

ARRANGEMENTS FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE CODE OF CONDUCT FOR MEMBERS – REVISED 9 MAY 2016

Introduction

This procedure applies when a complaint is received that a member, town/parish member or co-opted member, has or may have failed to comply with the adopted code of conduct for members.

A complaint is confidential and remains so until the complaint is resolved.

Making a complaint

The person making the complaint will be referred to as “the complainant” and the person against whom the complaint is made will be referred to as the “subject member”.

A complaint must be made using the standard complaint form (available on the council’s website via the following link)

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/government-citizens-and-rights/democracy/standards-and-ethics>

The complaint must be submitted in writing by post or email to:-

Information Access Team, Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane, PO Box 4, Hereford HR4 0XH

accesstoinformation@herefordshire.gov.uk

Pre Qualification

The information access team will normally acknowledge on receipt of the complaint within five working days and advise if the complaint will be passed for initial assessment by the monitoring officer or rejected.

The information access team may reject a claim if;

- It is against one or more named Members or co-opted Members of the Council or a Town/Parish Council outside the Council’s area;
- The Subject Member was not in office at the time of the alleged misconduct/or at the time of the complaint;
- The complaint is made anonymously.

Initial Assessment

The monitoring officer will review the complaint and decide whether it should be rejected, merits further consideration, or another course of action.

The monitoring officer may seek the views of the independent person to aid consideration and may also request further information.

This decision will normally be taken within 15 working days of receipt of a complaint.

A complaint will be rejected by the monitoring officer if:

- The complaint, if proven, would not be a breach of the code of conduct under which the subject member was operating at the time of the alleged misconduct.
- Where the complaint appears to be malicious, vexatious, politically motivated or tit-for-tat;
- Where the subject member has apologised for making an error and the matter would not warrant a more serious sanction.
- Whether the complaint is about something that happened so long ago that those involved are unlikely to remember it clearly enough to provide credible evidence, or where the lapse of time means there would be little benefit or point in taking action now;

If the complaint is rejected the complainant will be advised of the decision. The subject member will not be advised that a complaint has been made or of the rejection.

If the complaint is not rejected, the Monitoring Officer will then go on to apply the following criteria in deciding whether a complaint should be dealt with by another course of action, by monitoring officer resolution or by formal investigation:

- Whether the allegation discloses a potential breach of the Code of Conduct, but the complaint is not serious enough to merit any recommendation other than an apology and:-
 - (i) The resources needed to investigate and determine the complaint are wholly disproportionate to the allegations;
 - (ii) Whether, in all the circumstances, there is no overriding public interest in carrying out an investigation;
- whether the complaint suggests that there is a wider problem throughout the authority;
- whether training or conciliation would be the appropriate response;
- whether a substantially similar allegation has previously been made by the complainant;

The decision as to how to proceed will be made by the monitoring officer and shall be final. There shall be no right of appeal.

Monitoring Officer Resolution

Where ever possible, the monitoring officer will resolve complaints.

The subject member will be asked, within 25 working days of receipt, to make written representations to the monitoring officer which must be taken into account when deciding how the complaint will be dealt with.

If the monitoring officer considers, after consultation with the Independent person, that the matter should reasonably be resolved without the need for a formal investigation, a fair resolution shall be suggested.

Such resolution may include:

- advising the subject member about matters of conduct
- arranging training for the subject member
- advising the subject member that an apology might be appropriate
- suggesting a mediation meeting between the subject member and the complainant

The monitoring officer will report (within 10 working days from receipt of information from the subject member) the outcome of the complaint to the complainant, subject member, and if a parish or town councillor to the clerk to the town/parish council (if appropriate) for information, but will take no further action.

The decision as to how to proceed will be made by the monitoring officer and shall be final. There shall be no right of appeal.

The resolution of the complaint by the monitoring officer will be published in the statistics of complaint to the council's audit and governance committee annually.

Formal investigation

Where, in the opinion of the monitoring officer, following consultation with the independent person, monitoring officer resolution is not appropriate, the monitoring officer will make arrangements (within 10 working days upon receipt of information from the subject member) for the complaint to be formally investigated. The monitoring officer may appoint an investigating officer to investigate the complaint, gather further evidence and prepare a report.

The monitoring officer will review the investigating officer's report and will then either:

- report (within 10 working days) that there has been no breach of the code to the complainant, subject member and the Clerk to the Town/Parish Council (if appropriate) for information and take no further action;
- refer the report to a standards panel in accordance with the constitution 3.6.3.5; <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/government-citizens-and-rights/democracy/council-constitution>
- or after consulting the independent person, seek local resolution.

The relevant group leader(s) will be informed of the investigation and the subsequent outcome.

The resolution of the complaint by formal investigation will be published in the statistics of complaint to the council's audit and governance committee annually.

NOTES

Confidentiality

If a complainant has asked for their identity to be withheld, this request will be considered by the monitoring officer at the Initial Assessment stage.

As a matter of fairness and natural justice, the subject member should usually be told who has complained about them and receive details of the complaint. However, in exceptional circumstances, the monitoring officer may withhold the complainant's identity if on request from the complainant, they are satisfied that the complainant has evidence and reasonable grounds for believing that they or any witness relevant to the complaint may be at risk of actual harm, or their employment may be jeopardised if their identity is disclosed.

If the monitoring officer decides to anonymise the complaints details from the subject member this will be kept under review.

If the monitoring officer decides to refuse a request by a complainant for confidentiality, he will offer the Complainant the option to withdraw the complaint, rather than proceed with his or her identity being disclosed.

Additional Information

The monitoring officer may require additional information at any stage of the process to come to a decision and may request information from the complainant, subject member and where the complaint relates to Town/Parish Councillor, the Clerk of the Town/Parish Council. Such requests will remind those involved of the requirement to keep the matter confidential.

Another course of action

This is not defined but may include mediation, training, other alternative arrangements or where another process or procedure more appropriately applies a referral to that process.

The non-disclosure of a disclosable pecuniary interest without a reasonable excuse is a criminal offence and could lead to a referral to the Police rather than the matter being dealt with under this procedure.

Investigation officer

The investigating officer may be a council officer, an officer of another council, or an external investigator.

Independent Person

Where possible an independent person may be available to support the subject member through the process where the independent members has not otherwise been involved in the matter.

Standards panel

The parties will be informed of the hearing date and the arrangements in preparation for the meeting. The only witnesses permitted are people referred to in the evidence, and not, for example, character witnesses.

The meeting is held in private.

The recommendations will be presented, either:

- To the council's Audit and Governance Committee in the case of a complaint against a member of Herefordshire Council or:
- To the relevant town/parish council, in the case of a complaint against a town/parish council member.

The Audit and Governance committee or the town or parish council will decide what action to take on the recommendations in the report. This decision shall be final with no right of appeal.

What actions might be taken on the recommendations in the panels reports?

This list is not exhaustive

- Publish its findings in respect of the member's conduct;
- Report its findings to council (or to the town/parish council) for information;
- Recommend to council that the member be censured;
- Recommend to the member's group leader (or in the case of un-grouped members, recommend to council) that he/she be removed from any or all committees or sub-committees of the council;
- Recommend to the leader of the council that the member be removed from the cabinet, or removed from their portfolio responsibilities;
- Recommend that the subject member be replace as executive leader;
- Instruct the monitoring officer to (or recommend that the town/parish council) arrange training for the member;
- Recommend to council (or recommend to the town/parish council) that the member should not be appointed and/or be removed from all outside body appointments to which they have been appointed or nominated by the council (or by the town/parish council);
- Withdraw (or recommend to the town/parish council that it withdraws) facilities provided to the member by the council, such as a computer, website and /or email and Internet access;
- Exclude (or recommend that the town/parish council exclude) the member from the council's offices or other premises, with the exception of meeting rooms as necessary for attending council, committee and sub-committee meetings.
- Require an apology in suitable terms to the standards panel.

This procedure comes into force on [date]. It will apply to all new complaints received after this date and all complaints which were being handled under the former procedure but were not completed this implementation date.

