide whether it merits formal investigation.
- 4.2 In reaching this decision the Monitoring Officer will have regard to the Standards Committee's assessment criteria.
- 4.3 The Monitoring Officer will inform the Parties of his or her decision and the reasons for it in writing.
- 4.4 The Monitoring Officer may seek to resolve the complaint informally, without the need for a formal investigation. This may involve mediation or other suitable action, including training or an apology by the Member.
- 4.5 Where the Member or the Council make a reasonable offer of local resolution, but the Complainant is not willing to accept that offer, the Monitoring Officer may take this into account in deciding whether the complaint merits formal investigation.
- 4.6 If the complaint identifies potential criminal conduct by any person, the Monitoring Officer may call in the Police or other regulatory agencies.
- 4.7 The Complainant or the Member may request a review of the Monitoring Officer's decision at the initial assessment stage.
- 4.8 A review will be determined by a Review Sub-Committee who may decide:
 - a. to take no further action on the complaint;
 - b. to refer the complaint to the Monitoring Officer for investigation or other suitable action, including mediation.

5 Investigation

- 5.1 If the Monitoring Officer decides that a complaint merits formal investigation, he/she will appoint an Investigating Officer within 2 days of the decision to investigate and inform the Parties of the appointment.

- 5.2 The Investigating Officer will investigate the complaint in accordance with guidelines produced by the Monitoring Officer and will send a copy of the investigation report to the Parties, in confidence, within 30 days of the notification of the Investigating Officer's appointment.
- 5.3 The Parties will be invited to submit any written comments on the report to the Monitoring Officer within 10 days of the date on which the report is sent to them.

6 Consideration of Investigating Officer's Report

- 6.1 The Monitoring Officer will, as soon as reasonably practicable, review the Investigating Officer's report and any comments submitted by the Parties, in consultation with the Independent Person.
- 6.2 Where the Investigating Officer concludes that there is no evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct and the Monitoring Officer is satisfied that the Investigating Officer's report is sufficient, the Monitoring Officer will, after consultation with the Independent Person, inform the Parties that no further action is required.
- 6.3 If the Monitoring Officer is not satisfied that the investigation has been conducted properly, he/she may ask the Investigating Officer to reconsider his/her report and findings.
- 6.4 Where the Investigating Officer concludes that there is evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct the Monitoring Officer will, after consulting the Independent Person, either refer the matter for hearing before the Hearing Sub-Committee or seek an alternative resolution.
- 6.5 The Complainant may request a review of a decision by the Monitoring Officer, following consideration of the Investigating Officer's report, to dismiss the complaint.
- 6.6 A review will be determined by the Review Sub-Committee who may decide:
 - a. to dismiss the complaint;
 - b. to refer the complaint for hearing by the Hearing Sub-Committee
 - c. To refer the complaint to the Monitoring Officer to seek alternative resolution.

7. Alternative Resolution

- 7.1 Where the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, considers that the matter can reasonably be resolved without the need for a hearing, he/she will consult with the Parties to seek to agree a fair resolution

which also helps to ensure higher standards of conduct for the future.

7.2 Alternative resolution may involve mediation and may include the Member accepting that their conduct was unacceptable and offering an apology, and/or other remedial action by the Council or the Parish Council as the case may be. If the Member complies with the suggested resolution, the Monitoring Officer will report the matter to the Standards Committee, and the relevant Parish Council where appropriate, for information, but will take no further action.

8. Hearing

- 8.1 If the Monitoring Officer, after consultation with the Independent Person, considers that alternative resolution is not appropriate or, after exploring the possibility, concludes that it is unlikely to be achieved he/she will refer the matter to the Hearing Sub-Committee to conduct a local hearing to determine the complaint.
- 8.2 The Hearing Sub-Committee, supported by the Monitoring Officer, will conduct a pre-hearing review to identify the issues, areas of agreement and disagreement, and to give directions for the efficient conduct of the hearing. This may either be conducted in writing or by a meeting with the Parties.
- 8.3 The Monitoring Officer will notify the Parties in writing of the directions for the hearing.
- 8.4 The Sub-Committee may exclude the press and public from the hearing where it appears likely that confidential or exempt information will be disclosed and the public interest in withholding the information outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.
- 8.5 At the hearing, the Investigating Officer will present their report, call such witnesses as they consider necessary and make representations to substantiate their conclusion that the Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.
- 8.6 The Complainant will have the right to make a statement in support of their complaint.
- 8.7 The Members of the Hearing Sub-Committee and the Member may ask questions of the Investigating Officer and any witnesses called.
- 8.8 The Member will have an opportunity to give their evidence, to call witnesses and to make representations as to why they consider that they did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct.
- 8.9 The Members of the Hearing Sub-Committee and the Investigating Officer will have the opportunity to ask questions of the Member and any witnesses called.

- 8.10 The Investigating Officer and the Member may each make a concluding statement.
- 8.11 The Members of the Hearing Sub-Committee will then withdraw, with the Independent Person, to consider the case, taking advice from the Independent Person and, where necessary, from the Monitoring Officer on law and procedure.
- 8.12 The Hearing Sub-Committee may conclude that the Member did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct, and so dismiss the complaint.
- 8.13 If the Hearing Sub-Committee concludes that the Member did fail to comply with the Code of Conduct, the Chairman will inform the Parties of this finding and the Hearing Sub-Committee will then consider what action, if any, should be taken as a result of the breach.
- 8.14 The Investigating Officer and the Member will be invited to make representations on the question of sanctions.
- 8.15 The Hearing Sub-Committee will, after consulting the Independent Person, determine what action, if any, to take (or recommend in the case of a parish councillor) in respect of the matter.

9. Sanctions

These are to be determined by the Council. A suggested range of sanctions is included at Annex 1.

In the case of parish, town and city councils these will be in the form of recommendations from the Hearing Sub-Committee.

10. Decision

- 10.1 At the end of the hearing, the Chairman will announce the decision of the Hearing Sub-Committee in summary form.
- 10.2 The Monitoring Officer will send the Parties, and where appropriate the relevant Parish Council, a formal decision notice, which will be published on the Council's web-site and made available for public inspection.

11. Revision of these arrangements

- 11.1 The Council may by resolution agree to amend these arrangements, and has delegated to the Monitoring Officer and the Hearing Sub-Committee the right to depart from these arrangements where they consider that it is expedient to do so in order to secure the effective and fair consideration of any matter.

12. Reviews

- 12.1 Any request for a review must be made in writing to the Monitoring Officer within 5 days of the date of receipt his/her decision and must set out the grounds for the review.
- 12.2 A review request will be determined by the Review Sub-Committee, after consulting the Independent Person, within 14 days of receipt of the request.

13. Appeals

- 13.1 There is no right of appeal for the Complainant or the Member against a decision of the Hearing Sub-Committee.

Annex 1

Possible Sanctions

1. The Council has delegated to the Hearing Sub-Committee such of its powers to take action in respect of individual members of the Council as may be necessary to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. The Hearing Sub-Committee may therefore impose (or, in the case of a parish, town or city councillor, recommend) one or more of the following sanctions:

Removal from Committees, Sub-Committees, Cabinet and Outside Bodies

- 1.1 Recommend to the Member's Group Leader (or in the case of un-grouped members, recommend to Council or to Committees) that the Member is removed from any or all Committees or Sub-Committees of the Council;
- 1.2 Recommend to the Leader of the Council that the Member is removed from the Cabinet, or removed from particular portfolio responsibilities;
- 1.3 Remove the Member from all outside appointments to which he/she has been appointed or nominated by the Council.

Training

- 1.4 Instruct the Monitoring Officer to arrange training for the Member.

Report to Council

- 1.5 Report its findings to Council.

Publish

- 1.6 Publish its findings in respect of the Member's conduct in such manner as the Standards Committee determines appropriate;

Note:

In the case of R v Broadland District Council ex parte Lashley the Court of Appeal recognised that it was within the Council's powers to take action that was calculated to facilitate and was conducive or incidental to, the council's functions (1) of maintaining its administration and internal workings in a state of efficiency and (2) of maintaining and furthering the welfare of its employees.

This may enable a Hearing Sub-Committee to impose restrictions on a member for the purpose of securing the efficient and effective discharge of the Council's functions. These might, for instance, include the withdrawal of certain facilities, such as a computer, e-mail and/or internet access, or exclusion from certain parts of the council's premises, provided that the measures do not interfere with the democratic process. However, this may not be used as a punitive measure nor, in particular, to justify the suspension or disqualification of a member.

Legal advice will need to be taken on the extent to which this potential option may be available in the particular circumstances of each case.