

REPORT TITLE: COMPLAINTS GUIDANCE AND PROCESS

28 NOVEMBER 2024

REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

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WARD(S): ALL

PURPOSE

This report presents two documents for the Audit & Governance Committee to review and comment upon as follows:

1. Guidance on the Winchester City Council Councillor Code of Conduct, based on the LGA issued guidance, updated following discussion by the Constitutional Working Group meeting of the 6 September 2024.
2. The arrangements for dealing with complaints under the Code of Conduct.

Both documents are to support the effective implementation of the new Code of Conduct from 1 January 2025 and aim to equip councillors and members of the public with a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and procedures associated with the new Code of Conduct.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Audit and Governance Committee is asked to

1. Review, comment and endorse the guidance and arrangement for dealing with complaints as attached as Appendix 1 and 2 to this report.
2. Recommend to Full Council the adoption of the arrangements for dealing with code of conduct complaints (Appendix 2) as a document that is incorporated into the Councils Constitution.
3. Note that the Monitoring Officer will advise all Town and Parish Councils within the district of the Guidance and arrangements for dealing with complaints including the offer of an online training session.

## IMPLICATIONS:

### 1 COUNCIL PLAN OUTCOME

- 1.1 This committee is responsible for maintaining high governance standards within the Council pursuant to its duties under the [Localism Act 2011](#). The committee has the role of ensuring that the ethical standards regime forming part of the governance framework of the Council is robust, thereby engendering public confidence that the Council can deliver upon its priorities within the Council Plan.

### 2 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.1 There are no direct financial consequences of introducing this guidance or the updated process.

### 3 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Section 27(1) of the Localism Act 2011 requires the Council to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by its members and co-opted members when they are acting in the capacity of members.
- 3.2 Section 27(2) requires that the Council must adopt a code dealing with the conduct that is expected of members and co-opted members in order to discharge this duty.
- 3.3 Section 28 (6) requires local authorities (other than parish or town councils) to have arrangements under which allegations that an elected member of the authority or of a town or parish council has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct can be investigated and decisions on allegations can be made.

### 4 WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Whilst there will be some increased resource requirements around the promotion of and any additional training needed in the new City Council Code of Conduct this has been accounted for in existing resources.

### 5 PROPERTY AND ASSET IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 None from this report.

### 6 CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 6.1 The Constitutional Working Party (CWP), comprising of members from all political groups represented on the council met on the 6 September 2024 to consider whether to recommend to this committee to adopt the LGA Model Code of Conduct.
- 6.2 The CWP also recommend further expansion of the accompanying guidance regarding issues such as economic disadvantage, bullying and the use of social media and these matters have been incorporated into the document.

### 7 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 None from this report.

### 8 PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

- 8.1 The adoption of the code of conduct will be carried out in accordance with Council's duties under the Equality Act 2010 and in accordance with the principles in the Council's Corporate Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Plan.

## 9 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 None from this report.

## 10 RISK MANAGEMENT

| <b>Risk</b>            | <b>Mitigation</b>  | <b>Opportunities</b>  |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Financial Exposure     | Ensuring that that the Council adopts an approved model code of conduct will assist to ensure independent oversight and mitigate against improper decision-making which in turn protects the Council's strong financial arrangements.                                | Will meet best practice requirements for independent oversight, strengthening governance and in turn ensuring reputation, and public confidence                             |
| Exposure to challenge  | Compliance with the code will assist in mitigating against poor decision making and inappropriate behaviours, aiding overall good governance.  | Will meet best practice requirements for independent oversight, strengthening governance and in turn ensuring reputation, and public confidence                             |
| Reputation             | The Code of Conduct is one of the tools used to demonstrate good governance. The good reputation of the City Council is in all members interests and the Code of Conduct goes to the heart of members behaving in a way that should overall enhance that reputation. | Where there are occasions where alleged bad behaviour has occurred a sound code of conduct, process and timely conclusion also enhances the reputation of the City Council. |
| Achievement of outcome | The Council is required by law to adopt a code of conduct and the recommendations in this report achieve that critical outcome.  |   |
| Community Support      | Parish and Town Councils will be advised of the update to the Winchester   | A training and Q&A session will be offered to all Parish and Town   |

|            |  |  |
|------------|--|--|
|            | City Council Code of Conduct   | Council's to aid their understanding of the City Council's decision to adopt the Model Code and the contents of the code itself. |
| Timescales | The Council should move to adopt the Model Code in a timely fashion. |  |

## 11 SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

- 11.1 The Audit & Governance Committee advises the Council on the adoption or revision of the Councillors' Code of Conduct and monitors the operation of the Code of Conduct, overseeing arrangements for dealing with complaints against councillors.
- 11.2 At its meeting on the 26 September 2024, the Audit & Governance Committee recommended to Full Council that:
- a) The Local Government Association Model Code of Conduct for Councillors be adopted as the Winchester City Council Code of Conduct to come into force on 1 January 2025.
  - b) All councillors attend training on the new code on the 14 November 2024.
  - c) The Monitoring Officer advise all Parish and Town councils of the adoption of the Code.
- 11.3 It was also noted at the meeting that the Monitoring Officer would provide a further report to the committee concerning the associated guidance and arrangements for dealing with complaints to the Audit and Governance Committee at its November 2024 meeting.
- 11.4 Full Council at its meeting on the 6 November 2024, agreed the recommendations in 11.2 above.
- 11.5 The Monitoring Officer undertook an all member briefing on the 14 November 2024 on the Model Code of Conduct and the recording of this is being made available to those members who were unable to attend. The Monitoring Officer is also advising all Parish and Town councils of the adoption of the Code and providing a copy of the briefing session.
- 11.6 The Guidance document has been subdivided into three distinct subsections to assist those reading it, with the three sections being:
- 1) Introduction and General Principles
  - 2) Obligations under the Code
  - 3) Interests

12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 12.1 Not to present and subsequently use the guidance document to support the implementation of the updated code of conduct.
- 12.2 Not to update the arrangements for dealing with complaints document.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:-

Previous Committee Reports:-

[AG140 code of conduct for councillors.pdf](#) - Audit & Governance Committee 26 November 2024.

[AG117 Constitution review report v2.pdf](#) – Audit & Governance Committee 9 November 2023.

Other Background Documents:-

[Guidance on Local Government Association Model Councillor Code of Conduct | Local Government Association](#)

APPENDICES:

- Appendix 1. The Guidance. (Parts 1, 2 & 3)  
Appendix 2. The Complaint Handling Process

# Appendix I

Winchester City Council's

# Code of Conduct for Councillors

Guidance Part I: General Principles

November 2024



|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction.....  | 3  |
| Abbreviations.....   | 4  |
| General principles of Councillor conduct.....  | 5  |
| Application of the Code of Conduct.....  | 5  |
| General Principals - Acting as a private individual .....  | 7  |
| In what circumstances might I give the impression to a reasonable member of the public that I was engaged on council business? ..... | 7  |
| General Principals - Social media postings .....   | 10 |
| What does acting as a representative of my council mean?.....  | 11 |
| What if I sit on more than one council? .....  | 11 |
| What is a co-opted Councillor ? .....  | 12 |



## Guidance on the Code of Conduct

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### Introduction

Winchester City Council is committed to upholding the highest standards of conduct among its Councillors. To reinforce this commitment, the council has adopted the Local Government Association's Model Code of Conduct unamended. It provides a robust framework designed to promote accountability, transparency, and integrity in public office. By adopting this code, Winchester City Council aims to ensure that Councillors act lawfully, fairly, and with respect, which will foster public trust and maintain the integrity of the council's operations.

Winchester City Council adopted their code of conduct at a meeting of Full Council on the 6 November 2024 which comes into effect from the 1 January 2025 and this guidance has been agreed and published ahead of this 'go live' date.

The Code, together with this guidance, is intended to protect the democratic role of Councillors while encouraging good conduct and maintaining the trust and confidence of the public. The Code sets out the minimum standards of behaviour expected from Councillors, while also encouraging them to model the highest standards expected of their office. It aims to promote mutual respect—even where personal or political differences exist—supporting positive interactions between Councillors, officers, and members of the community.

In addition, the Code acts as a personal benchmark, outlining behaviours that, if falling below expected standards, may lead to complaints. It is designed not only to safeguard the public, officers, and the reputation of local government, but also to protect Councillors themselves.

The guidance has been subdivided into 3 parts, Part 1 (this section) gives an introduction and general principles, Part 2, provides details on general principles and Part 3 which provides details regarding interests.

This guidance aims to embed the principles of the Code and provides a structured resource, emphasising that each chapter can be used as a standalone reference. We value your feedback on the use of this guidance and any suggestions for its improvement. Please direct comments to [monitoringofficer@winchester.gov.uk](mailto:monitoringofficer@winchester.gov.uk)

## Abbreviations

**LGA** - Local Government Association: An organisation that supports, promotes, and improves local government in the UK.

**DPI** - Disclosable Pecuniary Interest: Interests that must be disclosed by councillors, such as employment, contracts, land, and financial interests.

**ORI** - Other Registerable Interest: Interests that councillors must register which do not fall under pecuniary interests but are still relevant for transparency.

**NRI** - Non-Registerable Interest: Interests that don't require formal registration but may still need to be declared in specific contexts.

**ASB** - Anti-Social Behaviour: Refers to activities that harm or lack consideration for the well-being of others.

**HR** - Human Resources: The department responsible for managing employment matters within an organisation.

**CX** – Chief Executive or Head of Paid Service

**MO** – Monitoring Officer: The statutory officer responsible for the legal governance of a council and who has a legal duty to ensure the council fulfils its statutory obligations and apply its codes of conduct.

**S151 Officer** - often referred to as the Chief Financial Officer, the S151 officer is a statutory role within a council, mandated by Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and has a duty for maintaining financial integrity and accountability within local government.

**Council** - An administrative body in local government responsible for providing a range of public services and facilities within a specific geographic area.

Examples relevant to this guidance are the City Council and Town and Parish Councils across the district.

## **General principles of Councillor conduct**

The Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles) outline the ethical standards those working in the public sector are expected to adhere to. The principles apply to all public office holders at all levels including ministers, civil servants, Councillors, and council officers, as well as private and voluntary organisations delivering services paid for by public funds. The principles are set out in Appendix 2 of Part 3 of these guidance documents.

These principles underpin the standards that Councillors should uphold and form the basis for the Code of Conduct, where the principles have been translated into a series of clear rules. While fundamental to the Code of Conduct, the principles are not part of the rules of the code and should be used for guidance and interpretation only.

## **Application of the Code of Conduct**

### **When does the Code apply?**

S27(2) of the Localism Act 2011 says that a council must adopt ‘a code dealing with the conduct that is expected of Councillors and co-opted Councillors of the authority when they are acting in that capacity.’

The term ‘capacity’ is not further defined in the Act. However, the Code states that:

### **The Code of Conduct applies to you when you are acting in your capacity as a Councillor which may include when:**

- you misuse your position as a Councillor.
- your actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that you are acting as a Councillor.

This means it applies when you are carrying out your official duties, for example when you are considering or discussing council business, either as a Councillor or representing the council on an outside body.

There is no formal description of what the role of a Councillor is, but aside from formal council business, for example, sitting on a committee of the council or addressing the planning committee as a visiting Councillor, it would include promoting and representing the council in the local community and acting as a bridge between the community and the council. The LGA's **Guidance** for new Councillors is a helpful reference point.

The code does not, therefore, apply solely when you are in committee or other council meetings council or on council premises.

The code applies to all forms of communication and interaction, including:

- at face-to-face meetings
- at online or telephone meetings
- in written communication
- in verbal communication
- in non-verbal communications
- in electronic and social media communication, posts, statements, and comments. This includes interactions with the public as well as with fellow Councillors and council officers.

Under the Local Government Act 1972 and the **Local Government (Disqualification) Act 2022** Councillors can be disqualified from being a Councillor due to matters in their private life, such as being subject to a bankruptcy order, receiving a custodial sentence of three months or longer (whether or not suspended) or being subject to a sexual offences order.

## **General Principals - Acting as a private individual**

For something to fall within the code there must be a clear link to a council function or your role as a Councillor. For example, an argument with a neighbour which does not relate to council business would not engage the code, even if your neighbour happens to know you are a Councillor and therefore complains to the council about being treated disrespectfully.

### **Acting as a private individual - Examples**

A Councillor and an officer had a personal relationship. The Councillor sent and encouraged the officer to send inappropriate social media messages, including messages of a sexual nature, during office hours. The panel rejected arguments that the Councillor had been acting in an entirely personal capacity. It found that the Councillor could not divorce himself from his role as the officer's quasi-employer and that, when sending or encouraging the officer to send the messages during working hours, he was acting in his official capacity.

It is not always immediately apparent in which capacity you are acting, therefore in situations where there may be ambiguity it may be helpful if you can make clear to people in which capacity you are engaging with them.

While the Code does not apply to your non-Councillor roles, what you do as a Councillor could impact on your position in those other roles. Political party or group rules may also require you as a Councillor to demonstrate certain behaviours as a private individual and failure to do so can result in sanctions from political groups.

## **In what circumstances might I give the impression to a reasonable member of the public that I was engaged on council business?**

When you use or attempt to use your position as a Councillor to seek to gain an advantage for yourself or someone close to you or to disadvantage someone this is an attempt to misuse your position and therefore falls within the scope of the Code of Conduct.

A number of factors will need to be taken into account to determine whether or not you had used or attempted to use your position as a Councillor.

For example:

- writing to someone on council headed paper or using a council email address may lead someone to assume you were writing in your capacity as a Councillor.
- handing out a business card where you describe yourself as a Councillor may also lead to that assumption.
- wearing official council regalia/lanyard/council pass/I.D.

In Winchester, we have some major events so you should consider your role in anything relating to events such as the Christmas market and Boomtown.

## Misuse of position – Examples

Attempting to misuse your position as a Councillor would include if you threatened to use your position improperly to block someone's planning, licence, or grant application. In effect you would be doing something that only a Councillor could do even if as a matter of fact, you did not have the power to do so. That may include an assumption, for example, that you would put inappropriate pressure on officers or fellow Councillors or lobby behind the scenes for a particular outcome. It should not be up to a member of the public to have to work out whether you are in fact on the planning committee.

A Councillor returning from a party got into an argument with a taxi driver. When he arrived home, he refused to pay the fare and when he spoke to the manager of the taxi company, he said that he was a Councillor and would make sure that the taxi driver's licence was withdrawn by the council. While he was entitled to dispute the payment if he was dissatisfied with the service he had received he was found to have breached the code by invoking his office and seeking to misuse his position to intimidate the manager and driver and to seek to gain an advantage for himself, notwithstanding the fact that he did not in reality have the ability to carry out his threat.

## General Principals - Social media postings

Simply describing yourself as a Councillor in a social media posting or at the top of your page or in your username or profile, for example, does not of itself mean that every posting you make is covered by the Code. There must be a link within the individual posting or thread to your role as a Councillor or to your council's business. However, even if you do not describe yourself as a Councillor you may also fall within the scope of the code if you are discussing council business.

For example, a post which is simply discussing a recent football match is not covered by the code even if you have described yourself as a Councillor. However, if you make a post threatening a fellow Councillor or officer that would fall within the code even if you have not described yourself as a Councillor as it relates to council business or your role as a Councillor.

Each matter would need to be looked at on a case-by-case basis ([see guidance on 'disrespect, bullying and harassment for further information'](#)).

You should be very careful when describing yourself as a Councillor as seeing the word "Councillor" may lead to assumptions amongst the community and district that you are acting as a Councillor.

To help avoid some of these issues, some Councillors have found it helpful to have separate social media profiles for personal and council use, though even the strictest privacy settings are no guarantee that posts or actions will remain private. As a rule of thumb, never post anything online you would not be comfortable saying or sharing in a public meeting.

The LGA has published **Social media guidance for Councillors**.

### Social Media Postings - Examples

Following a heavy snowstorm which meant a local street market could not go ahead a Councillor posted on the local community Facebook page that a certain council officer should be sacked for failing to put adequate arrangements in place to clear the snow. Even though it was not posted on a council page and he did not explicitly describe himself as a Councillor in the post he was found to have breached the code by treating an officer with disrespect and seeking to put undue pressure on officers.



A Councillor who described himself as such in his Twitter profile made insulting and offensive comments about the Prime Minister which led to complaints being made to his council. He was found not to have breached the code as the comments did not directly relate to his role as a Councillor or council business but were seen as wider political comments.

## **What does acting as a representative of my council mean?**

You are acting as a representative of the council when you are sitting on an outside body to which you have been appointed by the council, for example.

You would also be considered a representative of the council where you were attending an external function or conference on behalf of the council or as the council's nominated delegate.

You would not be considered as a representative of the council where you were attending an event in a party-political role, for example at a political party's annual conference. In that situation you would be subject to any relevant party rules.

Matters in party group meetings would also normally not be covered by the code as they are more matters for a party to regulate. However, if you are clearly trying to improperly influence fellow Councillors or put undue pressure on them in relation to council business for example then relevant provisions of the code would apply. The same would apply to social media groups you may be a member of.

## **What if I sit on more than one council?**

If you sit on more than one council, you are subject to the code and associated procedures of the council you are representing at any one time. As such, if you are a City Councillor and a Parish Councillor, you would be bound by the city councils code when attending city council meetings or speaking to city council officers; and bound by the parish council code when attending parish council meetings or speaking to parish council officers.

Where your local authorities have the same code, the same rules would apply and, for example, your completed register of interests should be the same on both tiers.

## **What is a co-opted Councillor ?**

The code also applies to co-opted Councillors under the Localism Act. A co-opted member under the Act is someone who is entitled to vote on any matter to be decided at a council committee or sub-committee.

A parish Councillor who has been co-opted to fill a casual vacancy where an election has not been held is also covered by the Code of Conduct in the same way as if they had been elected.

It does not, therefore include co-opted Councillors who do not have voting rights, nor does it cover, for example, an Independent Person appointed under s28 of the Localism Act to support the council on standards matters.

However, it would be good practice to ask such Councillors to agree to abide by the code of conduct and to inform the monitoring officer of any interests they might have. While they would not formally fall within the statutory framework for complaint handling, they can be removed from their role by the council should they be found to have committed a serious breach of the code so it is important that they are also aware of the expected standards of behaviour.

Winchester City Council's

# Code of Conduct for Councillors

Guidance Part 2: General  
Obligations under the Code

November 2024



Winchester  
City Council

|  |    |
|--|----|
| General obligations under the Code of Conduct..... | 3  |
| 1. Respect.....                                    | 3  |
| 2. Bullying, Harassment & discrimination.....      | 9  |
| 3 Impartiality of officers.....                    | 18 |
| 4. Confidentiality and access to information.....  | 22 |
| 5. Disrepute.....                                  | 29 |
| 6. Use of position.....                            | 32 |
| 7. Use of resources and facilities.....            | 35 |
| 8. Complying with the Code of Conduct.....         | 38 |

## **General obligations under the Code of Conduct**

### **1. Respect**

#### **As a Councillor:**

**1.1. I treat other Councillors and members of the public with respect.**

**1.2. I treat council employees, employees and representatives of partner organisations and those volunteering for the local authority with respect and respect the role they play.**

Showing respect to others is fundamental. As an elected or appointed representative of the public it is important to treat others with respect and to act in a respectful way. Respect means politeness, courtesy and civility in behaviour, speech, and in the written word. It also relates to all forms of communications Councillors undertake, not just in meetings. Rude, offensive, and disrespectful behaviour lowers the public's expectations and confidence in its elected representatives, whether or not it actually constitutes a breach of the code of conduct.

### **Respect**

The key roles and responsibilities of Councillors; representing and serving your communities and taking decisions on their behalf, require Councillors to interact and communicate effectively with others. Examples of Councillor interaction and communication include talking to constituents, attending council meetings, representing the council on outside bodies, and participating in community meetings and events. In turn this means that as a Councillor you are required to interact with many different people, often from diverse backgrounds and with different or conflicting needs and points of view.

You will engage in robust debate at times and are expected to express, challenge, criticise and disagree with views, ideas, opinions, and policies. Doing these things in a respectful way will help you to build and maintain healthy working relationships with fellow Councillors, officers, and members of the public, it encourages others to treat you with respect and helps to avoid conflict and stress.

Respectful and healthy working relationships and a culture of mutual respect can encourage positive debate and meaningful communication which in turn can increase the exchange of ideas, understanding and knowledge.

Examples of ways in which you can show respect are;

- by being polite and courteous
- listening and paying attention to others, without interruptions
- having consideration for other people's feelings
- following protocols and rules
- showing appreciation and thanks and being kind

In a local government context this can mean;

- using appropriate language in meetings and written communications
- allowing others time to speak without interruption during debates
- focusing any criticism or challenge on ideas and policies rather than personalities or personal attributes
- recognising the contribution of others to projects

### **Disrespectful behaviour**

Failure to treat others with respect will occur when unreasonable or demeaning behaviour is directed by one person against or about another. The circumstances in which the behaviour occurs are relevant in assessing whether the behaviour is disrespectful. The circumstances include the place where the behaviour occurs, who observes the behaviour, the character and relationship of the people involved and the behaviour of anyone who prompts the alleged disrespect.

Disrespectful behaviour can take many different forms ranging from overt acts of abuse and disruptive or bad behaviour to insidious actions such as bullying and the demeaning treatment of others. It is subjective and difficult to define.

However, it is important to remember that any behaviour that a reasonable person would think would influence the willingness of fellow Councillors, officers, or members of the public to speak up or interact with you because they expect the encounter will be unpleasant or highly uncomfortable fits the definition of disrespectful behaviour.

Examples of disrespect in a local government context might include;

- rude or angry outbursts in meetings
- use of inappropriate language in meetings or written communications such as swearing
- ignoring someone who is attempting to contribute to a discussion
- attempts to shame or humiliate others in public
- nit-picking and fault-finding
- the use of inappropriate sarcasm in communications
- the sharing of malicious gossip or rumours.

Disrespectful behaviour can be harmful to both you and to others. It can lower the public's expectations and confidence in you and the council and Councillors and politicians more generally. It influences the willingness of fellow Councillors, officers, and the public to speak up or interact with you because they expect the encounter will be unpleasant or uncomfortable. Ongoing disrespectful behaviour can undermine willingness of officers to give frank advice, damage morale at a council, and ultimately create a toxic culture and has been associated with instances of governance failure.

### **Freedom of expression**

The requirement to treat others with respect must be balanced with the right to Freedom of expression. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely without interference. This includes the right to express your views aloud or in writing, such as in published articles or leaflets or on the internet and social media. Protection under Article 10 extends to the expression of views that may shock, disturb, or offend the deeply held beliefs of others.

However, Article 10 is not an absolute but a qualified right which means that the rights of the individual must be balanced against the interests of society. Whether a restriction on freedom of expression is justified is likely to depend on a number of factors, including the identity of the speaker, the context of the speech and its purpose, as well as the actual words spoken or written.

Democracy depends on people being free to express, debate and criticise opposing viewpoints. The courts have generally held that the right to free expression should not be curtailed simply because other people may find it offensive or insulting. A balance must still be struck between the right of individuals to express points of view which others may find offensive or insulting, and the rights of others to be protected from hatred and discrimination.

Freedom of expression is protected more strongly in some contexts than others. In particular, a wide degree of tolerance is accorded to political speech, and this enhanced protection applies to all levels of politics, including local government. Article 10 protects the right to make incorrect but honestly made statements in a political context but it does not protect statements which the publisher knows to be false. Political expression is a broad concept and is not limited to expressions of or criticism of political views but extends to all matters of public administration. However, gratuitous personal comments do not fall within the definition of political expression.

Public servants such as local government officers are subject to wider levels of acceptable criticism than other members of the public when matters of public concern are being discussed. However, the limits are not as wide as they are for Councillors. Officers do not have the same right of reply to such comments as Councillors do and Councillors should take care not to abuse or exploit this imbalance. Further information on this is set out in the Protocol for Councillor/Officer Relations within the Councils constitution.

Recent case law has confirmed that council officers should be protected from unwarranted comments that may have an adverse effect on good administration and states that it is in the public interest that officers are not subject to offensive, abusive attacks and unwarranted comments that prevents them from carrying out their duties or undermine public confidence in the administration. That said, officers who are in more senior positions, for example chief executives or heads of services, will also be expected to have a greater degree of robustness.

### **Is the Respect provision of the code a gag on Councillors?**

This provision of the Code (Paragraph 1) is not intended to stand in the way of lively debate in local authorities. Such discussion is a crucial part of the democratic process. Differences of opinion and the defence of those opinions through councillors' arguments and public debate are an essential part of the cut and thrust of political life. Councillors should be able to express their opinions and concerns in forceful terms. Direct language can sometimes be appropriate to ensure that matters are dealt with properly. The code is not intended to stifle the expressions of passion and frustration that often accompany discussions about council business.

### **Can Councillors criticise officers?**

In some cases, officers have been known to reject reasonable criticism appropriately made and describe it as disrespectful or bullying. The Code of Conduct is not intended to constrain councillors' involvement in local governance, including the role of Councillors to challenge performance. Councillors can question and probe poor officer performance provided it is done in an appropriate way. In the everyday running of a council, it is inevitable that Councillors may have disagreements with officers from time to time.

This paragraph of the code does not mean that Councillors cannot express disagreement with officers. This disagreement might, in the appropriate context, manifest itself in criticism of the way in which an officer or officers handled particular matters.



It is important that Councillors raise issues about poor performance in the correct way and at the appropriate forum in accordance with the council's processes and procedures, and not in a public meeting or through a published attack in the media.

All local authorities should have clearly defined policies, procedures, and occasions where such issues can be properly raised. It is only where councillors' conduct is unfair, unreasonable, or demeaning that the code will be relevant. If a councillor's criticism is abusive or offensive it is likely to breach the code.

Further information on this is set out in the Protocol for Councillor/Officer Relations within the Councils constitution.

**What kinds of conduct are not covered?**

A very clear line must be drawn between the Code of Conduct's requirement of respect for others, including Councillors with opposing views, and the freedom to disagree with the views and opinions of others. In a democracy, members of public bodies should be able to express disagreement publicly with each other.

**What if a member of the public is being unnecessarily disrespectful to me?**

Councillors are allowed to respond to criticism, and where that criticism is robust, then they can be robust in response. However, Councillors should always seek to try to be civil and demonstrate leadership in their communication. Even where Councillors have been wrongly accused, responding in an angry, defensive way can often escalate the situation. There has been a growing tendency for members of the public to use social media channels to unfairly criticise local Councillors.

## Respect – Examples

The complaint alleged that the Councillor posted on their blog a highly critical comment and an offensive caption about a former Councillor, who had passed away and whose funeral had taken place the previous day. The Councillor was found to have breached the provisions of his council's Code of Conduct relating to Councillors treating others with respect; as well as conducting themselves in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing their role or their authority into disrepute.

The complaint alleged that a Councillor commented under a pseudonym on a council blog referring to possible nepotism in the awarding of a contract to a local firm by the council. The standards committee found that the Councillor had breached the Code of Conduct in making the posts because he had failed to treat others with respect and, in doing so, he had conducted himself in a manner which brought his role and his council into disrepute.

The complaint alleged that a Councillor had made remarks of an abusive, insulting, and personal nature to the complainant, a police officer, and also made a number of unfounded allegations about him during two telephone calls to a police station made in his capacity as a ward Councillor. It was found that the comments amounted to an unacceptable personal attack on the complainant and that the Councillor had breached the respect provisions in his council's Code of Conduct.

## **2. Bullying, Harassment & discrimination**

### **As a Councillor:**

#### **2.1. I do not bully any person.**

Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and victimisation (either directly or indirectly) are unacceptable and should not be tolerated. It is important to recognise the impact such behaviour can have on any individual experiencing it, as well as on the wider organisation in terms of morale and operational effectiveness.

Bullying may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting, or humiliating behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power that can make a person feel vulnerable, upset, undermined, humiliated, denigrated, or threatened. Power does not always mean being in a position of authority and can include both personal strength and the power to coerce through fear or intimidation. Bullying may be obvious or be hidden or insidious. Such conduct is usually part of a pattern of behaviour which attempts to undermine an individual or a group of individuals, is detrimental to their confidence and capability, and may adversely affect their health.

Bullying can take the form of physical, verbal, and non-verbal conduct but does not need to be related to protected characteristics. Bullying behaviour may be in person, by telephone or in writing, including emails, texts, or online communications such as social media. The standards of behaviour expected are the same, whether you are expressing yourself verbally or in writing.

Bullying can affect anyone, in any career, at any time, at any level and within any workplace. Such behaviour can take the form of easily noticed, physically threatening or intimidatory conduct with immediate impact, or it can take place behind closed doors, or be much more subtle or camouflaged and difficult to identify, at least at first. It can start, for example, with what appear to be minor instances, such as routine 'nit-picking' or fault-finding, but which become cumulative or develop into more serious behaviour over time, enabling the perpetrator to isolate and control the person.

Some bullies lack insight into their behaviour and are unaware of how others perceive it. Others know exactly what they are doing and will continue to bully if they feel they are unlikely to be challenged. Bullying can sometimes be overlooked, as a result of common euphemisms being used by way of explanation or justification, referring to someone as having a "poor leadership

style” or a “bad attitude,” for example, or to the problem being due to a “personality clash”.

You should always be mindful of the overall potential impact of the behaviour on others. First and foremost, bullying can have a significant impact on the recipient’s well-being and health. Bullying can have an impact on a council’s effective use of resources and provision of services. Officers who are subject to bullying are frequently away from their posts, sometimes for extended periods, on sickness or stress-related leave.

Bullying can impact on a councillor’s ability to represent their residents effectively. It can also discourage candidates from standing in local elections, making local authorities less representative of their communities, and impacting local democracy.

Like disrespectful behaviour, bullying can be difficult to define. When allegations of bullying are considered it’s likely that the person handling the complaint will consider both the perspective of the alleged victim, and whether the Councillor intended their actions to be bullying. They will also consider whether the individual was reasonably entitled to believe they were being bullied.

Conduct is unlikely to be considered as bullying when it is an isolated incident of a minor nature, where it is targeted at issues, rather than at an individual’s conduct or behaviour, or when the behaviour by both the complainant and Councillor contributed equally to the breakdown in relations. However, the cumulative impact of repeated 'minor' incidents should not be underestimated.

## Examples of bullying

include but are not limited to:

- verbal abuse, such as shouting, swearing, threats, insults, sarcasm, ridiculing or demeaning others, inappropriate nicknames, or humiliating language
- physical or psychological threats or actions towards an individual or their personal property
- practical jokes
- overbearing or intimidating levels of supervision, including preventing someone from undertaking their role or following agreed policies and procedures
- inappropriate comments about someone's performance
- abuse of authority or power, such as placing unreasonable expectations on someone in relation to their job, responsibilities, or hours of work, or coercing someone to meet such expectations
- ostracising or excluding someone from meetings, communications, work events or socials
- sending, distributing, or posting detrimental material about other people, including images, in any medium
- smear campaigns, i.e. a [deliberate effort to damage someone's reputation by spreading false or misleading information about them](#)

### **Does this mean that Councillors cannot raise concerns about officers or fellow Councillors?**

Bullying behaviour should be contrasted with the legitimate challenges which a Councillor can make in challenging policy or scrutinising performance. An example of this would be debates in the chamber about policy or asking officers to explain the rationale for the professional opinions they have put forward. You are entitled to challenge fellow Councillors and officers as to why they hold their views. However, if your criticism is a personal threat or abusive or offensive in nature, you are likely to cross the line of what is acceptable behaviour.

### **Preventing bullying conduct from developing**

Ideally, a culture of honest and clear communication should be sought, with respect for the individual and for the confidentiality required when managing individual performance-related issues. Further information on this is set out in the Protocol for Councillor/Officer Relations within the Councils constitution.

The protocol for parish and town councils can include such simple but important matters as acceptable times to contact the clerk by telephone at home or call at the clerk's home on council business.

Council officers and parish/town clerks also need to be mindful that Councillors can come from a wide range of backgrounds and may have been part of workplaces where the culture and expected standards are very different from what the clerk or officers expect; as a result, the Councillor simply may not be aware of the impact that their communications have had on the clerk or officer. Early discussion about emerging issues is important to help avoid matters escalating and help establish more effective working arrangements for the future.

### **Bullying and harassment and the law**

In some cases, acts of bullying or harassment can be civil offences, which can be brought to an employment tribunal or a county court.

In some cases, conduct that amounts to bullying and harassment may also amount to criminal offences, which can be tried in the criminal courts.

There is not an exhaustive list of acts of bullying or harassment that may constitute a criminal offence. Examples may include, but are not limited to:

- physical assault
- making threats of violence or death threats
- stalking
- hate crimes
- sexual harassment

## 2.2 Harassment

### As a Councillor:

#### 1. I do not harass any person.

The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 states that harassment includes behaviour which alarms a person or causes a person distress or puts people in fear of violence and must involve such conduct on at least two occasions. It can include repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications and contact upon a victim in a manner that could be expected to cause distress or fear in any reasonable person. Harassment of any kind whether direct or indirect is in no-one's interest and should not be tolerated. It is important to recognise the impact such behaviour can have on any individual experiencing it, as well as on the wider organisation in terms of morale and operational effectiveness.

Like bullying, harassment can take the form of physical, verbal, and non-verbal conduct but does not need to be related to protected characteristics. Harassment may be in person, by telephone or in writing, including emails, texts, or online communications such as social media. It may manifest obviously or be hidden or insidious.

The factors likely to be considered when assessing allegations of harassment are whether the Councillor knows or ought to know that their actions constitute harassment, whether a reasonable person would consider the actions to be harassment and the impact of the behaviour/conduct on victim.

**Examples of harassment** include but are not limited to:

- sending unwelcome emails
- unnecessarily repetitive, intrusive questioning
- unwelcome physical contact such as touching or invading 'personal space'
- haranguing, i.e. speaking forcefully and angrily to persuade or criticise.
- intimidation
- inappropriate remarks or questioning such as comments about someone's appearance, lewd comments, and offensive jokes
- overbearing or intimidating levels of supervision, including preventing someone from undertaking their role or following agreed policies and procedures
- inappropriate comments about someone's performance
- placing unreasonable expectations on someone in relation to their job, responsibilities, or hours of work, or coercing someone to meet such expectations
- sexual harassment which would also refer to unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that may not be immediately obvious but can still create a hostile or uncomfortable environment.

### **What does the law say about harassment?**

In some cases, acts of harassment can be civil offences, which can be brought to an employment tribunal or county court.

In some cases, conduct that amounts to harassment may also amount to criminal offences, which can be tried in the criminal courts. There is not an exhaustive list of acts of harassment that may constitute a criminal offence. Examples may include, but are not limited to physical assault:

- making violent or death threats
- stalking
- hate crimes
- sexual harassment

### **Harassment - Example**

The complaint alleged that a Councillor had behaved in a disrespectful and harassing manner towards two fellow female Councillors and officers. It was established that the Councillor had made unwarranted and inappropriate physical contact with the Councillors and officers at an official event and had also made remarks towards the officers which were patronising and demeaning. The Councillor was found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct.



## **Discrimination**

### **As a Councillor:**

#### **2.3 I promote equalities and do not discriminate unlawfully against any person.**

Councillors have a central role to play in ensuring that equality issues are integral to the council's performance and strategic aims, and that there is a strong vision and public commitment to equality across public services.

The Equality Act 2010 imposes positive duties on local authorities to promote equality and to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment. Under the Act we may be liable for any discriminatory acts which you commit. This will apply when you do something in your official capacity in a discriminatory manner. You must be careful not to act in a way which may amount to any of the prohibited forms of discrimination, or to do anything which hinders your authority's fulfilment of its positive duties under the Act. Such conduct may cause your authority to break the law, and you may find yourself subject to a complaint that you have breached this paragraph of the Code of Conduct.

Unlawful discrimination is where someone is treated unfairly because of a protected characteristic. Protected characteristics are specific aspects of a person's identity defined by the Equality Act 2010. They are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment (the process by which a person changes their gender presentation and/or physical characteristics to align with their gender identity.)
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex and sexual orientation

In addition to these protected characteristics, please also consider economic disadvantage within the district. Councillors are often champions for those without a voice and appreciate that they have a duty to serve all constituents fairly. This means recognising and addressing the challenges faced by individuals for example with inadequate housing, low educational attainment or unemployment. By fostering inclusivity and equitable access to resources, Councillors uphold the principles of fairness and social responsibility within their community.

There are four main forms of discrimination:

**Direct discrimination:** treating people differently because of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

**Indirect discrimination:** treatment which does not appear to differentiate between people because of their age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation but which disproportionately disadvantages them.

**Harassment:** engaging in unwanted conduct on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation, which violates another person's dignity or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

**Victimisation:** treating a person less favourably because they have complained of discrimination, brought proceedings for discrimination, or been involved in complaining about or bringing proceedings for discrimination.

**Examples of discriminatory behaviour** include but are not limited to:

- exclusion or victimisation based on the Protected Characteristics
- treating someone less favourably or limiting their opportunities based on any of the Protected Characteristics
- comments, slurs, jokes, statements, questions, or gestures that are derogatory or offensive to an individual's or group's characteristics
- promoting negative stereotypes relating to individual's or group's characteristics
- racial or ethnic slurs, insults, or jokes
- intolerance toward religious customs
- mimicking, mocking, or belittling a person's disability
- homophobic, biphobic or transphobic comments or slurs
- discriminating against pregnant people or mothers
- declaring ('outing') someone's religion or sexuality or threatening to do so against their will
- deliberate, unwarranted application of an authority's practice, policy or rule in a way that may constitute indirect discrimination
- instructing, causing, inducing, or knowingly helping someone to commit an act of unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

A councillor's personality and life experiences will naturally incline them to think and act in certain ways. They may form views about others based on those experiences, such as having an affinity with someone because they have a

similar approach to life or thinking less of someone because they are from a different generation. This is known as “**unconscious bias**” and it can lead people to make decisions based on biases or false assumptions. Councillors need to be alert to the potential of unconscious bias and ensure they make decisions based on evidence, and not on assumptions they have made based on biases.

### **How can Councillors cause their council to be in breach of the Equality Act?**

The Code of Conduct is not intended to stifle democratic debate. Councillors should always remember that Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights gives a high level of protection to comments that are genuinely made during political debate, even if most people would find them offensive.

Some Councillors have particular roles which may give a higher risk for the potential for discrimination; for example, if you are on an appointment panel for a position in the council, or you are able to award local grants in your ward and will need to decide which organisations to support.

Merely arguing, or even voting, against a proposal which is aimed at complying with a positive anti-discriminatory duty would not be enough by itself to risk breaking this part of the code. Simply having a party-political or personal position on an issue is unlikely to amount to a breach of this provision because it does not, of itself, involve the council doing anything.

Under the Equality Act 2010, an authority is made liable for any discriminatory acts which a Councillor commits. This will apply where they say or do something in their official capacity in a discriminatory manner.

#### **1. Equality Act – Examples**

The complaint alleged that a Councillor ‘liked’ several racially discriminatory comments on social media and one comment advocating violence against Travellers. The panel found that ‘Liking’ of the offensive comments did amount to a failure to treat those who were the subject of such comments with respect and a failure to promote equalities in breach of the Code of Conduct.

A Councillor was a member of the council’s recruitment panel to appoint a new chief executive. Five applicants were shortlisted. After one candidate had finished his presentation and left the room the Councillor said, “good candidate, shame he’s black.” The panel found that the Code of Conduct had been breached.

### **3 Impartiality of officers**

#### **As a Councillor:**

#### **3.1 I do not compromise, or attempt to compromise, the impartiality of anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the council.**

Officers work for the council as a whole and must be politically neutral (unless they are political assistants which the City Council do not have). They should not be coerced or persuaded to act in a way that would undermine their neutrality. You can question officers in order to understand, for example, their reasons for proposing to act in a particular way, or the content of a report that they have written. However, you must not try and force them to act differently, change their advice, or alter the content of that report, if doing so would prejudice their professional integrity.

Both Councillors and officers are servants of the public and are indispensable to one another. Together, they bring the critical skills, experience and knowledge required to manage an effective council.

At the heart of this relationship, is the importance of mutual respect. Councillor-officer relationships should be conducted in a positive and constructive way. Therefore, it is important that any dealings between Councillors and officers should observe reasonable standards of courtesy, should show mutual appreciation of the importance of their respective roles and that neither party should seek to take unfair advantage of their position or seek to exert undue influence on the other party.

Councillors provide a democratic mandate to the council and are responsible to the electorate whom they represent. They set their council's policy framework, ensure that services and policies are delivered and scrutinise council services.

Councillors on the cabinet, chairs and vice chairs of committees have additional responsibilities. These responsibilities will result in increased expectations and relationships with officers that are more complex. Such Councillors must still respect the impartiality of officers and must not ask them to undertake work of a party-political nature or compromise their position with other Councillors or other officers.

Officers provide the professional advice and managerial expertise and information needed for decision making by Councillors and to deliver the policy framework agreed by Councillors. They are responsible for implementing decisions of Councillors and the day-to-day administration of the council. The roles are very different but need to work in a complementary way. It is important for both sides to respect these differences and ensure that they work in harmony. Getting that relationship right is an important skill. That is why the code requires Councillors to respect an officer's impartiality and professional expertise. In turn officers should respect a councillor's democratic mandate as the people accountable to the public for the work of the council. It is also important for a council to have a Councillor-officer protocol which sets out how this relationship works and what both Councillors and officers can expect in terms of mutual respect and good working relationships.

Officers may sometimes give you advice that you do not want to hear or does not suit your political views. They must be allowed to do this without fear of recriminations to allow for good decision-making looking at all relevant options. That means in your dealing with officers you must not seek to influence them improperly or put undue pressure on them. For example, you should not get officers to help you prepare party political material, or to help you with matters relating to your private business. You should not provide or offer any incentive or reward in return for acting in a particular way or reaching a particular decision.

The fundamentally held principle is that "the local government system of the UK has long resided on a bond of trust between elected Councillors and a permanent corps of local government officer... that relationship of trust stems from the right of Councillors to expect that they are being assisted in their functions by officers who are politically neutral and whose loyalty is to the council as a whole (see] Ahmed v United Kingdom (2000) 29 EHRR 1)

## **Impartiality of officers - Examples**

A Councillor became involved in a social care case on behalf of a constituent during which time he inappropriately sought to influence operational decision-making and sent discourteous and disrespectful correspondence to the officers. In doing so, he lost sight of his overall responsibility to the council to allow its officers to perform their statutory functions. He was found to have breached the Code of Conduct.

A Councillor who, over a period of six months, persistently sought to influence the decisions of officers dealing with a complaint by his son and daughter-in-law against their council tenant neighbour was found, through his actions, to have compromised the impartiality of the officers and to have used his position improperly to promote the interest of his family and to have brought the role of Councillor into disrepute in breach of the Code of Conduct.

### **What does working on behalf of the authority mean?**

Local Authorities deliver services in a range of ways. Often services will have been contracted out to outside bodies. For example, if you are in a highway authority, road repair services may be carried out by outside contractors. Their employees delivering that contract are doing so on behalf of the council and you should not use your position to interfere improperly in delivery of that service.

### **What if I disagree with the views of an officer?**

You are perfectly entitled to disagree with officers. They are there to give you impartial professional advice and you do not need to accept their advice without question. When you do question them however, you should treat them with respect and recognise that they are professionals.

If you feel dissatisfied with the advice you are given you should raise through appropriate management channels in line with the council's Councillor-officer protocol, see guidance on respect, bullying and harassment in Part 2.

Where you have a declarable interest in a matter you are discussing with an officer you should make that clear to the officer – see guidance on declarations of interest in Part 3. Where it is an interest which would stop you from taking part in a meeting you should not discuss those matters with officers except where you are seeking professional advice in the same way as any member of the public could – for example, assistance with making an application – and the officer should make a note that an interest has been declared.

If you need to speak to an officer about the matter, you should arrange a meeting as a member of the public and not seek to use your position to gain preferential or quicker access.

### **Having regard to Officer advice**

Councillors take decisions every day that affect the lives of those who live and work within your community. It is therefore important that those decisions are made having regard to all available evidence and weighing up all sides of the argument.

If you seek advice as an individual Councillor, or advice is offered to you, for example, on whether or not you should register or declare an interest, you must have regard to this advice before you make your mind up. Failure to do so may lead to a breach of the Code of Conduct.

If in any doubt – be safe and always seek advice from your monitoring officer before taking any action.

#### **4. Confidentiality and access to information**

**As a Councillor:**

##### **4.1 I do not disclose information:**

**a. given to me in confidence by anyone**

**b. acquired by me which I believe, or ought reasonably to be aware, is of a confidential nature, unless**

- i. I have received the consent of a person authorised to give it;**
- ii. I am required by law to do so;**
- iii. the disclosure is made to a third party for the purpose of obtaining professional legal advice provided that the third party agrees not to disclose the information to any other person; or**
- iv. the disclosure is:**
  - 1. reasonable and in the public interest; and**
  - 2. made in good faith and in compliance with the reasonable requirements of the council; and**
  - 3. I have consulted the monitoring officer or their team prior to its release.**

**4.2 I do not improperly use knowledge gained solely as a result of my role as a Councillor for the advancement of myself, my friends, my family members, my employer, or my business interests.**

**4.3 I do not prevent anyone from getting information that they are entitled to by law.**

Local authorities must work openly and transparently. Their proceedings and printed materials are open to the public, except in certain legally defined circumstances. You should work on this basis, but there will be times when it is required by law that discussions, documents, and other information relating to or held by the council must be treated in a confidential manner. Examples include personal data relating to individuals or information relating to ongoing negotiations.



## **Confidential information**

While council business is by law generally open and local authorities should always operate as transparently as possible, there will be times – for example, when discussing a named individual, confidential HR matters or commercially sensitive information – when it is appropriate for council business to be kept confidential or treated as exempt information.

In those circumstances, you must not disclose confidential information, or information which you believe to be of a confidential nature, unless:

- you have the consent of the person authorised to give it
- you are required by law to do so
- the disclosure is made to a third party for the purposes of obtaining professional advice (for example, your lawyer or other professional adviser) provided that person agrees not to disclose the information to any other person
- the disclosure is in the public interest

## **Disclosure in the public interest**

Disclosure ‘in the public interest’ is only justified in limited circumstances, when all the following four requirements are met:

- the disclosure must be reasonable
- the disclosure must be in the public interest
- the disclosure must be made in good faith
- the disclosure must be made in compliance with any reasonable requirements of your authority

In relation to the disclosure of confidential information in the public interest, the four requirements are outlined in more detail below.

1. The first requirement, that the disclosure must be reasonable, requires you to consider matters such as:
  - Whether you believe that the information disclosed, and any allegation contained in it, is substantially true. If you do not believe this, the disclosure is unlikely to be reasonable.
  - Whether you make the disclosure for personal gain. If you are paid to disclose the information, the disclosure is unlikely to be reasonable.
  - The identity of the person to whom the disclosure is made. It may be reasonable to disclose information to the police or to an appropriate regulator. It is less likely to be reasonable for you to disclose the information to the world at large through the media.
  - The extent of the information disclosed. The inclusion of unnecessary detail, and in particular, private matters such as addresses or telephone numbers, is likely to render the disclosure unreasonable.

- The seriousness of the matter. The more serious the matter disclosed, the more likely it is that the disclosure will be reasonable.
  - The timing of the disclosure. If the matter to which the disclosure relates has already occurred, and is unlikely to occur again, the disclosure may be less likely to be reasonable than if the matter is continuing or is likely to reoccur.
  - Whether the disclosure involves your authority failing in a duty of confidence owed to another person.
2. The second requirement, that the disclosure must be in the public interest, needs to involve one or more of the following matters or something of comparable seriousness, that has either happened in the past, is currently happening, or is likely to happen in the future:
- a criminal offence is committed.
  - the council or some other person fails to comply with any legal obligation to which they are subject.
  - a miscarriage of justice occurs.
  - the health or safety of any individual is in danger.
  - the environment is likely to be damaged.
  - that information tending to show any matter falling within the above is deliberately concealed.
3. The third requirement, that the disclosure is made in good faith, will not be met if you act with an ulterior motive, for example, to achieve a party-political advantage or to settle a score with a political opponent.
4. The fourth requirement, that you comply with the reasonable requirements of the council, means that before making the disclosure you must comply with the council's policies or protocols on matters such as whistle-blowing and confidential information. You must first raise your concerns through the appropriate channels set out in such policies or protocols.

In summary, to decide whether the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, you may need to conduct a balancing exercise weighing up the public interest in maintaining confidentiality against any countervailing public interest favouring disclosure. This will require a careful focus on how confidential the information is, on any potentially harmful consequences of its disclosure, and on any factors, which may justify its disclosure despite these potential consequences. **If in doubt you should always seek advice from the monitoring officer.** Always keep a note of the reason for your decision.

In some situations, it is extremely unlikely that a disclosure can be justified in the public interest. These will include where the disclosure amounts to a criminal offence, or where the information disclosed is protected by legal professional privilege.

### **Circumstances in which a council can treat information as confidential**

For further information, please refer to the Access to Information Procedure Rules within the Councils Constitution.

### **Does confidentiality under the code apply only to information which is classified as confidential or exempt by law?**

No. The code goes wider than matters simply considered in a formal council setting. Information is a broad term. It includes facts, advice, and opinions. It covers written material, including tapes, videos, CDs, DVDs, and other electronic media. It covers material in unwritten form, including intellectual property.

Information can only be confidential if all the following apply:-

- it has the necessary 'quality of confidence' about it (trivial information will not be confidential but information that you would expect people to want to be private would be);
- it was divulged in circumstances importing an obligation of confidence (information properly in the public domain will not be confidential);
- disclosure of it would be detrimental to the party wishing to keep it confidential.

For example, you may be told confidential information by a constituent in the course of your duties. That is why the code is written broadly to cover information classed as confidential which you may come across in your duties.

You should use your judgment when you are given information. An individual does not have to explicitly say that information is confidential if they tell you something which a reasonable person would regard as sensitive. You may, however, wish to clarify if somebody tells you something whether they want you to treat it as confidential.

## Confidentiality - Examples

A Councillor was assisting a resident in an adoption process, which the resident decided to subsequently withdraw from. The resident's estranged parent contacted the Councillor for information as to what was happening with the case and the Councillor inadvertently shared confidential information as she had not realised that father and son were estranged. This was found to be a breach of the code.

A Councillor circulated information about an officer's medical condition to other Councillors and a local headteacher with whom he was acquainted. He was found to have disclosed information which should reasonably be regarded as being of a confidential nature and without the officer's consent in breach of the Code of Conduct.

### **What does consent by the person authorised to give it mean?**

If somebody, for example a constituent, has told you something in confidence – for example in the line of casework – you may later want to put that in the public domain as part of pursuing that case. You should always check with the individual before you disclose something you believe is confidential to ensure that they are comfortable with that information being disclosed. You should also be clear with them as to how you may use the information, they give you to help resolve their issue.

### **In what circumstances am I required to disclose confidential information by law?**

This would be where a law enforcement or regulatory agency or the courts required disclosure of information.

### **In what way could I use information I have obtained to advance myself or others?**

As a Councillor you will often receive commercially sensitive or other confidential information. You must not use that information to your own advantage. For example, if you know the council is considering the purchase of a piece of land, you should not use that information in your private dealings to seek to purchase the land.

## **How does this relate to the Data Protection Legislation?**

As part of their role Councillors will receive personal information. They should seek to ensure they are familiar with how Data Protection Legislation applies to their role in handling such information through training, and if they are not sure to seek advice from an appropriate officer in the council.

Although Councillors are not required to register as a data controller, they will receive personal information from residents in their area. They should only use it for the purpose for which it has been given and must ensure this information is held securely and only share with others that are entitled to it.

In contrast, the council is responsible for information they provide to Councillors and ensuring they know how it can be used.

## **Access to information**

Transparency is a very important principle underpinning local democracy and public decision-making. The public are entitled to see information about the way decisions are made unless there are specific reasons why that information is confidential. The council has a publication scheme setting out what information is accessible to the public and you as an individual Councillor must not prevent any person from accessing information which they are entitled to by law. This includes information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or those copies of minutes, agendas, reports, and other documents of the council which they have a right to access.

If in doubt seek advice from the relevant council officers.

## **The 'need to know'**

As a Councillor, you are not automatically entitled to access all information the council holds. For example, the council may deal with highly confidential and sensitive information about employees or about residents involved in complex cases.

In addition to rights set out in law or conferred by the council constitution, you have a right to inspect documents if you can demonstrate a "need to know." This isn't a right to a roving commission but must be linked to your performance of your duties and functions as a Councillor. For example, the need could more easily be demonstrated by membership of a relevant committee, such as a staffing committee than simply because you are interested in seeing the information. Local authorities have more justification for denying free access to particularly sensitive papers such as childcare or staffing records. You should not seek to get information if you have a declarable interest in it.

You can also exercise the “need to know” in respect of attending meetings. Access to Information Rules set out an Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s rights of access to documents and additional rights of access to documents for Councillors to carry out their functions.

Where you are given access to documents which are not available to members of the public, you should ensure that any confidential information is used and protected in an appropriate and secure manner and shared with authorised persons only.

### **Can I use council information for matters outside the council?**

A Councillor is entitled to access information held by the council for the performance of their duties as a Councillor. If a Councillor wishes to use council information for any purpose other than in connection with their duties as a Councillor, and that information is not in a publicly available document, however, then that Councillor should submit a freedom of information request so that it can be given to them to use freely.

The general rule is that any information held by the council and given directly to a Councillor may only ever be used for the purpose for which it was provided. That purpose may add particular restrictions, for example where it relates to an individual constituent or sensitive matter. The purpose should not be for anything other than use in connection with the proper performance of the councillor’s duties as a Councillor. The exceptions to this are where the information has already been published, it has been given as a result of a request under Freedom of Information or Environmental Information Regulations or it is in the public interest (‘whistleblowing’) for which provisions are made in the Code of Conduct as explained above.

Please see the [ICO website](#) for helpful guidance on data protection and freedom of information.

## 5. Disrepute

### As a Councillor:

#### 5.1 I do not bring my role or council into disrepute.

As a Councillor, you are trusted to make decisions on behalf of your community and your actions and behaviour are subject to greater scrutiny than that of ordinary members of the public. Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects your right to freedom of expression, and political speech as a Councillor is given enhanced protection but this right is not unrestricted. You should be aware that your actions might have an adverse impact on your role, other Councillors and/or the council and may lower the public's confidence in your ability to discharge your functions as a Councillor or the council's ability to discharge its functions.

In general terms, disrepute can be defined as a lack of good reputation or respectability. In the context of the Code of Conduct, a councillor's behaviour in office will bring their **role** into disrepute if the conduct could reasonably be regarded as either:

1. reducing the public's confidence in them being able to fulfil their role; or
2. adversely affecting the reputation of your authority's Councillors, in being able to fulfil their role.

Conduct by a Councillor which could reasonably be regarded as reducing public confidence in their council being able to fulfil its functions and duties will bring **the authority** into disrepute.

For example, circulating highly inappropriate, vexatious, or malicious e-mails to constituents, making demonstrably dishonest posts about your authority on social media or using abusive and threatening behaviour might well bring the role of Councillor into disrepute. Making grossly unfair or patently untrue or unreasonable criticism of your authority in a public arena might well be regarded as bringing the council into disrepute.

#### **What distinguishes disrepute to “your role or council” from disrepute to you as a person?**

The misconduct will need to be sufficient to damage the reputation of the councillor's role or council, as opposed simply to damaging the reputation of the individual concerned.

Certain kinds of conduct may damage the reputation of an individual but will rarely be capable of damaging the reputation of the role of Councillor or the reputation of the authority.

Here are some of the situations that might tip the balance in favour of disrepute to the role of Councillor or to the council in particular cases:

1. Situations where Councillors have put their private interests above the public interest, which they are expected to promote as Councillors, and therefore reduced the standing of their role. For example, Councillors using their position to secure a secret personal profit.
2. Similarly, situations where a Councillor defies important and well-established rules of the authority for private gain.
3. Where a Councillor engages in conduct which directly and significantly undermines the authority's reputation as a good employer or responsible service provider.

#### 1. **Disrepute – Examples**

A Councillor posted a tweet reading “Cllr Blogs why don't you just throw in the towel, just go before you cause any more damage to the reputation of the council. You and some members of your cabinet have failed. I hope that the SFO is brought in to investigate your conduct. #failedleadership.” The complainant stated that she found the tweet ‘very offensive’ and bullying and also considered that the tweet would reasonably bring the councillor's office and the authority into disrepute. The Councillor was found to have brought his authority into disrepute by reducing public confidence in the council.

A Councillor brought his role and authority into disrepute by taking advantage of a council mistake and failing to prevent council-employed contractors from working on his privately-owned home. The council mistakenly sent decorators to the home, an ex-council property. The Councillor only told the council about the mistake after the work had been completed and then said he could not be charged for the work.



The chair of a council made a deeply inappropriate remark at a council meeting that was reported in the local media and was accused of bringing his role and authority into disrepute. It was clear in both the meeting and the local media reporting that other Councillors expressed concerns about his comments and found them inappropriate. It was found that he had not brought his authority into disrepute but that he had brought his role into disrepute.

## **6. Use of position**

### **As a Councillor:**

#### **6.1 I do not use, or attempt to use, my position improperly to the advantage or disadvantage of myself or anyone else.**

Your position as a Councillor provides you with certain opportunities, responsibilities, and privileges, and you make choices all the time that will impact others. However, you should not take advantage of these opportunities to further your own or others' private interests or to disadvantage anyone unfairly.

You should not use, or attempt to use, your public office either for your own or anybody else's personal gain or loss.

Involving yourself in a decision in which you have an interest, to seek to benefit yourself or another would be a breach of this paragraph of the code. For guidance on how to conduct yourself when you have an interest and how to balance your rights as an individual and your responsibilities as a public decision maker see the guidance on registration of interests.

Councillors who own land, or whose relatives or close associates own land, need to be particularly cautious where planning matters are concerned. This applies equally to parish/town Councillors when the council is consulted on planning matters. Similarly, while it is reasonable to expect Councillors to help constituents apply to the council, for example, for housing, it is quite improper to seek to influence the decision to be taken by the officers and would also be in breach of paragraph 3 of the code.

#### **What kinds of attempts to advantage or disadvantage would be improper?**

There are circumstances where it will be proper for a Councillor to seek to confer an advantage or disadvantage and other circumstances where it will not.

Being a Councillor can involve making hard choices and balancing a range of interests. Most decisions will inevitably benefit some people and will be to the detriment of others. It's important when you make those decisions to make them in what you think is the public interest and not be influenced by private interests. For example, there can be no objection to Councillors voicing their opposition to the closure of a local public library. This conduct is clearly intended to secure an advantage for the users of the library. What is crucial is that councillors' attempts to secure this advantage are clearly part and parcel of their duties as a local representative. Therefore, these activities are not improper.

The term 'improperly' is not defined in the Code of Conduct. This ensures that the scope of the provision is not unnecessarily limited. The underlying principle is that Councillors are elected or appointed to public office to serve the public interest.

A councillor's conduct would be improper if they were to use their public position to further private interests of themselves or associates, or to settle old scores with enemies, to the detriment of the public interest. Any conduct that unfairly uses a councillor's public position to promote private interests over the public interest will be improper.

### **What if the attempt to confer an advantage or disadvantage fails?**

The wording of the Code of Conduct makes it clear that the use of position provision (paragraph 6) covers failed attempts as well as situations where an advantage or disadvantage has actually been achieved.

For example, if you have tried to influence fellow Councillors to vote in a particular way which would be to your personal advantage and/or that of your family/close associates you would have breached this provision of the code even if they did not in fact vote that way.

### **Misuse of Position - Examples**

Most alleged improper uses of position are in connection with matters in which the Councillors have interests.

A Councillor who was a 'joint co-ordinator' of a community group did not notify the council of her position in this group. She took part in the considerations and voted on the decision to negotiate a new lease in respect of a workshop used by this community group. A standards committee found that she had used her position improperly as the decision on which she voted benefited a group in which she clearly had an interest which she had not disclosed to the council.

A council leader failed to declare a conflict of interest relating to land he owned. The court found that he used his position as a Councillor and instructed a planning officer to alter the road route to benefit his own land's value to a considerable extent. He was found guilty of misconduct in public life (which is a criminal offence) for trying to influence the route of a new by-pass to enclose his land in a new development belt, which would have significantly increased its value. He received an 18-month custodial sentence.

A parish Councillor was found to have improperly used his position and secured an advantage for a member of the public by asking the parish clerk to make a payment which had not been approved by the Parish Council in breach of the Code of Conduct. The payment was for repairs to a private road used by the Councillor to get to his allotment.

## **7. Use of resources and facilities.**

**As a Councillor:**

**7.1 I do not misuse council resources.**

**7.2 I will, when using the resources of the council or authorising their use by others:**

- a) **act in accordance with the council's requirements; and**
- b) **ensure that such resources are not used for political purposes unless that use could reasonably be regarded as likely to facilitate, or be conducive to, the discharge of the functions of the council or of the office to which I have been elected or appointed.**

You may be provided with resources and facilities by the council to assist you in carrying out your duties as a Councillor.

Examples include:

- office support
- stationery
- equipment such as a laptop or iPad.
- transport
- access and use of council buildings and rooms

These are given to you to help you carry out your role as a Councillor more effectively and are not to be used for business or personal gain. They should be used in accordance with the purpose for which they have been provided and the council's own policies regarding their use, for example the IMT Security and Conduct Policy, the Officer-Member protocol, Allowances & Expenses Policy and appropriate e-learning packages.

The key principle underlying all such protocols should be that public office and public resources should not be used to further purely private or party-political purposes.

You must make sure you use the authority's resources for proper purposes only. It is not appropriate to use, or authorise others to use, the resources for political purposes, including party political purposes. When using the authority's resources, you must have regard, if applicable, to any Council Code of Publicity made under the Local Government Act 1986.

You must be familiar with the rules applying to the use of resources made available to you by the council. Failure to comply with the council's rules is likely to amount to a breach of the code.

You should never use council resources for purely political purposes, including designing and distributing party political material produced for publicity purposes.

However, the council may authorise you to use its resources and facilities for legitimate political purposes in connection with your authority's business. For example, holding surgeries in your ward and dealing with correspondence from your constituents. In this case, you must be aware of the limitations placed upon such use for these purposes. Using your authority's resources outside of these limitations is likely to amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct. Where you are part of a formally recognised political group, the council is also allowed to give you such resources as you need for council business, for example use of a room for group meetings.

You should never use council resources purely for private purposes, for example using a photocopier to print off flyers for your business.

**What are the “resources of the council”?**

The resources of the council include services and facilities as well as the financial resources of the authority.

Resources could include any land or premises, equipment, computers, and materials. The time, skills, and assistance of anybody employed by the authority, or working on its behalf, are also resources, as is information held by the authority which it has not published.

**What constitutes using resources “improperly for political purposes”?**

The code acknowledges that party politics has a proper role to play, both in the conduct of authority business and in the way that Councillors carry out their duties.

There will be times when it is acceptable for political groups to use the resources of the council, for example, to hold meetings in authority premises. Often it is impractical to separate a councillor's political campaigning from carrying out their duties as an elected ward member, such as when they hold surgeries or deal with correspondence from constituents.

However, Councillors and monitoring officers will need to exercise considerable care to ensure that this provision is not abused. You must ensure that there is a sufficient connection between the use of resources and the business of the authority. Only **improper** use of resources will be a breach of the Code of Conduct.

This part of the code complements Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986, which prevents the publication of material "designed to affect public support for a political party". The code, however, goes further than the Code of Recommended Practice on Publicity. It covers not only the publication of campaigning material but also any other activity that is intended to promote purely party-political interests.

You must have regard to any applicable council code of publicity made under the powers contained in Section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986. Publicity is defined as "any communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public at large or to a section of the public." It will cover meetings, websites, and social media postings as well as printed and other written material.

You should be particularly scrupulous about the use of authority resources when elections are pending, particularly those resources relating to publicity. When using the council's resources in these circumstances, you should not appear to be seeking to influence public opinion in favour of you, your party colleagues, or your party.

### **Misuse of Resources – Examples**

The complaint alleged a Councillor used his computer equipment provided by his council for private purposes by downloading inappropriate adult pornographic images and sending a number of letters to a local newspaper, which he falsely represented as being from members of the public. He was found to have misused the council's equipment in breach of the code and had brought his office into disrepute.

A Councillor used council notepaper in an attempt to avoid parking penalties incurred by his son. He also dishonestly attempted to renew a parking permit for disabled drivers. He was convicted of attempting, by deception, to evade the parking penalties dishonestly. He was also found by his council to have breached this paragraph of the code.

## **8. Complying with the Code of Conduct**

It is extremely important for you as a Councillor to demonstrate high standards, for you to have your actions open to scrutiny and for you not to undermine public trust in the council or its governance. If you do not understand or are concerned about the council's arrangements for dealing with a complaint you should raise this with the monitoring officer.

### **As a Councillor:**

#### **8.1 I undertake Code of Conduct training provided by my council.**

Councillors should be competent for the work they undertake, and this includes the way in which you conduct yourself when carrying out your role as a Councillor. Training helps to develop such competence, ensuring that you understand the Code of Conduct and how it applies to you.

As a Councillor you are responsible for your own actions and will be held personally responsible if you breach the council's Code of Conduct. Therefore, it is essential that, where you are offered the opportunity by the council, you equip yourself with sufficient knowledge of the code to ensure that you comply with it at all times.

#### **8.2 I cooperate with any Code of Conduct investigation and/or determination.**

The Code of Conduct is a cornerstone of good governance. It is important for public trust that it is seen to be taken seriously by individual Councillors as well as the council as a whole.

While being the subject of a complaint that you are alleged to have breached the Code of Conduct and having your conduct investigated may at times be unpleasant and stressful it is essential that Councillors cooperate with any code investigations and determinations. Failure to cooperate will not stop an investigation but may simply drag matters and does not allow you to put your side of the story so increases the risk that inferences are drawn about your unwillingness to cooperate and that you will be found in breach of the Code.

It is equally important if you have made a complaint which the council has decided merits investigation that you continue to cooperate. Complaints made simply to damage the reputation of an individual through inferences but which you are not willing to support through your cooperation will damage relationships and will also damage the reputation of you and the council.



If you are asked to assist the investigator as a potential witness it is again important that you do so to allow as fully rounded a picture as possible to be drawn so that any determination on a case has as much evidence as necessary in order to reach the correct decision. You should let the investigator know if you need any reasonable adjustments made.

**8.3 I do not intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person who is likely to be involved with the administration of any investigation or proceedings.**

However much you may be concerned about allegations that you or a fellow Councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, it is always wrong to intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person involved in the investigation or hearing. Even though you may not have breached the Code of Conduct, you will have your say during any investigation or hearing, and you should let these processes follow their natural course. If you seek to intimidate a witness in an investigation about your conduct, for example, you may find yourself subject to another complaint that you breached this paragraph of the Code of Conduct.

**When does the duty not to intimidate start and avoiding allegations of intimidation?**

Once there is the possibility of a complaint that the Code of Conduct has been broken, Councillors need to be alert to how their behaviour towards potential witnesses or officers involved in handling of their case may be viewed. However innocently the contact is intended or may appear, great care should be taken when Councillors deal with people involved with their case.

**8.4 I comply with any sanction imposed on me following a finding that I have breached the Code of Conduct.**

Fair, consistent, and proportionate sanctions help to ensure the integrity of the standards framework and thus maintain public trust and confidence in Councillors, your role, and your authorities. It is important that Councillors and local authorities take standards of conduct seriously and the use of available sanctions helps to demonstrate this.

Failure to comply with sanctions can bring the standards framework into disrepute.

Winchester City Council's

# Code of Conduct for Councillors

Guidance Part 3: Interests

November 2024



## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Register of interests – Introduction & General Matters ..... | 3  |
| Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs).....                  | 4  |
| Other registerable interests (ORI's).....                    | 10 |
| Sensitive interests.....                                     | 12 |
| Declarations of interest.....                                | 15 |
| Disclosable Pecuniary Interests.....                         | 18 |
| Other registerable interests.....                            | 20 |
| Non-registerable interest .....                              | 22 |
| Executive decisions.....                                     | 26 |
| Dispensations.....   | 26 |
| What is a 'sensitive interest'?.....                         | 27 |
| Registration of gifts, hospitality, and interests .....      | 28 |
| Bias and Predetermination .....                              | 32 |
| What do I do if I need advice? .....                         | 38 |
| Appendix 1 - Interests Flowchart.....                        | 39 |
| Appendix 2 - General Principles .....                        | 40 |
| Useful Links.....  | 41 |

## **Protecting your reputation and the reputation of the council**

The code requires you to register matters under 2 separate categories:

1. Gifts and hospitality, you receive in your role as a Councillor; and
2. Certain types of interests

### **Register of interests – Introduction & General Matters**

Section 29 of the Localism Act 2011 requires the monitoring officer to establish and maintain a register of interests of members of the council.

You need to register your interests so that the public, council employees and fellow Councillors know which of your interests might give rise to a conflict of interest. The register is a public document that can be consulted when (or before) an issue arises. Individual register of interest forms can be found on the Councillors profile page at <https://www.winchester.gov.uk/councillors-committees>

The register also protects you by allowing you to demonstrate openness and a willingness to be held accountable. You are personally responsible for deciding whether or not you should disclose an interest in a meeting, but it can be helpful for you to know early on if others think that a potential conflict might arise. It is also important that the public know about any interest that might have to be disclosed by you or other Councillors when making or taking part in decisions, so that decision-making is seen by the public as open and honest. This helps to ensure that public confidence in the integrity of local governance is maintained.

Within 28 days of becoming a member or your re-election or re-appointment to office you must register with the monitoring officer the interests which fall within the categories set out in Table 1 (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests) of the Code of Conduct which are as described in “The Relevant Authorities (Disclosable Pecuniary Interests) Regulations 2012”.

You should also register details of your other personal interests which fall within the categories set out in Table 2 (Other Registerable Interests).

You must register two different categories of interests:

1. Disclosable Pecuniary Interests – these are categories of interests which apply to you and your partner. The categories are set out in regulations made under s27 of the Localism Act 2011 and non-compliance is a criminal offence; and
2. Other registerable interests – these are categories of interest which apply only to you and which the LGA and the council believes should be registered as an aid to transparency.

Further details about these two categories follow. For guidance on when these interests give rise to a matter which needs to be declared at a meeting see the guidance on declaring interests.

### **Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs)**

These are interests which must be notified to the principal authority's monitoring officer within 28 days of the code being adopted by your council or within 28 days from when you become a Councillor in accordance with the statutory requirements of the Localism Act 2011. These are enforced by criminal sanction, and failure to register or declare such an interest at a meeting is a criminal offence. You must keep your register up to date so, as soon as a new interest needs to be registered or you cease to hold an interest, you should notify the monitoring officer.

A 'disclosable pecuniary interest' is an interest of yourself or your partner (which means spouse or civil partner, a person with whom you are living as husband or wife, or a person with whom you are living as if you are civil partners) and the categories covered are set out in the Code of Conduct.

### **Offences**

It is a criminal offence under the Localism Act 2011 to

- fail to notify the monitoring officer of any disclosable pecuniary interest within 28 days of election or co-option
- fail to disclose a disclosable pecuniary interest at a meeting if it is not on the register
- fail to notify the monitoring officer within 28 days of a disclosable pecuniary interest that is not on the register that you have disclosed to a meeting
- participate in any discussion or vote on a matter in which you have a disclosable pecuniary interest

- knowingly or recklessly provide information that is false or misleading in notifying the monitoring officer of a disclosable pecuniary interest or in disclosing such interest to a meeting.

The criminal penalties available to a court are to impose a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale and disqualification from being a Councillor for up to five years.

| <b>Subject</b>  | <b>Description</b>   |
|---|--|
| <b>Employment, office, trade, profession, or vocation</b> | Any employment, office, trade, profession or vocation carried on for profit or gain.   |
| <b>Sponsorship</b>  | <p>Any payment or provision of any other financial benefit (other than from the council) made to the Councillor during the previous 12-month period for expenses incurred by him/her in carrying out his/her duties as a Councillor, or towards his/her election expenses.</p> <p>This includes any payment or financial benefit from a trade union within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992.</p>   |
| <b>Contracts</b>  | <p>Any contract made between the Councillor or his/her spouse or civil partner or the person with whom the Councillor is living as if they were spouses/civil partners (or a firm in which such person is a partner, or an incorporated body of which such person is a director* or a body that such person has a beneficial interest in the securities of*) and the council:</p> <p>(a) under which goods or services are to be provided or works are to be executed; and</p> <p>(b) which has not been fully discharged.</p> |
| <b>Land and Property</b>                                  | <p>Any beneficial interest in land which is within the area of the council.</p> <p>'Land' excludes an easement, servitude, interest or right in or over land which does not give the Councillor or his/her spouse or civil partner or the person with whom the Councillor is living as if</p>  |

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
|                            | they were spouses/ civil partners (alone or jointly with another) a right to occupy or to receive income.   |
| <b>Licences</b>            | Any licence (alone or jointly with others) to occupy land in the council for a month or longer  |
| <b>Corporate tenancies</b> | Any tenancy where (to the councillor's knowledge)—<br>(a) the landlord is the council; and<br>(b) the tenant is a body that the Councillor, or his/her spouse or civil partner or the<br><br>person with whom the Councillor is living as if they were spouses/ civil partners is a<br><br>partner of or a director* of or has a beneficial interest in the securities* of.   |
| <b>Securities</b>          | Any beneficial interest in securities* of a body where—<br>(a) that body (to the councillor's knowledge) has a place of business or land in the council; and<br>(b) either—<br>(i) the total nominal value of the securities* exceeds £25,000 or one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that body; or<br>(ii) if the share capital of that body is of more than one class, the total nominal value of the shares of any one class in which the Councillor, or his/ her spouse or civil partner or the person with whom the Councillor is living as if they were spouses/civil partners has a beneficial interest exceeds one hundredth of the total issued share capital of that class. |

\* director' includes a member of the committee of management of an industrial and provident society.

\* 'securities' means shares, debentures, debenture stock, loan stock, bonds, units of a collective investment scheme within the meaning of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and other securities of any description, other than money deposited with a building society.

### **Does 'office carried on for profit or gain' include allowances I may receive from another council I sit on?**

If you receive allowances which are treated as taxable income rather than simply being pure reimbursement of expenses, say, then they do need to be registered and declared as appropriate.

Reimbursement of expenses is separately covered by the DPI category 'sponsorship' and makes clear that it excludes the need to register or declare reimbursement of expenses from one's own authority. However, that does not exclude any allowances received from another authority. This is supported by a letter written by the then Minister Brandon Lewis to Desmond Swayne MP in 2013 when this issue was raised with Government which said: "a member being in receipt of taxable Councillor allowances may be considered to give rise to a disclosable pecuniary interest under the subject of 'Employment, office, trade or vocation' set out in the regulations.

That means that any member in receipt of taxable allowances from another authority would have to register such as a DPI. For example, a parish Councillor who is also a district Councillor and is in receipt of taxable allowances from the district would need to register that fact.

### **How much detail do I need to put about my employment?**

It is not enough simply to put, for example, 'management consultant' or 'teacher.' Sufficient detail should be given to identify your company or employer. This aids transparency and allows people to see where potential conflicts of interest may arise.

Where you have a sensitive employment, which should not be disclosed you should discuss this with your monitoring officer ([see 'sensitive interests' below](#)). While the law on sensitive interests only applies to where there is a fear of intimidation there may be employment, such as certain sections of the military, which cannot be disclosed for other reasons so you should always seek advice if in doubt.

### **What is a contract with the council?**

Some councillors' own businesses which may have dealings with the council. For example, a grounds maintenance company may contract with a parish council for grass cutting. Such contracts should be included on the register of interests.



More broadly, Councillors, as residents, may have dealings with the council in their personal lives. For example, some Councillors pay their own council to have garden waste collections, rent an allotment or may be a member of the gym of a council operated leisure centre. Such arrangements form a subscription service that are open to all residents, and do not require registration.

### **How much detail is required of landholdings?**

Sufficient detail should be given to identify the land in question.

An address and, where the address is not sufficient, details that are sufficient to identify the land will usually meet the requirement. A plan identifying the land may be useful in some situations but is not a requirement.

### **Do you have to register the landholdings of your employers or bodies you have shareholdings in?**

In general, there is no requirement to list the landholdings of companies or corporate bodies included in the register. The only requirement is to register any tenancy between such bodies and the authority (under the corporate tenancies). Obviously, you can only be expected to register those you ought reasonably to be aware of, so, for example, if you work for a large housebuilder, you may not be aware of which land in the council's area, they had options on.

You do need to be mindful of your level of control in the company and the effect this may have on your benefit from the land. For example, if you and your spouse jointly owned a farming business, you would be the sole beneficiaries of any land owned by that farm and as such it is strongly advised to register land held by companies in which you have a controlling interest.

### **What about my home and tenancies?**

The most common beneficial interest in land Councillors have is their home address. You should include in here your home if you live in it; whether that be as a result of a mortgage, tenancy, or other arrangement (for example, a Councillor is living with their parents but not paying a rental fee to them).

You should also include in the section for beneficial interests in land any tenancy properties you own in the council's area.

### **How much information do you have to give out about shareholdings?**

In general, if you hold more than £25,000 of equity in a company, or more than 1 per cent of a shareholding, you are required to declare this.

Many Councillors hold investments through trust funds, investment funds or pension funds which are managed by fund managers. In that situation, you may not know if you actually hold more than £25,000 in a single company or more than 1 per cent of a shareholding. The expectation is that you should take reasonable steps to ensure you do understand what investments you may have and whether the requirement to register applies, and so:

1. It can be helpful for Councillors to state on their form that they have funds invested in specific funds.
2. It can be helpful for Councillors to make fund managers aware of their requirement to declare where they hold significant investments within a company that operates in the council's area so that they can be notified if this is the case.

### **Do I have to separate my spouse/partners interests and my own interests?**

The law only requires you to register the interests, and you are not required specifically to state whether the interest is held by you, or by your spouse. However, many local authorities do ask for this information as it can be more transparent to separate it.

### **How much information do I need to obtain from my spouse/partner?**

You need to make sure you take all reasonable steps to obtain information from your spouse or partner about their interests. For example, you would reasonably be expected to know where they worked, or if they owned any rental properties. You would be expected to ask if they had any shareholdings in companies, but they may not know the full details of an investment fund they had and where it was invested, and if that were the case, you would not be expected to know (and register) it either.

### **Other registerable interests (ORI's)**

In addition to the Disclosable Pecuniary Interests above, you must, within 28 days of the code being adopted by your council, or your election or appointment to office (where that is later), notify the monitoring officer in writing of the details of your interests within the following categories, which are called 'other registerable interests':

- (a) Details of any body of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management and to which you are appointed or nominated by your council;
- (b) Details of any body of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management and which –
  - exercises functions of a public nature
  - is directed to charitable purposes, or
  - is a body which includes as one of its principal purposes influencing public opinion or policy
- (c) Details of any gifts or hospitality with an estimated value of more than £50 or such other limit as your council has agreed, that you receive personally in connection with your official duties.

With Other Registerable Interests, you are only obliged to register your own interests and do not need to include interests of spouses or partners. Therefore, a spousal interest in a local group is not registerable as an 'other registerable interest.' Failure to register these interests is **not** covered by the criminal offence but would be a breach of the code.

### **What is a “body exercising functions of a public nature”?**

Although it is not possible to produce a definitive list of such bodies, here are some criteria to consider when deciding whether or not a body meets that definition -

- does that body carry out a public service?
- is the body taking the place of local or central government in carrying out the function?
- is the body (including one outsourced in the private sector) exercising a function delegated to it by a public authority?
- is the function exercised under legislation or according to some statutory power?
- can the body be judicially reviewed?

Unless you answer “yes” to one of the above questions, it is unlikely that the body in your case is exercising functions of a public nature.

Examples of bodies included in this definition: government agencies, other councils, public health bodies, council-owned companies exercising public functions, arms-length management organisations carrying out housing functions on behalf of a council, school governing bodies.

### **Do local campaigning or Facebook groups need to be registered?**

Membership (which does not include simply being on a mailing list), of local campaign or Facebook groups will only need to be registered if they are bodies:

- exercising functions of a public nature;
- directed towards charitable purposes; or
- one whose principal purpose includes influencing public opinion or policy.

Generally, it is unlikely that these groups will be regarded as formal bodies to be registered. However, each case should be considered on its own merits. 'A Body' is defined as 'a number of persons united or organised.' Some groups are very united on their cause and organised, but their purpose must fall under one of the functions listed above.

There must also be some formality to the membership, such as registration for example. Simply attending a meeting of a local campaign does not of itself make you a 'member' of that organisation.

There has been a growth in organisations which are more nebulous in nature, and no formal membership requirements exist, such as Extinction Rebellion. It can be helpful to ask yourself the question "do I consider I am a member of the organisation" and if the answer is yes, then register the membership for transparency purposes.

If you need further information or specific advice, please speak to the monitoring officer.

### **What about membership of a political party or trade union?**

The second category of other registerable interests refers to membership of a body or being in a position of general control and management of a body, one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion or policy. This includes any political party or trade union. Memberships of political parties and Trade Unions therefore need to be registered. Remember that if because of membership of a political party or a trade union any payment or financial benefit is received, it is likely to come under the Sponsorship category of DPI.

### **Sensitive interests**

Where you consider that disclosure of the details of an interest could lead to you, or a person connected with you, being subject to violence or intimidation, and the monitoring officer agrees, if the interest is entered on the register, copies of the register that are made available for inspection and any published version of the register will exclude details of the interest, but may state that you have an interest, the details of which are withheld.

### **What is sensitive information?**

It may include your sensitive employment (such as certain scientific research or the Special Forces) which is covered by other legislation or interests that are likely to create serious risk of violence or intimidation against you or someone who lives with you. For example, disclosure of your home address where there has been a threat of violence against you or where there is a court order protecting your whereabouts.

You should provide this information to your monitoring officer and explain your concerns regarding the disclosure of the sensitive information; including why it is likely to create a serious risk that you or a person who lives with you will be subjected to violence or intimidation. You do not need to include this information in your register of interests, if your monitoring officer agrees, but you need to disclose at meetings the fact that you have an interest in the matter concerned (see guidance on declaring interests).

### **What happens if the monitoring officer does not agree that the information is sensitive?**

It is for the monitoring officer to decide if the information is sensitive. You must notify the monitoring officer of the information which you think is sensitive and give your reasons and any supporting evidence.

If the monitoring officer agrees, this information does not need to be included in the register of interests. However, if the monitoring officer disagrees then it must be registered.

### **What happens if the information stops being sensitive?**

You must notify the monitoring officer of any change in circumstances which would mean that the sensitive information is no longer sensitive within 28 days of the change, for example a change in employment. The information would then be included in the authority's register of interests.

### **I haven't received a direct threat, but I am concerned about registering my home address.**

At present, Councillors are required to register their home address as part of their council's register of interests which are typically published on their council

website. There have been growing concerns about the potential for threats and intimidation to Councillors by virtue of disclosing their home address. Whilst some Councillors believe disclosing a home address is a core component of democracy and it is important for the public to know where a Councillor may live as they may be making decisions that have an impact on their property, others are very concerned about it.

Section 32 of the **Localism Act 2011** allows Local Authorities to withhold sensitive interests from the public register where their disclosure could lead to violence or intimidation. It is recommended that Councillors should not be required to register their home addresses as a disclosable pecuniary interest. The **Committee on Standards in Public Life**'s review of Local Government Ethical Standard recommended in January 2019 that Councillors should not be required to register their home addresses as a disclosable pecuniary interest. However, at present no Government has legislated for this.

It is important that if Councillors have such concerns, they share these with the monitoring officer transparently and openly so they can be properly considered.

The practice at the City Council is that whilst Councillors are generally required to record their home address within the register of interest form, we do not display a Councillors home address as part of their contact details held on their Councillor profile page as was previously the case.

### **Who should you notify when registering your interests?**

The Localism Act and the Code both say that the monitoring officer is responsible for maintaining the register. You must therefore notify your monitoring officer of your interests to be registered. This is also true for parish/town Councillors that you must notify the monitoring officer of the district for the area in which the parish/town council is situated.

However, the obvious point of contact for information of this type for the public is the clerk. The clerk needs to have an up-to-date copy of the register of interests in order to comply with public access requirements and there is a requirement for the parish council to publish the registers on their website where they have one, either directly or through a link to the relevant page on the principal authority's website. It also ensures that the clerk is aware of potential conflicts if they arise in a parish council meeting and can advise accordingly. It is therefore practical for the parish clerk to act as the point of contact between parish/town Councillors and the relevant monitoring officer by collecting their interests together, passing them on and regularly asking Councillors to review if there have been any changes.

However, you should ensure that there is a system in place for the parish clerk to pass on immediately any information to the relevant monitoring officer as each individual Councillor is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the relevant monitoring officer is in possession of all the required information.

## **Declarations of interest**

### **As a Councillor:**

#### **9.1 I register and disclose my interests.**

Section 29 of the Localism Act 2011 requires the monitoring officer to establish and maintain a register of interests of members of the authority.

You need to register your interests so that the public, council employees and fellow Councillors know which of your interests might give rise to a conflict of interest. The register is a public document that can be consulted when (or before) an issue arises. The register also protects you by allowing you to demonstrate openness and a willingness to be held accountable. You are personally responsible for deciding whether or not you should disclose an interest in a meeting, but it can be helpful for you to know early on if others think that a potential conflict might arise. It is also important that the public know about any interest that might have to be disclosed by you or other Councillors when making or taking part in decisions, so that decision making is seen by the public as open and honest. This helps to ensure that public confidence in the integrity of local governance is maintained.

You should note that failure to register or disclose a disclosable pecuniary interest as set out in Table 1 of the Code, is a criminal offence under the Localism Act 2011.

**Appendix B of the Code sets** out the detailed provisions on registering and disclosing interests. If in doubt, you should always seek advice from your monitoring officer.

This part of the Code is about the registering of your interests and then how to go about declaring or managing your interests.

This is a simple principle – as public decision-makers, decisions must be made in the public interest and not to serve private interests. However, the rules to set out whether you have an interest or not in any given situation can be complex given the infinite variety of issues that may arise. This guidance is to help you steer a way through those rules.

The Code therefore requires Councillors to declare interests in certain circumstances. Disclosure, in the register and at meetings, is about letting members of the public and interested parties know where you are coming from when involved in decision making and is to enable you to be ‘up front’ about who you are and what your conflicts of interest might be. Conflicts of interest in decision making as a Councillor, and what in public law is known as ‘apparent



bias,' are an established part of the local government legal landscape. The Nolan Principles and the Code require Councillors to act impartially (i.e., not be biased) when carrying out their duties. (See also guidance on bias and predetermination)

A single Councillor who is guilty of bias is enough to strike out the whole decision when challenged before the courts. This can cause huge cost and reputational damage for the council yet is seldom due to actual corruption or even consciously favouring a personal interest over the public interest on the part of the Councillor involved and may have no repercussions for them personally. The object of this part of the Code is therefore twofold.

Firstly, it is to provide an explanation and a guide to the public and Councillors as to what is or isn't a conflict of interest and then how a conflict between the interest you may hold as an individual Councillor and the public interest you must hold as a decision maker of a public authority can be best managed.

Secondly, the Code provides a means to hold an individual Councillor to account for their actions when they fail to manage that conflict of interest properly and put the decision of the public authority, including the public purse, and decisions around individuals' daily lives, at risk.

The test at law for apparent bias is '**would a fair-minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, conclude that there was a real possibility of bias.**' This is why you will see this question reflected in the Code when you are asked to consider whether or not you should participate in a meeting where you have a conflict of interest.

The code contains three different categories of interests – **Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPI); Other Registerable Interests ORI); and Non-Registerable Interests (NRI).**

For the first two categories these are interests which must be recorded on a public register except in limited circumstances (**see guidance on Registration of Interests**). The third category do not need to be recorded on the register but will need to be declared as and when they arise.

This means an interest may arise not just from interests already on your register. There will also be times when, although the interest does not personally involve you, it may involve a relative or close associate. You are not expected to register every interest of those people, but you will need to declare them as and when they might arise. These are referred to in the code as '**non-registerable interests.**'

As a brief summary, the requirements of the code apply where:

1. you or someone you are associated with has an interest in any business of your authority, and;
2. where you are aware or ought reasonably to be aware of the existence of that interest, and
3. you attend a meeting of your authority at which the business is considered (or where you are making a delegated decision as an individual under executive arrangements).

You must disclose to that meeting the existence and nature of your interests at the start of the meeting, or when the interest becomes apparent. It is usual to have for any declarations of interest at the start of the meeting..

And there will be times that because your interest is so close to the matter under discussion you will not be able to take part in that item of business. Those circumstances are explained in greater detail for each category of interest below.

## **Disclosable Pecuniary Interests**

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (or 'DPIs') were introduced by s30 of the Localism Act 2011. They are a category of interests which relate to the member and/or their partner, such as financial interests of you or your partner such as your house or other property, or if you have a job or own a business. The categories are set out in regulations made under the Act and are in Table 1 of Annex B of the Code.

**'Partner'** is defined by regulations as your 'spouse or civil partner, a person with whom you are living as husband or wife, or a person with whom you are living as if you are civil partners.'

They must be registered and, where they come up in a meeting, declared. Failure knowingly to register or declare a DPI is a criminal offence under the Localism Act.

The Localism Act says that if you are present at a meeting of the Council, or any committee, sub-committee, joint committee or joint sub-committee of the authority, and you have a disclosable pecuniary interest **in any matter to be considered or being considered at the meeting:**

- you may not participate in any discussion of the matter at the meeting
- you may not participate in any vote taken on the matter at the meeting
- if the interest is not registered, you must disclose the interest to the meeting
- if the interest is not registered and is not the subject of a pending notification, you must notify the monitoring officer of the interest within 28 days.

The Act says you need to declare the nature of the interest only if it is not on the public register. In addition, standard practice is to leave the room where the meeting is held while any discussion or voting takes place. However, the Code states that it is important to declare the nature of the interest and to withdraw while the item is being dealt with. This aids transparency for the public and helps avoid accusations that you may be seeking to influence the outcome by remaining in the room even if your council's rules don't explicitly require it.

If you have a **DPI**, you may in certain circumstances be granted a dispensation to take part (see guidance on **Dispensations**).

### **When does a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest arise?**

The Localism Act uses the phrase ‘you have a DPI in any matter...’

This wording has led to some confusion as to what circumstances would lead to the need to declare a DPI. The Explanatory Notes to the Localism Act say that section 31 of the Act “requires a member of a relevant authority to disclose a disclosable pecuniary interest that they are aware of (apart from a sensitive interest), at a meeting or if acting alone, where any matter to be considered **relates to** their interest. ... It prohibits a member from participating in discussion or voting on any matter **relating to** their interest or, if acting alone, from taking any steps in relation to the matter (subject to any dispensations).” [our emphasis].

This means you have a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest (DPI) in a matter when the matter being discussed **directly relates** to your registered interest or that of your partner, rather than simply affecting it.

For example, if you have registered 1 Acacia Avenue as your address, you would have a DPI if you put in a planning application for 1 Acacia Avenue, or if the whole of Acacia Avenue was being considered for a Resident Parking Zone. You would not have a DPI if 3 Acacia Avenue had put in a planning application as the matter does **not directly relate** to your registered interest. You may however have a non-registerable interest (see below) as the application may indirectly affect your property.

### **Does setting the Council Tax or precept give rise to a DPI?**

The LGA is clear that you do not have a DPI simply if you are voting to set the Council Tax or precept. Guidance issued by the Government in 2013 made clear that ‘any payment of, or liability to pay, council tax does not create a disclosable pecuniary interest as defined in the national rules; hence being a council tax payer does not mean that you need a dispensation to take part in the business of setting the council tax or precept or local arrangements for council tax support.’ The Council Tax and precept are charges on all relevant properties in the area and do not directly relate to any single property in such a way as to give rise to a DPI. Councillors are therefore fully entitled to vote on the matter (subject to rules about Council tax arrears).

## **Other registerable interests**

The second category of interests are 'other registerable interests' or ORIs.

If you have an 'Other Registerable Interest' – that is an interest which falls within the categories in Table 2 in Annex B of the code - the Code says you should not participate in the relevant business in two circumstances:

- a. when a matter directly relates to the finances or wellbeing of that interest. (para 6); or
- b. when a matter affects the finances or wellbeing of that interest to a greater extent than it affects the majority of inhabitants; and a reasonable member of the public would thereby believe that your view of the public interest would be affected (paras 8 and 9).

### **An interest 'directly relates' to an outside body where the council is taking a decision which directly relates to the funding or wellbeing of that organisation**

For example, under a) if you are a member of a group which has applied for funding from the council, or if you are a member of an organisation which has submitted a planning application, the decision directly relates to that organisation. In such a case you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter.

You can speak on the matter before withdrawing but only where the public are also allowed to address the meeting. For example, you may want to put forward the organisation's case as to why it has applied for funding, but representatives from competing organisations would also need to be able to make their case. If the public are not allowed to address the meeting on that item, you would need, if necessary, to get another Councillor who did not have an ORI to make any relevant case.

If the council is simply discussing that outside organisation but not making a decision which relates to its finances or wellbeing – for example discussing the annual report from the organisation – that does not directly relate to the organisation as there is no direct impact on the organisation which would give rise to a conflict of interest.

Under b) if you are on the committee of the local village hall and an application for a licence for another venue in the village is made which may take trade away from the village hall then the matter would affect the village hall and a reasonable person would believe that would affect your view of the public interest so those two tests are met.

You would not have an interest if the council was discussing early planning for an event, which may or may not be held in the village hall as there would be no direct financial impact at that time. When the plans crystallised then an interest would arise as a decision would be made which would have financial implications.

There will also be circumstances where you do not need to declare an interest even though the matter may be relevant to the wider aims of an organisation of which you are a member. For example, if you are a member of a charity such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), you do not need to declare an interest every time the council might discuss matters relating to habitats or conservation issues. Those issues may reflect the wider aims of RSPB, but they do not directly relate to or affect the organisation.

If you were in a position of control or general management in that body and the organisation was campaigning actively on the specific issue being discussed or you personally were campaigning actively on that specific issue the situation would be different. In those circumstances you may have an interest and there is a risk of predetermination. Where there is doubt you should always seek advice from the monitoring officer (or clerk if you are a parish/town Councillor).

As with DPs you can be granted a dispensation (see below) and if the interest has not been registered or notified to the monitoring officer you should do so within 28 days of the meeting.

### **Non-registerable interest**

The third category of interests is non-registerable interests or NRIs.

A **Non-registerable Interest** arises where the interest is that of yourself or your partner which is not a DPI or of a relative or close associate (see definition below).

As a Councillor you are not expected to have to register the interests of your relatives or close associates but under the Code you are expected to declare them as and when relevant business occurs which affects their finances or wellbeing. The Code says you should not participate in the relevant business in two circumstances:

- **a.** when a matter directly relates to that interest. Or
- **b.** when a matter affects that interest to a greater extent than it affects the majority of inhabitants and a reasonable member of the public would thereby believe that your view of the public interest would be affected

For example, under a) if your son has submitted an application for a licence to open a bar, the matter directly relates to your relative. You must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter.

For example, under b) there has been an application made to build several units of housing on a field adjacent to your business partner's home. It is not their application, but they will be more affected by the application than the majority of people so again you would be expected to declare the interest and withdraw.

Similarly, an application for the property next door to you does not directly relate to your property so it is not a DPI, but you would instead need to declare a Non-Registerable Interest.

In all of these cases you can speak on the matter before withdrawing but only where the public are also allowed to address the meeting. If the public are not allowed to address the meeting on that item, you would need, if necessary, to get another Councillor who did not have an NRI to make any relevant case or to represent the wider views of constituents.

As with DPIs you can be granted a dispensation (see below).

### **What is the difference between ‘relates to’ and ‘affects’?**

Something relates to your interest if it is directly about it. For example, the matter being discussed is an application about a particular property in which you or somebody associated with you or an outside body you have registered has a financial interest.

‘Affects’ means the matter is not directly about that interest but nevertheless the matter has clear implications for the interest – for example, it is a planning application for a neighbouring property which will result in it overshadowing your property. An interest can of course affect you, your family or close personal associates positively and negatively. So, if you or they have the potential to gain or lose from a matter under consideration, an interest would need to be declared in both situations.

### **What does “affecting well-being” mean?**

The term ‘well-being’ can be described as a condition of contentedness and happiness. Anything that could affect your quality of life or that of someone you are closely associated with, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect your well-being.

There may, for example, be circumstances where any financial impact of a decision may be minimal but nevertheless the disruption it may cause to you or those close to you could be significant. This could be on either a temporary or permanent basis. Temporary roadworks in your street may affect your wellbeing on a temporary basis. Closure of a local amenity may have a more permanent impact on your wellbeing if you use it more than the majority of people in the area.

### **What are the definitions of relative or close associate?**

The Code does not attempt to define “relative” or “close associate,” as all families vary. Some people may have very close extended families, but others will have more distant relations. You should consider the nature of your relationship with the person (e.g., whether they are a close family member or more distant relation). The key test is whether the interest might be objectively regarded by a member of the public, acting reasonably, as potentially affecting your responsibilities as a Councillor. It would be a person with whom you are in either regular or irregular contact with over a period of time who is more than an acquaintance. It is someone a reasonable member of the public might think you would be prepared to favour or disadvantage when discussing a matter that affects them. It may be a friend, a colleague, a business associate, or someone whom you know through general social contacts. A close associate may also be somebody to whom you are known to show animosity as you might equally be viewed as willing to treat them differently.



### **What if I am unaware of the interest?**

You can only declare an interest in a matter if you are aware of the interest. For example, a company of which your father-in-law is a director may have made an application to the council. You may not be aware that he is a director, and you are not expected to have to ask about the business affairs of your relatives or acquaintances simply because you are a Councillor. However, you would need to declare an interest as soon as you became aware.

A reasonable member of the public would expect you to know of certain interests of course, so it is, for example, reasonable that you would be expected to know your daughter's address or job but not necessarily any shareholdings she might have. While it is therefore your decision as to whether or not to declare an interest, you should always consider how it might seem to a reasonable person and if in doubt always seek advice from the monitoring officer.

### **Do I always have to withdraw if I have an 'other registerable interest' or a non-registerable interest to declare?**

Where you have declared a DPI the Localism Act says you must always withdraw from participation unless you have a dispensation.

If the matter is an 'other registerable interest' or a non-registerable interest you must always withdraw from participation where the matter directly relates to that interest unless you have a dispensation.

If it is something which affects the financial interest or wellbeing of that interest you are asked to declare it and the Code then asks you to apply a two-part test before considering whether to participate in any discussion and/or vote:

1. Does the matter affect the interest more than it affects the majority of people in the area to which the business relates?

For example, if a major development affects the settlement where your sister lives and your sister would be no more affected than anybody else – for example, she lives at the other end of the settlement rather than next door to the development, the answer would be no. If the answer is yes, you then ask:

2. Would a reasonable member of the public knowing all the facts believe that it would affect your judgment of the wider public interest?

This is similar to the test for bias (*see guidance on predetermination and bias*) and if the answer is yes to that question, then you must not take part in the meeting.

- a. You help to run a food bank and are considering a motion to investigate the causes of poverty. A reasonable member of the public would not think that fact would affect your view of the wider public interest.
- b. You are over 65 and are taking part in a discussion about provisions for older people. You would be more affected than the majority, but a reasonable member of the public would not think that fact would affect your view of the wider public interest.
- c. You are discussing closure of the council-run home where your elderly parent lives. A reasonable member of the public would think that fact would affect your view of the wider public interest because of the direct effect on your parent.

### **What does 'withdraw from the meeting' mean?**

When you withdraw from the meeting that means you must not be present in the room during the debate or vote on the matter. If the public are allowed to speak at the meeting, then you would be granted the same speaking rights as the public and would need to comply with the same rules – for example, giving notice in advance or abiding by time limits. However, unlike the public you would then withdraw once you had spoken.

This would be true at a committee meeting, for example, even if you are not a member of the committee but are simply attending as a member of the public. By staying in the room, even though you are not permitted to speak or vote, it is a long-held doctrine of case law that a Councillor may still influence the decision or might gather information which would help in the furtherance of his or her interest. It is therefore in the public interest that a Councillor, after having made any representations, should withdraw from the room, and explain why they are withdrawing.

These rules would apply to virtual meetings as they would to physical meetings. For example, after having spoken you should turn off your microphone and camera and may be moved to a 'virtual waiting room' while the item is discussed.

## **Executive decisions**

Where you are an executive member, you should follow the same rules as above when considering a matter collectively – that is you should not take part in the decision where you have an interest applying the same rules as apply to other meetings above.

Where you have delegated decision-making power, you should not exercise that delegation in relation to matters where you have a disclosable pecuniary interest or another type of interest which would debar you from taking part in a meeting. Instead, you should ask the executive to take the decision collectively without your participation.

Where you have been delegated non-executive powers under s.236 of the Local Government and Public Housing Act 2007 you should similarly follow this approach and your council may need to make that clear in its code if it is using that power.

## **Dispensations**

Wherever you have an interest the code allows you to apply for a dispensation. The Localism Act sets out arrangements for applying for a dispensation where you have a DPI but is silent about dispensations for other types of interest as they are not statutory interests.

A dispensation must be applied for in writing to the 'Proper Officer' (the monitoring officer or, in the case of a parish/town council, the clerk) in good time before the relevant meeting and will be considered according to the council's scheme of delegation for considering a dispensation. The circumstances whereby a dispensation may be granted are where –

1. It is considered that without the dispensation the number of persons prohibited from participating in any particular business would be so great a proportion of the body transacting the business as to impede the transaction of the business.
2. It is considered that without the dispensation the representation of different political groups on the body transacting any particular business would be so upset as to alter the likely outcome of any vote relating to the business.
3. That the authority considers that the dispensation is in the interests of persons living in the authority's area.
4. That the authority considers that it is otherwise appropriate to grant a dispensation.

### **What is a ‘sensitive interest’?**

There are circumstances set out in the Localism Act where you do not need to put an interest on the public register or declare the nature of an interest at a meeting although you would have to declare in general terms that you have an interest. These are so-called ‘sensitive interests.’

An interest will be a sensitive interest if the two following conditions apply: (a) That you have an interest (whether or not a DPI); and (b) the nature of the interest is such that you and the monitoring officer consider that disclosure of the details of the interest could lead to you or a person connected to you being subject to violence or intimidation.

Where it is decided that an interest is a “sensitive interest” you must inform the monitoring officer of the interest so that a record is kept but it will be excluded from published versions of the register. The monitoring officer may state on the register that the member has an interest the details of which are excluded under that particular section.

Where the sensitive interest crops up in a meeting the usual rules relating to declaration will apply except that you will only be required to disclose that you hold an interest in the matter under discussion but do not have to say what that interest is. The Localism Act sets out the scheme where the DPI is a sensitive interest.

For example, if your sister has been subject to domestic violence such that the perpetrator has been served with a Domestic Violence Protection Order you would not be expected to disclose your sister’s address to a meeting.

### **What do I do if I need advice?**

If you are unsure as to whether you have an interest to declare you should always seek advice from the monitoring officer (or the clerk if you are a parish/town Councillor).

**The Golden Rule is to be safe –seek advice if in doubt before you act.**

## **Registration of gifts, hospitality, and interests**

### **Gifts and hospitality**

#### **As a Councillor:**

**10.1 I do not accept gifts or hospitality, irrespective of estimated value, which could give rise to real or substantive personal gain or a reasonable suspicion of influence on my part to show favour from persons seeking to acquire, develop or do business with the council or from persons who may apply to the council for any permission, licence or other significant advantage.**

**10.2 I register with the monitoring officer any gift or hospitality with an estimated value of at least £50 within 28 days of its receipt.**

**10.3 I register with the monitoring officer any significant gift or hospitality that I have been offered but have refused to accept.**

In order to protect your position and the reputation of the council, you should exercise caution in accepting any gifts or hospitality which are (or which you reasonably believe to be) offered to you because you are a Councillor. The presumption should always be not to accept significant gifts or hospitality. However, there may be times when such a refusal may be difficult if it is seen as rudeness in which case, you could accept it but must ensure it is publicly registered.

However, you do not need to register gifts and hospitality which are not related to your role as a Councillor, such as Christmas gifts from your friends and family. It is also important to note that it is appropriate to accept normal expenses and hospitality associated with your duties as a councillor, which can be especially relevant to cabinet members and the Mayor. If you are unsure, do contact your monitoring officer for guidance.

#### **What does “hospitality” mean?**

Hospitality can be defined as any food, drink, accommodation, or entertainment freely provided or heavily discounted.

#### **How much detail should I include on the register?**

Where you register gifts or hospitality you should include the name of the person or organisation who gave you the gift or hospitality; the date on which you received it; the reason it was given; and its value or estimated value.

### **How do I know if gifts or hospitality have been offered to me because of my role as a Councillor?**

The code says you must register any gift or hospitality received *in your capacity as a Councillor* if the estimated value exceeds £50 or such other limit as agreed by your council.

You should ask yourself whether you would have received the gift or hospitality if you were not on the council. If you are in doubt as to the motive behind an offer of a gift or hospitality, we recommend that you register it or speak to the clerk or monitoring officer before deciding whether to accept it. You should also refer to the council's policy on gifts and hospitality.

You do not need to register gifts and hospitality which are not related to your role as a Councillor, such as Christmas gifts from your friends and family, or gifts which you do not accept. However, you should apply common sense when you consider how receipt of a gift might be interpreted. For example, if you are the chair of the planning committee and a birthday present arrives from a family friend who is also an applicant just before a planning application is due to be considered, then you need to think about how this would be interpreted by a reasonable member of the public.

### **What about gifts or hospitality I do not accept?**

The code makes it clear that the presumption is that you do not normally accept gifts or hospitality. While gifts or hospitality can be offered for benign reasons it is important for your reputation, the reputation of the council and the need to reassure the public that decision-making is not being improperly influenced that you do not accept gifts or hospitality wherever possible.

Simply accepting gifts or hospitality and then registering it does not mean that it may be seen as reasonable. Accepting an expensive meal from somebody who is negotiating for a contract with the council, for example, is not 'made right' by being recorded on a public register.

There will be times, however, where turning down hospitality or gifts could be seen as causing unnecessary offence. For example, if you have been invited as a ward Councillor to a local festival or faith celebration along with other members of the community then it may be entirely appropriate to accept the hospitality. However, you should always exercise particular caution if the organisers are involved in ongoing negotiations with the council on a particular matter. Where you are offered a gift or hospitality but decline it you should nevertheless notify the monitoring officer. That helps the authority to identify if there are any patterns and to be aware of who might be seeking to influence the authority.

Also, an accumulation of small gifts you receive from the same source over a short period of say a couple of months that add up to £50 or over should be registered in the interests of transparency.

**What if I do not know the value of a gift or hospitality?**

The general rule is, if in doubt as to the value of a gift or hospitality, you should register it, as a matter of good practice and in accordance with the principles of openness and accountability in public life. You may therefore have to estimate how much a gift or hospitality is worth.

**What if I'm at an event but don't have the hospitality or only have a small amount?**

The best way to preserve transparency is for you to assess the hospitality on offer, whether it is accepted or not. This is because it would clearly not be in your interests to be drawn into arguments about how much you yourself ate or drank at a particular occasion. For example, you may find yourself at a function where relatively lavish hospitality is on offer, but you choose not to accept it. You may go to a champagne reception but drink a single glass of orange juice for example.

As a guide you should consider how much a person could reasonably expect to pay for an equivalent function or event run on a commercial basis. What you have been offered is the value of the event regardless of what you actually consumed. Clearly where you are in any doubt the prudent course is to register the hospitality.

**Is there a minimal threshold where I wouldn't have to notify the monitoring officer?**

The code is about ensuring that there is transparency and accountability about where people may be trying to influence you or the council improperly. However, in the course of your duties as a Councillor you will be offered light refreshments or similar on many occasions. It is perfectly acceptable to have a cup of tea or biscuits at a meeting with residents at the local community centre for example and there may be times when an external meeting lasts all day and the organisers offer you a sandwich lunch and refreshments.

The Government's guide to the Bribery Act for employers says that 'the Government does not intend that genuine hospitality or similar business expenditure that is reasonable and proportionate be caught by the Act, so you can continue to provide bona fide hospitality, promotional or other business expenditure. In any case where it was thought the hospitality was really a cover for bribing someone, the authorities would look at such things as the level of hospitality offered, the way in which it was provided and the level of influence the person receiving it had on the business decision in question. But, as a general proposition, hospitality or promotional expenditure which is proportionate and reasonable given the sort of business you do is very unlikely to engage the Act.' You should use your discretion and think how it might look to a reasonable person but always seek the views of the monitoring officer or clerk where you are a parish Councillor if in doubt.

**What are 'normal expenses and hospitality associated with your duties as a Councillor'?**

As well as the minimal threshold hospitality above there will be times when you are paid expenses which include an element for food and drink as part of your role.

The focus of the code is on the source of the hospitality and its nature. Hospitality does not need to be registered where it is provided or reimbursed by the authority or where it is clearly ancillary to the business being conducted, such as an overnight stay for an away-day. Therefore, hospitality at a civic reception or mayor's ball would not need to be registered.



### **What if my role involves me attending regular events or receiving gifts or hospitality?**

Some roles in a council will inevitably involve being offered more entertainment than others because of the 'ambassadorial' nature of the role. For example, the mayor of the authority will be invited to a large number of functions and the leader of the council may be attending events as political leader of the council.

Although the mayor for example, may attend many social functions, they are not exempt from the requirement to register hospitality as individual Councillors. However, where the hospitality is extended to the office holder for the time being rather than the individual, there is no requirement under the code to register the hospitality against your individual register. The question a Councillor needs to ask themselves is, "Would I have received this hospitality even if I were not the mayor?" If the answer is yes, then it must be registered.

### **Bias and Predetermination**

Bias and predetermination are not explicitly mentioned in the Code of Conduct. The code provisions on declarations of interest are about ensuring you do not take decisions where you or those close to you stand to lose or gain improperly. **(See guidance on declarations of interest)**

There is however a separate concept in law dealing with bias and predetermination which exists to ensure that decisions are taken solely in the public interest rather than to further private interests.

Both the courts and legislation recognise that elected Councillors are entitled, and indeed expected, to have and to have expressed their views on a subject to be decided upon by the council. In law, there is no pretence that such democratically accountable decision-makers are intended to be independent and impartial as if they were judges or quasi-judges.

Nonetheless, decisions of public authorities do involve consideration of circumstances where a decision-maker must not act in a way that goes to the appearance of having a closed mind and pre-determining a decision before they have all of the evidence before them and where they have to act fairly. Breaches of the rules of natural justice in these circumstances have and do continue to result in decisions of local authorities being successfully challenged in the courts. These issues are complex, and advice should be sought and given in the various situations that come up, which is why there are no direct paragraphs of the code covering this, although it does overlap with the rules on declarations of interest.

While declaring interests will to some extent deal with issues of bias, there will still be areas where a formal declaration is not required under the Code of Conduct, but Councillors need to be clear that they are not biased or predetermined going into the decision-making process. Otherwise, the decision is at risk of being challenged on appeal or in the Courts. To quote a leading judgment in this field "All Councillors elected to serve on local councils have to be scrupulous in their duties, search their consciences and consider carefully the propriety of attending meetings and taking part in decisions which may give rise to an appearance of bias even though their actions are above reproach." [1]

The rules against bias say that there are three distinct elements.

The first seeks accuracy in public decision-making.

The second seeks the absence of prejudice or partiality on the part of you as the decision-maker. An accurate decision is more likely to be achieved by a decision-maker who is in fact impartial or disinterested in the outcome of the decision and who puts aside any personal strong feelings they may have had in advance of making the decision.

The third requirement is for public confidence in the decision-making process. Even though the decision-maker may in fact be scrupulously impartial, the appearance of bias can itself call into question the legitimacy of the decision-making process. In general, the rule against bias looks to the appearance or risk of bias rather than bias in fact, in order to ensure that justice should not only be done but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done.

To varying degrees, these "requirements" might be seen to provide the rationales behind what are generally taken to be three separate rules against bias: "automatic" (or "presumed") bias, "actual" bias, and "apparent" bias.

[1] *Kelton v Wiltshire Council* [2015] EWHC 2853 (Admin)

The rationale behind "automatic" or "presumed" bias appears to be that in certain situations (such as if you have a pecuniary or proprietary interest in the outcome of the proceedings) then it must be presumed that you are incapable of impartiality. Since a motive for bias is thought to be so obvious in such cases, the decisions are not allowed to stand even though no investigation is made into whether the decision-maker was biased *in fact*. In these circumstances you should not participate in the discussion or vote on the issue. These are covered by the code's requirement to declare certain interests and withdraw from participation. (**see guidance on declaration of interests**).

A single Councillor who is guilty of bias is enough to strike out the whole decision when challenged before the courts. This can cause huge cost and reputational damage for the council yet is seldom due to actual corruption or even consciously favouring a personal interest over the public interest on the part of the Councillor involved and may have no repercussions for them personally.

### **Predetermination**

The Localism Act 2011 has enshrined the rules relating to pre-disposition and predetermination into statute. In essence you are not taken to have had, or appeared to have had, a closed mind when making a decision just because you have previously done anything that directly or indirectly indicated what view you may take in relation to a matter and that matter was relevant to the decision. Predetermination at a meeting can be manifested in a number of ways. It is not just about what you might say, for example, but it may be shown by body language, tone of voice or overly hostile lines of questioning for example.

You are therefore entitled to have a predisposition one way or another as long as you have not pre-determined the outcome. You are able to express an opinion providing that you come to the relevant meeting with an open mind and demonstrate that to the meeting by your behaviour, able to take account of all of the evidence and make your decision on the day.

### **How can bias or predetermination arise?**

The following are some of the potential situations in which predetermination or bias could arise.

### **Connection with someone affected by a decision**

This sort of bias particularly concerns administrative decision-making, where the authority must take a decision which involves balancing the interests of people with opposing views. It is based on the belief that the decision-making body cannot make an unbiased decision, or a decision which objectively looks impartial, if a Councillor serving on it is closely connected with one of the parties involved.

## Examples

The complaint alleged that a Councillor had behaved in a disrespectful and harassing manner towards two fellow female Councillors and officers. It was established that the Councillor had made unwarranted and inappropriate physical contact with the Councillors and officers at an official event and had also made remarks towards the officers which were patronising and demeaning. The Councillor was found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct.

A district Councillor also belongs to a parish council that has complained about the conduct of an officer of the district council. As a result of the complaint the officer has been disciplined. The officer has appealed to a Councillor panel and the Councillor seeks to sit on the panel hearing the appeal. The Councillor should not participate.

Contrast this with:

The complaint about the officer described above is made by the local office of a national charity of which the Councillor is an ordinary member and is not involved with the local office. The Councillor should be able to participate in this situation because the matter is not concerned with the promotion of the interests of the charity.

Improper involvement of someone with an interest in the outcome

This sort of bias involves someone who has, or appears to have, inappropriate influence in the decision being made by someone else. It is inappropriate because they have a vested interest in the decision.

## Examples

A council receives an application to modify the Definitive Map of public rights of way. A panel of Councillors are given delegated authority to make the statutory modification Order. They have a private meeting with local representatives of a footpath organisation before deciding whether the Order should be made. However, they do not give the same opportunity to people with opposing interests.

**Prior involvement**

This sort of bias arises because someone is being asked to make a decision about an issue which they have previously been involved with. This may be a problem if the second decision is a formal appeal from the first decision, so that someone is hearing an appeal from their own decision. However, if it is just a case of the person in question being required to reconsider a matter in the light of new evidence or representations, it is unlikely to be unlawful for them to participate.

**Commenting before a decision is made**

Once a lobby group or advisory body has commented on a matter or application, it is likely that a Councillor involved with that body will still be able to take part in making a decision about it. But this is as long as they do not give the appearance of being bound only by the views of that body. If the Councillor makes comments which make it clear that they have already made up their mind, they may not take part in the decision.

If the Councillor is merely seeking to lobby a public meeting at which the decision is taking place but will not themselves be involved in making the decision, then they are not prevented by the principles of predetermination or bias from doing so. Unlike private lobbying, there is no particular reason why the fact that Councillors can address a public meeting in the same way as the public should lead to successful legal challenges.

## Examples

A council appoints a barrister to hold a public inquiry into an application to register a village green. The barrister produces a report where he recommends that the application is rejected. A Councillor attends a meeting in one of the affected wards and says publicly: "speaking for myself I am inclined to go along with the barrister's recommendation." He later participates in the council's decision to accept the barrister's recommendation. At the meeting, the supporters of the application are given an opportunity to argue that the recommendation should not be accepted.

This is unlikely to give rise to a successful claim of predetermination or bias. The statement made by the Councillor only suggests a predisposition to follow the recommendation of the barrister's report, and not that he has closed his mind to all possibilities. The subsequent conduct of the meeting, where supporters of the application could try and persuade Councillors to disagree with the recommendation, would confirm this.

A council appoints a barrister to hold a public inquiry into an application to register a village green. The barrister produces a report where he recommends that the application is rejected. A Councillor attends a meeting in one of the affected wards and says publicly: "speaking for myself I am inclined to go along with the barrister's recommendation." He later participates in the council's decision to accept the barrister's recommendation. At the meeting, the supporters of the application are given an opportunity to argue that the recommendation should not be accepted.

A developer entered into negotiations to acquire some surplus council land for an incinerator. Planning permission for the incinerator had already been granted. Following local elections there is a change in the composition and political control of the council. After pressure from new Councillors who have campaigned against the incinerator and a full debate, the council's executive decides to end the negotiations. This is on the grounds that the land is needed for housing and employment uses.

The council's decision is unlikely to be found to be biased, so long as the eventual decision was taken on proper grounds and after a full consideration of all the relevant issues.

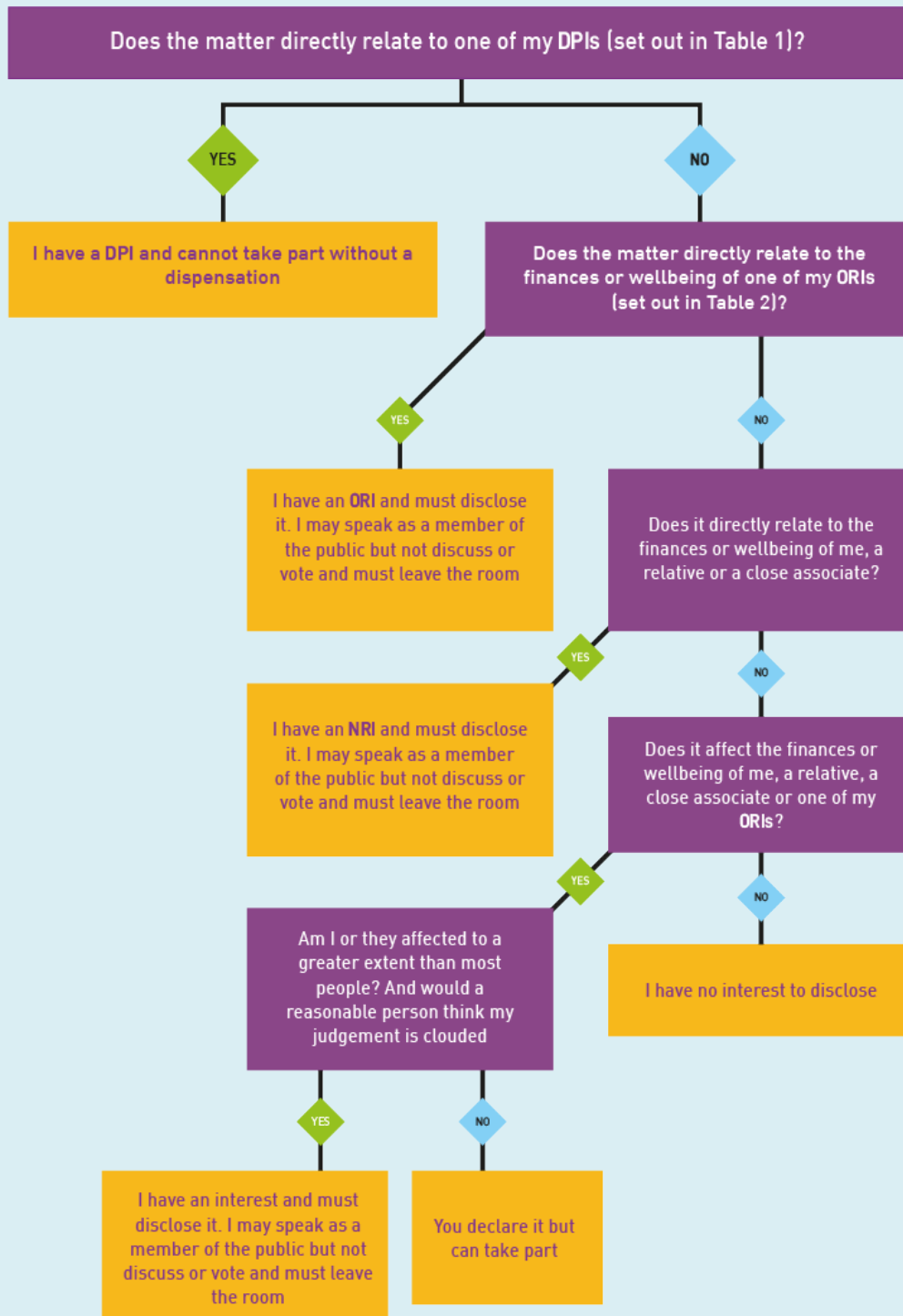
**What do I do if I need advice?**

If you are unsure as to whether your views or any action you have previously taken may amount to predetermination you should always seek advice from the monitoring officer

**The Golden Rule is to be safe –seek advice if in doubt before you act.**

## Appendix 1 - Interests Flowchart

The flowchart below gives a simple guide to declaring an interest under the code.





## **Appendix 2 - General Principles**

### **General Principles**

The Seven Principles of Public Life (also known as the Nolan Principles) outline the ethical standards those working in the public sector are expected to adhere to. The principles apply to all public office holders at all levels including ministers, civil servants, Councillors, and council officers, as well as private and voluntary organisations delivering services paid for by public funds. The principles are:

#### **Selflessness**

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

#### **Integrity**

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

#### **Objectivity**

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

#### **Accountability**

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

#### **Openness**

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

#### **Honesty**

Holders of public office should be truthful.

#### **Leadership**

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

## Useful Links

The LGA published **“A councillor’s workbook on effective Councillor/officer relationships 2018”**. This workbook has been designed as a distance learning aid for local Councillors. It forms part of the suite of LGA resources intended to provide Councillors with insight and assistance into key skills and knowledge. It is designed to provide a foundation for effective working as you progress in your Councillor career, from the ward level to holding a leading Councillor position. The workbook has been updated to contain information and examples obtained from the LGA’s work on the ground in local authorities and through the **Corporate Peer Challenge programme**, and to reflect the changing nature of the Councillor and officer relationship.

# Appendix 2

Winchester City Council's

# Code of Conduct for Councillors

The Arrangements.

November 2024



|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Purpose of this document.....                            | 3  |
| 2. Background .....   | 3  |
| 3. Those Involved in the Complaint Process.....             | 3  |
| 4. Confidential and Anonymous Complaints .....              | 4  |
| 5. Potential Criminal Conduct.....                          | 4  |
| 6. Timescales.....  | 5  |
| 7. The Process .....  | 6  |
| 8. Standards Sub-Committee Hearing .....                    | 9  |
| 9. Publication of Complaints.....                           | 11 |
| 10. Revision of these arrangements .....                    | 11 |
| 11. Appeals.....  | 11 |
| Appendix 1 - Complaints Procedure Flowchart .....           | 12 |
| Appendix 2 - Standards Complaints Assessment Criteria ..... | 13 |
| Appendix 3 - Standards Sub-Committee Procedure.....         | 14 |

## **1. Purpose of this document.**

Reading this document before submitting a complaint will help complainants understand the process, requirements, and how a complaint will be assessed and managed effectively. Additionally, we encourage complainants to contact the Monitoring Officer via email in the first instance to discuss a complaint informally before submission.

Anyone wishing to make a complaint should complete our online form at: [www.winchester.gov.uk/councillors-committees/code-of-conduct](http://www.winchester.gov.uk/councillors-committees/code-of-conduct) or email: [monitoringofficer@winchester.gov.uk](mailto:monitoringofficer@winchester.gov.uk).

This document will also aid a Councillor who is subject to a complaint in understanding the arrangements for dealing with a complaint.

## **2. Background**

These arrangements relate to the processing of code of conduct complaints for all City, Town, and Parish Councillors within the Winchester District. Each council must adopt a code of conduct and Winchester City Council has adopted the Local Government Association Model Code of Conduct without amendment. Each complaint will be assessed against the code of conduct relevant to the Councillor the complaint is being made about.

These arrangements do not apply to County Councillors, who are subject to separate arrangements and their own code of conduct operated by the County Council.

## **3. Those Involved in the Complaint Process**

**The Complainant.** This is the person making the complaint.

**The Subject Member.** This is the Councillor being complained of.

**The Monitoring Officer.** The Monitoring Officer is a senior officer of the council with statutory responsibility for administering the process for dealing with complaints relating to the Code of Conduct alongside their small team, collectively known as the office of the Monitoring Officer.

**The Independent Person.** An Independent Person is an individual appointed by the council in accordance with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011 to provide an impartial perspective on complaints made against Councillors. They offer independent advice and input during the complaint-handling process to ensure fairness and transparency. The Independent Person is not affiliated with the Council as a Councillor, officer, or in any related capacity. Winchester City Council has appointed three Independent Persons.

#### **Standards Sub Committee**

A Sub-Committee comprising three Members of the Council's Audit and Governance Committee.

#### **4. Confidential and Anonymous Complaints**

If a complainant wants to keep their name and address confidential, they can indicate this in the space provided on the complaint form. The Monitoring Officer will consider this request and if granted will not disclose the name and address to the Subject Member without prior consent.

The council does not normally investigate anonymous complaints unless there is a clear public interest in doing so.

#### **5. Potential Criminal Conduct**

If the complaint identifies 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 agencies. In such circumstances, the code of conduct complaint will be held pending the outcome of that separate process.

## 6. Timescales

The timescales below are indicative. They are not guaranteed and are included here to illustrate the likely duration of the complaints process. Actual timescales may be significantly shorter or longer depending on the complexity and content of the complaint as well as the cooperation of those involved with the complaint including witnesses.

| <b>Stage in complaints process</b>  | <b>Indicative timescales</b>  |
|---|---|
| Acknowledge receipt of complaint  | Within 5 working days of receipt of the complaint   |
| Initial Assessment stage decision (following response from subject member and IP) | Issued to Subject Member and Complainant within 25 working days of receipt of complaint.  |
| Investigation (if applicable)   | A formal investigation normally takes around 8 - 12 weeks from the appointment of an appropriate investigator.  |
| Standards Sub Committee (if applicable)   | Within 25 working days of receipt of the final investigation report – which includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 10 working days to convene a quorate Standards sub-committee meeting and prepare hearing papers</li><li>• 10 working days for the Subject Councillor to submit a response to the Investigator's report and hearing papers</li><li>• 5 working days for agenda publication</li></ul> |
| Standards Sub Committee decision (if applicable)                                  | Issued to Subject Member and Complainant and published within 10 working days of the Standards Sub-Committee Hearing meeting  |

## **7. The Process**

Upon receiving a complaint, the Monitoring Officer will determine if it falls within a category that would not proceed to investigation, as outlined in Appendix 2. If it is clear to the Monitoring Officer that the complaint meets one of these criteria, the Monitoring Officer will inform the complainant, and no further investigation will take place.

If the complaint at this stage does not appear to meet the criteria in Appendix 2 then the next step is for the Monitoring Officer to forward the complaint to the Subject Member, allowing enough time for a detailed response from them. If the complaint concerns a Parish or Town Councillor, the Clerk of the relevant council may also be asked to provide relevant information in respect of the circumstances surrounding the complaint.

Once these first-stage responses are received, the Monitoring Officer will forward the complaint, along with the responses, including any video/audio/documentary evidence relevant to the complaint to one of the Council's Independent Persons for their review and input.

After receiving the response from the Independent Person, the Monitoring Officer will review all the documentation and decide on the appropriate next steps as described in the following sections. As part of this process, the Monitoring Officer may also reassess the complaint against the criteria outlined in Appendix 2.

Following this review, the Monitoring Officer will agree on the next steps which may include; seeking further information, referring for formal investigation, seeking an informal resolution or deciding no further action.

### **7.1. Will the complaint be investigated?**

If the Monitoring Officer needs further information to make a decision, they may contact the complainant and the Subject Member for additional details.

In appropriate cases, the Monitoring Officer may seek to resolve the complaint informally without the need for a formal investigation. Such informal resolution may, for example, involve the Subject Member accepting that their conduct was unacceptable and offering an apology or other remedial action. Where the Subject Member or the council makes a reasonable offer of informal resolution but the complainant is not willing to accept the offer the Monitoring Officer will take account of this in deciding whether the complaint merits further investigation.



## **7.2. How is the investigation conducted?**

If the Monitoring Officer decides that a complaint merits further investigation, they will appoint an Investigating Officer who may be another officer of the council, an officer of another council or an external investigator. This decision usually relates to the capacity and availability as well as any complexities of the individual complaint.

The Investigating Officer will decide whether they need to meet or speak to the Complainant and the Subject Member to understand the nature of the complaint and so that all parties can explain their understanding of events and suggest what further information the Investigating Officer may need to see and whom they may need to interview.

In exceptional cases where it has been agreed 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 remove their name and address from the papers given to the Subject Member or delay notifying the Subject Member until the investigation has progressed sufficiently.

At the end of the investigation, the Investigating Officer will produce a draft report ("the Investigation Report") and will send copies of that draft report in confidence to the Complainant and the Subject Member to give both an opportunity to identify any matter in that draft report which they disagree with or which they consider requires more consideration.

Having received and taken account of any comments which may be made on the draft Investigation Report, the Investigating Officer will send their final report to the Monitoring Officer.

## **7.3. What happens if the Investigating Officer concludes that there is no evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct?**

The Monitoring Officer will review the Investigating Officer's report and if they are satisfied that the Investigating Officer's report is sufficient the Monitoring Officer will write to the Complainant and the Subject Member concerned, and if applicable to the Town or Parish Council, notifying that they are satisfied that there has been no failure to comply with the relevant code of conduct and no further action is required and give you both a copy of the Investigation Final Report and decision notice.

If the Monitoring Officer is not satisfied that the investigation has fully considered all the relevant points, they may ask the Investigating Officer to reconsider their report.

#### **7.4. What happens if the Investigating Officer concludes that there is evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct?**

The Monitoring Officer will review the Investigating Officer's report and will then either send the matter for a hearing before the Standards Sub-Committee or after consulting the Independent Person seek an informal resolution.

#### **7.5. Informal Resolution**

The Monitoring Officer may consider that the matter can reasonably be resolved without the need for a Standards Sub-Committee hearing. In such a case they will consult with the Independent Person and the complainant and seek to agree a fair resolution and one which also helps to ensure higher standards of conduct for the future.

Such resolution may include the Subject Member accepting that their conduct was unacceptable and offering an apology and/or other remedial action by the council. If the Subject Member complies with the suggested resolution the Monitoring Officer will report the matter to the next meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee for them to note and the Town or Parish Council for information but will take no further action.

## **8. Standards Sub-Committee Hearing**

In cases where the Monitoring Officer refers a complaint for a hearing, this will be dealt with by the Standards Sub-Committee. This is a public hearing before a panel of three City Councillors who are members of the Audit and Governance Committee. The procedure to be adopted by the Sub-Committee is set out in Appendix 4.

The Monitoring Officer will conduct a "pre-hearing process" requiring the member to give their response to the Investigating Officer's report in order to identify what is likely to be agreed and what is likely to be in contention at the hearing and give pre-hearing directions to help the hearing stage move forward smoothly.

At the hearing, the Investigating Officer will present their report and call such witnesses as they consider necessary and make representations to substantiate their 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 the Sub-Committee and give evidence/be asked questions.

The Subject Member will then have an opportunity to present their evidence and to call witnesses and to make representations to the Sub-Committee.

The Sub-Committee, with the benefit of any advice from the Independent Person and/or the Monitoring Officer (acting as Legal Advisor to the Standards Sub-Committee) may conclude that the Subject Member did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct and dismiss the complaint.

If the Sub-Committee concludes that the Subject Member did fail to comply with the Code of Conduct the Chair will inform the Subject Member of this finding and the Committee will then consider what action if any the Committee should take as a result of the Subject Member's failure to comply with the Code of Conduct. In doing this the Committee will give the Member an opportunity to make representations to the Committee and will consult the Independent Person but will then decide what action if any to take in respect of the matter.

The Council has agreed a procedure for the hearings which is attached.

### **8.1. What action can the Standards Sub-Committee take where a member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct?**

The Sub-Committee may decide to take action in respect of individual Subject Members as may be necessary to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. Accordingly, the Sub-Committee may consider:-

1. A formal letter to the Councillor found to have breached the code;
2. Formal censure by motion;
3. Publish its findings that a member has broken the code of conduct in respect of the member's conduct;
4. Report its findings to the council [or to the Parish/Town Council] for information;
5. Advise the member's Group Leader of the finding;
6. Instruct the Monitoring Officer to [or recommend that the Parish/Town Council] arrange training for the member;
7. Withdraw [or recommend to the Parish/Town Council that it withdraws] facilities provided to the member by the Council such as a computer website and/or email and Internet access;
8. Issue a press release or other appropriate publicity;

The Sub-Committee has no power to suspend or disqualify the Subject Member or to withdraw a member's basic or special responsibility allowances.

### **8.2. What happens at the end of the hearing?**

At the end of the hearing, the Sub-Committee will adjourn to consider their decision in private and will usually then reconvene to confirm the decision as to whether the Subject Member failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and as to any actions which the Sub-Committee resolves to take. In some cases, the committee may agree to write to all parties to confirm the outcome.

In all cases, the Standards Sub Committee will prepare a formal decision notice and send a copy to the complainant and the Subject Member and to the Town or Parish Council Clerk (if applicable) making that decision notice available for public inspection.

## **9. Publication of Complaints**

Complaints that are not investigated for any of the reasons contained in Appendix 2 will not be published on the council's website. Complaints that are not rejected for any of the reasons within Appendix 2 and are further investigated, whether they result in a finding of breach or no breach will be published on the council website and reported to the Audit & Governance Committee via its quarterly governance reports.

## **10. Revision of these arrangements**

The Council may by resolution agree to amend these arrangements.

In the case of a Standards Sub-Committee, the Chairperson of the Sub-Committee can 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 in the best interests of the council.

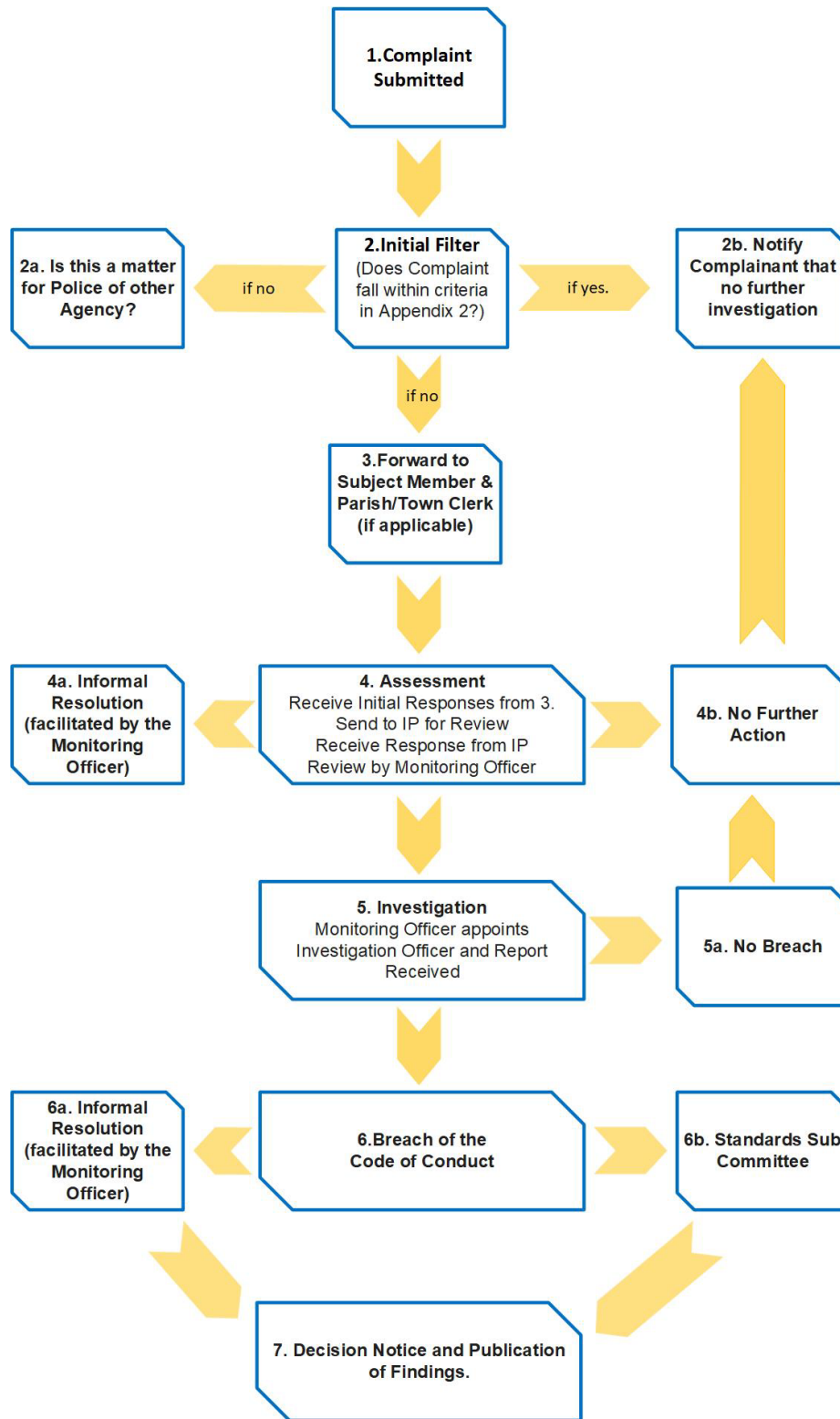
## **11. Appeals**

There is no right of appeal for the complainant or for the Subject Member against a decision of the Monitoring Officer or of the Standards Sub-Committee.

If it is believed that the council has failed to process a complaint properly a complaint can be made to the Local Government Ombudsman.

**November 2024**

# Appendix 1 - Complaints Procedure Flowchart



## **Appendix 2 - Standards Complaints Assessment Criteria**

Complaints which would not normally be referred for investigation

1. The complaint is not considered sufficiently serious to warrant investigation; or
2. The complaint appears to be simply motivated by malice or is “tit-for-tat”; or
3. The complaint appears to be politically motivated; or
4. It appears that there can be no breach of the Code of Conduct; for example, that it relates to the Councillor’s private life or is about dissatisfaction with a Council decision; or
5. It is about someone who is no longer a Councillor;
6. There is insufficient information available for a referral; or
7. The complaint has not been received within 3 months of the alleged misconduct unless there are exceptional circumstances e.g., an allegation of bullying harassment etc.
8. The matter occurred so long ago that it would be difficult for a fair investigation to be carried out; or
9. The same or similar complaint has already been investigated and there is nothing further to be gained by seeking the sanctions available to the Council; or
10. It is an anonymous complaint unless it includes sufficient documentary evidence to show a significant breach of the Code of Conduct.
11. Where the Member complained of has apologised and/or admitted making an error and the matter would not warrant a more serious sanction.

## **Appendix 3 - Standards Sub-Committee Procedure**

### **Quorum**

Three Members must be present throughout the hearing to form a quorum. The Sub-Committee shall elect a Chairperson for the meeting.

### **Opening**

The Chairperson explains the procedure for the hearing and reminds all parties to turn off mobile phones.

The Chairperson asks all present to introduce themselves.

The Subject Member will be asked whether they wish to briefly outline their position.

### **The Complaint**

The Investigating Officer shall be invited to present their report including any documentary evidence or other material (and to call witnesses as required by the Investigating Officer). This report and documentary evidence must be based on the complaint made to the Council – no new points will be allowed.

The Subject Member may question the Investigating Officer upon the content of their report and any witnesses called by the Investigating Officer. (This is the Subject Members opportunity to ask questions arising from the Investigator's report and not to make a statement.)

Members of the Sub-Committee may question the Investigating Officer and/or any witnesses.

### **The Subject Member's case**

The Subject Member may present their case and call any witnesses as they require.

The Investigating Officer may question the Subject Member and/or any witnesses.

Members of the Sub-Committee may question the Subject Member and/or any witnesses.

### **Summing Up**

The Investigating Officer may sum up the Complaint.

The Subject Member may sum up their case.

### **The Decision**

The Sub Committee will then adjourn to consider its findings and make its decision.