

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

PROCEDURE FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS REGARDING CITY, PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILLORS AND CO-OPTED MEMBERS

1. Introduction

1.1 Under the Localism Act 2011, the Council has a duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct for its elected and co-opted members and have arrangements in place to deal with complaints.

1.2 This Procedure sets out how the Council will deal with a complaint alleging a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct by:-

- Sheffield City Councillors
- Voting and non-voting co-opted members of the Council
- Bradfield Parish Councillors
- Ecclesfield Parish Councillors
- Stocksbridge Town Councillors

(In this Procedure the term 'Member' is used to describe a Councillor or Co-opted Member)

1.3 In dealing with complaints we will be fair to both the complainant and Member and progress matters in accordance with the timescales set out in the Procedure. Complaints will be handled in the strictest confidence at all times.

2. Monitoring Officer

2.1 Gillian Duckworth, Director of Legal and Governance, is the Council's Monitoring Officer. This is a statutory role, responsible for ensuring that the Council, its Members and officers carry out their functions in a lawful and ethical manner. The role includes supporting the Audit and Standards Committee and the three Independent Persons in dealing with complaints alleging a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct.

3. Independent Persons

3.1 The Council appoints Independent Persons from outside the Council to assist the Monitoring Officer and the Audit and Standards Committee in considering complaints. Sheffield currently has appointed three Independent Persons - Stuart Carvell, Marvyn Moore and David Waxman.

3.2 The Independent Person must be consulted at various stages in the complaints process and also before the Audit and Standards Committee makes a finding as to whether a member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and decides on action to be taken in respect of a Member.

4. Making a Complaint/Withdrawing a Complaint

- 4.1 Complaints alleging a breach of the Members' Code of Conduct should be made in writing using the complaint form and sent to Gillian Duckworth, Monitoring Officer, Sheffield City Council, Town Hall, Sheffield S1 2HH or email gillian.duckworth@sheffield.gov.uk. The complaint form is available from:-
- Website - www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/council-meetings/audit-and-standards-committee
 - Email - committee@sheffield.gov.uk
 - Phone - 0114 273 5033
- 4.2 If you need advice or assistance in submitting a complaint please contact Dave Ross in Democratic Services (email dave.ross@sheffield.gov.uk or phone 0114 273 5033).
- 4.3 Details of the complaint, including the name of the complainant, will be shared with the Member. The complainant can request on the complaint form that their identity is kept confidential. Requests for confidentiality will be considered by the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person and the complainant will be informed in writing of the outcome
- 4.4 Anonymous complaints will not be considered.
- 4.5 The complainant can withdraw their complaint at any time by informing the Monitoring Officer in writing. The Monitoring Officer will confirm this in writing with the complaint within 5 working days and also inform the Member that the complaint has been withdrawn.
- 4.6 Where a complaint has been withdrawn, the Monitoring Officer reserves the right to pursue the issues in the complaint.

5.0 Acknowledging the Complaint/Informing the Member

- 5.1 The Monitoring Officer will acknowledge receipt of the complaint in writing within 5 working days, with details of how the complaint will be dealt with and providing a copy of this Procedure and the Code of Conduct. If necessary, the Monitoring Officer will clarify any matters with the complainant as soon as possible before the Member is informed.
- 5.2 The Member will be informed in writing within 5 working days, subject to paragraph 5.1, that a complaint has been made about them. This will include the name of the complainant (unless the Monitoring Officer has agreed to the complainant's request that their name is kept confidential) and details of the complaint. They will also receive a copy of this Procedure and the Code of Conduct. To assist the Monitoring Officer in assessing the complaint, the Member will be invited to submit within 10 working days a written statement of fact in response to the complaint.
- 5.3 The Monitoring Officer will also inform the Leader of the relevant political Group, Group Whip and Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee that a

complaint has been received and provide a summary of the complaint.

5.4 Where a complaint relates to a Parish or Town Councillor, the Monitoring Officer will also inform the Clerk of that Council of the name of the Member and details of the complaint. The Clerk will also be kept informed of the progress and the outcome of the complaint.

6. Assessment by the Monitoring Officer

6.1 Before assessment of the complaint, it may be necessary for the Monitoring Officer to request further information or clarification from the complainant and/or Member and, where necessary, obtain other available information, such as the minutes of a meeting.

6.2 The Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, will consider (a) the complaint, any remedy sought by the complainant, any written statement of fact submitted by the Member and any other information obtained, (b) whether the member was acting in their official capacity and that the Code of Conduct does apply and (c) if the allegation constitutes a potential breach of the Code of Conduct and then take one of the following courses of action:-

- Take no action or
- Take other action through informal resolution or
- Refer the matter for investigation

6.3 The complainant and the Member will be informed in writing within 5 working days of the outcome and the reasons for the decision.

6.4 The Monitoring Officer will also inform the Leader of the relevant political Group, Group Whip and Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee of the decision. Where a complaint relates to a Parish or Town Councillor, the Monitoring Officer will also inform the Clerk of that Council.

6.5 It is likely that no action will be taken where:-

- A significant amount of time has elapsed since the events which are the subject of the complaint.
- The allegation relates to a cultural or recurring issue relating to standards within the Council.
- The matter should be dealt with by some other method, e.g. police investigation.
- Complaints have been made about the Member relating to similar issues that have previously been dealt with through this Procedure.
- The complaint appears to be trivial, vexatious, tit for tat or is part of a series of complaints from the complainant.

- The conduct occurred during political debate or could be regarded as a political expression of views or opinion.

6.6 Informal resolution may be the simplest and most cost effective way of resolving the complaint and may be appropriate where:

- The Monitoring Officer considers that this is the most effective way of resolving the matter to the complainant's satisfaction;
- The Member appears to have a poor understanding of the Code of Conduct and/or related Council procedures;
- The conduct complained of appears to be a symptom of wider underlying conflicts which, if unresolved, are likely to lead to further misconduct or allegations of misconduct;
- The conduct complained of appears to the Monitoring Officer not to require a formal sanction;
- The complaint appears to reveal a lack of guidance, protocols and procedures within the District or Parish Council;
- The complaint consists of allegations and retaliatory allegations between councillors;
- The complaint consists of allegations about how formal meetings are conducted; and
- The conduct complained of may be due to misleading, unclear or misunderstood advice from officers.

6.7 It is expected that the Monitoring Officer will refer only the most serious potential breaches for investigation or where the Member is not willing to accept an informal resolution or fundamentally disputes or does not accept the allegations in the complaint.

6.8 Where a complaint is not referred for investigation, the Monitoring Officer will seek to deal with the matter within 8 weeks.

7. Take Other Action Through Informal Resolution

7.1 Where the Monitoring Officer has decided to take other action this will seek to resolve the complaint informally and without determining if an actual breach of the Code has taken place. Both the complainant and Member will have to agree to the outcome of any informal resolution.

7.2 The Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, may take any of the following actions:-

- Take such steps as they think appropriate to prevent a future potential breach of the Code including training, guidance and introducing or amending policies/protocols.

- Ask the Whips to address the issue raised within their political parties or with an individual Member.
- Mediate between the parties involved to resolve the issues.
- Seek an apology from the Member.
- Any other action capable of resolving the complaint.

7.3 Where it has not been possible to agree an informal resolution, the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, will reassess the complaint, taking into consideration the reasons why informal resolution has not been agreed. The complainant and Member will be informed of the outcome within 5 working days.

7.4 The Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee and relevant Group Leader and Group Whip will also be informed of the outcome. Where a complaint relates to a Parish or Town Councillor, the Monitoring Officer will also inform the Clerk of that Council.

8. Investigation

8.1 If a complaint has been referred for investigation, the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, will appoint a person to undertake the investigation and this may be either a Council Officer or an outside agent, depending on the complexity and subject of the complaint.

8.2 The Investigating Officer will inform the complainant and Member of the process and proposed timescale of the investigation. The investigation may involve interviewing both parties and possibly other witnesses, together with reviewing any relevant documentation or paperwork.

8.3 The Investigating Officer will prepare a draft report on the outcome of the investigation and provide the complainant and Member with a copy for review and comment.

8.4 The Investigating Officer will submit a final version of the report to the Monitoring Officer that will make a finding that either (a) there has been a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct or (b) there has not been a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct. The final report will also be sent to the complainant and Member.

8.5 The Monitoring Officer will submit the Investigating Officer's report to the Consideration Sub-Committee.

8.6 An investigation will be completed within 12 weeks of a referral by the Monitoring Officer. The Consideration Sub-Committee will meet within one month of the final report being submitted to the Monitoring Officer.

9. Consideration Sub-Committee

- 9.1 The Consideration Sub-Committee comprises 3 Councillors and 1 non-voting co-opted Independent Member.
- 9.2 The Sub-Committee will consider the Investigating Officer's report and, after taking the views of the Independent Person into account, can:-
- (a) take no action where there is no evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct; or
 - (b) take no action where there is no evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct but make a recommendation to the authority with a view to promoting and maintaining high conduct of standards in general (e.g. proposed changes to internal procedures or training for Members); or
 - (c) ask the Monitoring Officer, where possible, to seek a local resolution to the complaint; or
 - (d) refer the matter to an Audit and Standards Committee Hearing Sub-Committee.
- 9.3 The complainant and Member will be informed in writing within 5 working days of the outcome and the reasons for the decision.

10. Local Resolution

- 10.1 Where the investigation finds evidence of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, may attempt a local resolution, avoiding the necessity of a hearing, and take any of the following actions:-
- Take such steps as they think appropriate to prevent a future potential breach of the Code including training, guidance and introducing or amending policies/protocols.
 - Ask the Whips to address the issue raised within their political parties or with an individual Member.
 - Mediate between the parties involved to resolve the issues.
 - Seek an apology from the Member
 - Any other action capable of resolving the complaint
- 10.2 Both the complainant and Member will have to agree to the outcome of any local resolution.
- 10.3 The Monitoring Officer will inform the complainant and Member in writing within 5 working days of the outcome of any agreed local resolution.

10.4 If a local resolution has not been possible, the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person and Chair of the Audit and Standards Committee, will refer the matter to a the Hearing Sub-Committee and inform the complainant and Member in writing within 5 working days.

11. Hearing Sub-Committee

11.1 The Hearing Sub-Committee comprises 3 Councillors and 1 non-voting co-opted Independent Member.

11.2 The Sub-Committee will meet within two months of a referral by the Consideration Sub-Committee to consider the allegation and Investigating Officer's report and make clear findings as to the facts of the matter and whether a breach of the Code of Conduct has occurred.

11.3 The Sub-Committee will meet in public unless it decides that all or part of the meeting should be held in private in accordance with the Access to Information Procedure Rules in the Council's Constitution.

11.4 In advance of the Hearing, there will be a pre-hearing process to allow matters at the Hearing to be dealt with more fairly and economically.

11.5 The complainant and Member will be given the opportunity to attend the Hearing and present witnesses. The Monitoring Officer, Investigating Officer and Independent Person will also attend. The procedure at the Hearing will include:-

- Making findings of fact
- Deciding if there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct
- Consider the remedies/sanctions available if there is a finding that the Member has breached of the Code of Conduct

11.6 Full details of the pre-hearing and hearing process are set out in the Procedure at Hearings. The Member and complainant will be provided with a copy of the Procedure.

11.7 A Finding of No Breach of the Code of Conduct

11.7.1 If the Sub-Committee finds that the Member did not breach the Code of Conduct no further action will be taken in respect of the complaint. However, the Sub-Committee can make a recommendation to the authority with a view to promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct in general (e.g. proposed changes to internal procedures or training for Members).

11.8 A Finding of a Breach of the Code of Conduct

11.8.1 If the Sub-Committee finds that a breach of the Code of Conduct has occurred they may make any of the following recommendations and may specify to whom they wish them to be directed:-

- Recommending to the Member's Group Leader (or in the case of ungrouped members, recommend to Council or to Committees) that he/she

be removed from any or all Committees or Sub-Committees of the Council or Shadow Portfolio responsibilities.

- Recommending to the Leader of the Council that the member be removed from the Cabinet, or removed from particular Portfolio responsibilities.
- Instructing the Monitoring Officer to arrange training for the member.
- That policies/procedures are amended.
- That a briefing/information note be issued.
- That an apology be given.
- That the Member is censured in writing and a copy of the letter is published on the Council's website.
- Take no action where it is not considered appropriate in the circumstances to impose a sanction.

11.9 The Monitoring Officer will inform the complainant and the Member of the outcome from the Sub-Committee hearing in writing within 5 working days.

11.10 The findings and decision of the Sub-Committee will be also be available on the Council's website and copies will be supplied to the Chief Executive, Leaders of all the political Groups and the Group Whips.

11.11 Where the matter relates to a Parish or Town Councillor, the Clerk of that Council will be informed of the outcome of a Hearing.

12. Appeals

12.1 There is no right of appeal for the complainant or Member against a decision of the Monitoring Officer, Consideration Sub-Committee or Hearing Sub-Committee.

12.2 If the complainant feels that the Council has failed to deal with their complaint properly, they can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman (www.lgo.org.uk)

13. Reports

13.1 A report on the complaints received and how they were dealt with will be submitted to meetings of the Audit and Standards Committee twice a year. An annual report will also be submitted to Full Council with a summary of all Standards Complaints received and their outcome.

14. Data Protection

14.1 Complaints will be handled in the strictest confidence at all times. We will ensure that any information received as part of the handling of the complaint is disclosed only to those who can demonstrate a valid need to know it.

However, when a complaint is considered at a Standards Committee Hearing then any information will be dealt with in accordance with the Access to Information Procedure Rules in the Council's Constitution.

14.2 Complaints records will be stored safely and securely.

15. Review and Changes to the Procedure

15.1 The Monitoring Officer will review the Procedure annually, in consultation with the Independent Persons, and submit a report on any proposed changes to the Audit and Standards Committee for consideration. In accordance with the Constitution, any changes will require final approval at Full Council.

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