

## **ARRANGEMENTS FOR DEALING WITH STANDARDS COMPLAINTS AT LEICESTER CITY COUNCIL UNDER THE LOCALISM ACT 2011**

### **A. CONTEXT**

These “Arrangements” set out how you may make a complaint that an Elected or co-opted Member of this Authority has failed to comply with the Authority’s Code of Conduct, and sets out how the Authority will deal with allegations of a failure to comply with the Authority’s Code of Conduct.

Under Section 28(6) and (7) of the Localism Act 2011, the Council must have in place “Arrangements” under which allegations that a member or co-opted member of the Authority or of a Committee or Sub-Committee of the authority, has failed to comply with that authority’s Code of Conduct can be investigated and decisions made on such allegations.

Such arrangements must provide for the Authority to appoint at least one Independent Person, whose views must be sought by the authority before it takes a decision on an allegation which it has decided shall be investigated, and whose views can be sought by the Authority at any other stage, or by a Member against whom an allegation has been made

### **B. THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

The Council has adopted a Code of Conduct for members, which is available for inspection on the authority’s website and on request from Reception at the Civic Offices. <http://www.leicester.gov.uk/councillors-democracy-and-elections/complaints-about-councillors/>

### **C. PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE NEW SCHEME**

The following principles should underpin Leicester City Council’s Arrangements:

- a. There should be simplicity to the scheme so that it is easily understood and transparent
- b. There should be flexibility at every stage of the process for informal resolution and / or robust decisions to be taken about “no further action”.
- c. There should be Member involvement at key stages in the process.
- d. There should be the involvement of Independent Members (IM) and the Independent Person (IP) at key stages of the process.
- e. The Monitoring Officer should have greater powers to deal with complaints relating to the Code of Conduct.
- f. Rights for complainants to seek a “review” of a decisions at various stages should be limited, consistent with the reduced scope and severity of allowable outcomes that can be imposed under the new regime

- g. At any stage in the process where it is clear that a matter should be referred to the police this should be done and the local investigation should be suspended.

## **D. THE NEW PROCESS**

### **1. Who may complain?**

Complaints must be about Elected Members (to include the Elected Mayor) or co-opted Members and can be made by members of the public, Elected Members or officers of the Council. Where the Monitoring Officer lodges a complaint, it shall be made to the Standards Committee via the Deputy Monitoring Officer

### **2. To whom must a complaint be made?**

Complaints must be made to the Standards Committee c/o the Monitoring Officer by writing to:

The Monitoring Officer  
Legal Services Division  
Leicester City Council  
16 New Walk  
Leicester  
LE1 6UB

Or e-mail: [monitoring-officer@leicester.gov.uk](mailto:monitoring-officer@leicester.gov.uk)

The Monitoring Officer is a senior officer of the authority who has statutory responsibility for maintaining the Register of Members' Interests and who is responsible for administering the system in respect of complaints of member misconduct on behalf of the Standards Committee

In order to ensure that all of the correct information is available to process the complaint they should preferably be submitted on the model complaint form, which can be downloaded from the authority's website and is available on request from Reception at the Civic Offices.

The complainant should provide their name and a contact address or e-mail address, so that the Monitoring Officer can acknowledge receipt of the complaint and keep them informed of its progress. If the complainant wishes to keep their name and address confidential this should be discussed with the Monitoring Officer. The authority does not normally investigate anonymous complaints, unless there is a clear public interest in doing so.

Complaints should be lodged promptly, and normally within 3 months of the alleged breach occurring unless there are good reasons for the Monitoring Officer or Independent Person to accept a complaint lodged outside of this period.

### 3. How to complain?

Complaints must be made in writing either by letter, e-mail or on-line. Anonymous complaints will not be accepted because of the difficulties they cause with investigation. Appropriate safeguards for employees of the Council wishing to make a standards complaint will be afforded in parallel to those that might apply under the whistle blowing policy. Safeguards will also be in place, at the discretion of the Monitoring Officer, to protect confidential or sensitive information about a complainant, the disclosure of which may cause, or be likely to cause, "serious harm"

The complainant should be encouraged (either through questions on the standard complaint form or through subsequent discussion for clarification) what remedy is sought. This will help to identify informal methods of resolution at the earliest stages.

### 4. What will happen to the complaint?

The complaint will be acknowledged with the complainant within 5 working days

The complaint will also be notified (by sending a copy of the full complaint) to the subject Member within 5 further working days, save where there are exceptional or legal reasons for the Monitoring Officer agreeing with the complainant that there are elements of it, or the entirety of it, that must be kept confidential at this initial stage

Within 15 further working days the following actions will be taken by the Monitoring Officer, after consultation with the Independent Person:

- a. Revert to the complainant to seek further clarification.
- b. Refer the matter for further fact finding by Monitoring Officer (where further information is needed before deciding what route to follow).
- c. Reject the complaint on the grounds that it is not related to the Code of Conduct, or may be covered by another process
- d. Reject the complaint on the basis that it is (i) trivial or (ii) not in the public interest to pursue or (iii) vexatious (see Appendix 1 attached for definition).
- e. Recommend informal resolution where (i) Code engaged and not breached, but where some gesture of reparation would still be in the interests of fairness; or (ii) Code engaged but low-level breach only has occurred, such as not to warrant formal investigation
- f. Refer the matter for immediate further investigation.
- g. In exceptional cases, refer the matter to the Standards Committee or subcommittee thereof for a decision on a. to f. above on the grounds that the Monitoring Officer feels it would be inappropriate to make the decision himself/herself.

The complainant and the subject Member will receive a letter after expiry of the 5 days indicating which of the above outcomes is to be pursued.

By law the Subject Member has the right to consult with the Independent Person during the course of a complaint. Appendix 2 describes how this right is to be exercised.

**Matters referred for fact finding** - The Monitoring Officer will undertake this fact finding exercise by inviting the Member to attend for a discussion within 10 working days, or submitting information in writing. After obtaining the subject Member's factual account the Monitoring Officer will engage with the Independent Person (IP) to decide on next steps. The next steps will comprise either of outcomes c. to g. above.

**Informal resolution** - may incorporate acceptance by the subject Member that their behaviour was unacceptable and the offer of apology to the complainant, or other remedial action at the discretion of the Monitoring Officer (e.g. an offer of training). The outcome of 'informal resolution' does not require approval of the complainant or the subject Member (though the complainant may exercise a right to seek a "review" as per above).

Non-compliance with "informal" outcomes will be dealt with in accordance with Appendix 3 attached.

**Review of a complaint** - The complainant may seek a "review" of a decision only under outcomes c. d. or e. Such requests must be lodged with the Monitoring Officer within 5 working days of receipt of the outcome letter. Any Review will be undertaken by the Monitoring Officer, this time in consultation with a different Independent Person. The Subject Member will be notified of the request for a "review" and the reasons given for it by the complainant. It will be a matter for the Monitoring Officer and the Independent Person if they wish to invite any comment or representations from the Subject Member at this point.

*In the case of all outcomes up to and including referral for formal investigation, the Monitoring Officer will report outcomes to the Standards Committee by updating report at each meeting*

**Formal investigation** - should the matter warrant detailed investigation, the Monitoring Officer will appoint an investigating officer. The investigator will conduct a thorough review within three months. Upon receipt of the investigator's report by the Monitoring Officer he/she will refer the matter for further decision to the Standards Committee (acting through its Standards Advisory Board), this time with the mandatory requirement to consult the Independent Person, who may determine:

- no further action
- referral for hearing

The option of 'no further action' may only flow from an investigator's own conclusion that no breach has occurred. If the Investigator finds breaches, then the Board cannot decide, without a hearing, that no breach has occurred and no further action needs to be taken.

The option of 'informal resolution' is not available once a matter has been referred for formal Investigation (and the Investigator finds breaches). Equally, where the Board refer a matter for hearing in order to establish if breaches have occurred (for example after disagreeing with an Investigator who concludes there have been no breaches) informal resolution will not, at that point, be a viable outcome because the matter has ceased to be dealt with 'informally'.

If the matter is referred for hearing then a Hearing Panel will be convened to hear the evidence, make findings of fact and determine appropriate outcomes. The Hearing Panel is a sub-committee of the Council's Standards Committee. The Independent Person is invited to attend all meetings of the Hearing Panel and his/her views are sought and taken into consideration before the Hearing Panel takes any decision on whether the Member's conduct constitutes a failure to comply with the Code of conduct and as to any action to be taken following a finding of misconduct.

The complainant and the subject member would be written to and given reasons for any decision following a formal investigation, and no rights of review shall be afforded, save the right to challenge the process by way of Judicial Review or referral to the Local Government Ombudsman if appropriate.

The Standards Committee (acting either as the full Committee or via a Standards Advisory Board convened to deal with a particular complaint at either stage of the process) reserves its right to publish an investigative report at any stage.

## **5. Outcomes**

The Hearing Panel may make recommendations to the Standards Committee for:

- a. Censure or reprimand the Member by letter
- b. Press release of findings
- c. Report findings to Council for information (with or without a subsequent motion of censure being proposed by Council)
- d. Recommendation to Group (or Full Council in the case of ungrouped Members) of removal from Committees/subcommittees of Council
- e. Recommendation to Elected Mayor that the Member be removed from The Executive, or from particular portfolio responsibilities
- f. Recommendation that the Member be removed from outside bodies to which they have been appointed by the Council
- g. Withdrawal of facilities provided to the Member by the Council
- h. Excluding the Member from the Council's offices or other premises (with the exception of accessing meetings of Council, Committees and subcommittees)
- i. Instructing the Monitoring Officer to arrange training for the Member

## **6. Revision of these arrangements**

The Council may by resolution agree to amend these arrangements at any time, and delegates to the Monitoring Officer and/or Chair of the Standards Committee the right to

depart from these arrangements where he/she considers it is necessary to do so in order to secure effective and fair consideration of any matter

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October 2014

## Vexatious Complaints – Member Misconduct process

Standards complaints are to be handled in accordance with the 'Arrangements for dealing with Standards Complaints at Leicester City Council'. This procedure was brought in following the new standards regime introduced by Chapter 7 of the Localism Act 2011.

One of the initial actions open to the Monitoring Officer (MO), after consultation with the Independent Person (IP), is to reject the complaint 'on the basis that it is:

*"... i) trivial or ii) not in the public interest to pursue or iii) **vexatious...**"*

No definition is provided within our Arrangements of 'vexatious'. The Localism Act and associated guidance make it clear that it is for the local authority to decide how they will investigate allegations for breach of conduct code and handle complaints. They do not specify what those arrangements must be.

Wherever possible, every effort should be made to find out what someone is complaining about, to investigate and respond. However, on occasion, complaints will be made that clearly do not substantiate claims or even justify further investigation. These types of complaints can be termed "vexatious complaints". It is important that the complaints procedure is correctly implemented and all elements of a complaint are considered as even repeated or vexatious complaints may have issues that contain some genuine substance.

It is important to note that it is the complaint itself that must be judged vexatious, oppressive or an abuse, not the complainant. Consideration of this ground should therefore focus primarily on the current complaint. The complainant's past complaint history may, however, be taken into account where it is relevant to show that the current complaint is vexatious, oppressive or an abuse.

The MO and IP should be able to demonstrate with evidence a reasonable belief that the complaint is vexatious, oppressive or an abuse of process before deciding to disapply the Standards process. Some assessment of the complaint will be required in order to demonstrate this.

- The LGO defines unreasonable and unreasonably persistent complainants as:  
*"those complainants who, because of the nature or frequency of their contacts with an organisation, hinder the organisation's consideration of their, or other people's complaints"*
- Examples of unacceptable or vexatious behaviour, as defined by the LGO, include any action or series of actions which are perceived by the staff member to be

*“deceitful, abusive, offensive, threatening”* whether they are delivered verbally or in writing or a combination of the two.

For the purposes of the Member misconduct processes the definition of ‘vexatious’ should include both limbs described above (that is, those that constitute unreasonable interpersonal behaviour as well as those that constitute unreasonable abuse of the system). Both represent behaviour which can potentially frustrate the proper application of the Standards regime in the interests of the wider public.

**The following (non-exhaustive list) factors will be taken into account by the MO and IP when considering whether to classify a complaint as vexatious:**

- Refusing to specify the grounds of a complaint, despite offers of assistance;
- Refusing to co-operate with the complaints investigation process;
- Refusing to accept that certain issues are not within the scope of the Complaints Procedure (e.g. substantive Planning Approval decisions);
- Insistence on the complaint being dealt with in ways which are incompatible with the Arrangements or with good practice;
- Demanding special treatment / immediate repeatedly;
- Politically motivated complaints
- Changing the basis of the complaint as the investigation proceeds;
- Denying or changing statements made at an earlier stage;
- Introducing trivial or irrelevant new information at a later stage;
- Raising numerous, detailed but unimportant questions; insisting they are all answered;
- Covertly recording meetings and conversations;
- Submitting falsified documents from themselves or others;
- Adopting a ‘scatter gun’ approach: pursuing parallel complaints on the same issue;
- Making excessive demands on the time and resources of staff with lengthy phone calls, emails to numerous Council staff, or detailed letters every few days, and expecting immediate responses;
- Submitting repeat complaints with minor additions/variations that the complainant insists make these ‘new’ complaints;
- Repeatedly arguing points with no new evidence
- Refusing to accept the decision as to how the complaint shall be progressed

**Process:**

More usually, consideration of designating a complaint as vexatious will arise at the early stages of receipt of a complaint. However, this should not impede the MO and IP from considering whether the designation of “vexatious” should apply at a later stage in any complaint.



Whenever the issue is raised, the IP and the MO must discuss the designation and reach a unanimous view. Exceptionally, where they cannot do so the second IP may be consulted and a majority view shall prevail.

The designation of a complaint as “vexatious” will be recorded with brief reasons given and communicated to the complainant and the Subject Member, with a right of “review” afforded as per the Arrangements.

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## **Protocol on the role of the Independent Person - meeting with Elected Members.**

This Protocol aims to set out the arrangements to be followed in the event that an Elected Member whom it is alleged has committed a breach of the Code of Conduct for Councillors seeks a meeting with the Independent Person (I.P.)

### **Background**

Section 28(7) Localism Act 2011 states:

(7) Arrangements put in place under subsection (6)(b) by a relevant authority must include provision for the appointment by the authority of at least one independent person—

(a) whose views are to be sought, and taken into account, by the authority before it makes its decision on an allegation that it has decided to investigate, and

(b) whose views may be sought—

(i) by the authority in relation to an allegation in circumstances not within paragraph (a),

(ii) by a member, or co-opted member, of the authority if that person's behaviour is the subject of an allegation,

The Parliamentary record (Hansard) reveals that one reason for a Member subject of a complaint seeking the views of the IP can be to express their concern about pressures that they might be facing from other Elected Members. The subject Member can raise with the IP their concerns about the conduct of other members in regards to the relevant complaint. This is addressed at point (ix) below.

The new “Arrangements” for dealing with complaints about the conduct of Councillors was established on 1 July 2012 and the principles of the new arrangements included:

- simplicity and transparency
- involvement of the I.P. at key stages of the process
- greater powers for the Monitoring Officer to deal with complaints relating to the Code of Conduct.

The right to “seek the views” of the IP therefore applies to any Elected Member who is the subject of a complaint. They may do this at any stage of the process except where a matter is referred to the police.

This right is separate to the right of the complainant to seek a “Review” of their complaint in the following circumstances as set out in our “Arrangements”:

- *rejection on grounds that complaint is not related to Code of Conduct, or is covered by another process*
- *rejection on grounds of being (i) trivial or (ii) not in the public interest to pursue or (iii) vexatious) or*
- *recommendation of informal resolution*

Such requests must be lodged with the Monitoring Officer within 5 working days of receipt of the outcome letter. Any Review will be undertaken by the Monitoring Officer, this time in consultation with a different Independent Person

The experience gained during the first year of the new Standards regime shows that Elected Members have in most cases been willing to accept the views of the Monitoring Officer (M.O.) and I.P. where informal resolution is the outcome. This outcome often involves offering to explain more fully the reason for adopting a course of action, offering an apology and/or offering a way forward.

However in any matter, whether it is proposed to be dealt with by informal resolution; is being “reviewed” or is one that proceeds to full investigation, the subject Member has a right to “seek the views” of the I.P. It is important that this engagement is defined and moderated so as to guard against:

- the Subject Member attempting to unduly influence the progress of the investigation by, for example, trying to explain “off the record” to the I.P. what they think of the complaint or how it should be resolved
- the Subject Member trying to compromise the independence of the I.P. by, for example trying to tell them things “in confidence” which are highly material to the investigation
- the Subject Member having false expectations of the purpose of exercising their right to seek the I.P.’s views
- the complainant being disadvantaged by the Subject Member’s exercise of their statutory right to seek the views of the I.P.

This Protocol therefore sets out the terms of engagement of such interaction, such as to promote transparency and preserve confidence in the Standards regime.

**Arrangements for a meeting between the duly appointed IP and an Elected Member subject of a complaint:**

- i. A Subject Member shall only be entitled to “seek the views” of the I.P. allocated to their complaint.
- ii. The right to speak with the I.P. will not apply where a decision has already been taken (and communicated) to dismiss the complaint. In such circumstances the Monitoring Officer can be approached to discuss any “lessons learned”
- iii. The right to speak with the I.P. will not apply where a complaint has been referred to the Police
- iv. The Subject Member shall make any request to “seek the views” of the I.P. through, and only through, the M.O. Where a Subject Member directly approaches the I.P., the I.P. will refer them back to the M.O. without further engagement
- v. The M.O. will arrange the meeting between the Subject Member and the I.P. at a date and time convenient to both, and on Council premises
- vi. The meeting shall be between the Subject Member and the I.P. only. No other attendees shall be permitted.
- vii. The I.P. will explain, at the outset the nature of their role at the meeting which is to answer questions about the investigative process, explain the types of questions that they will be addressing/have addressed before reaching an outcome and reiterate that they will NOT at that meeting express a concluded or tentative view on any of those matters
- viii. The purpose of the meeting will be for the Subject Member to better understand the investigative process and the reasons why the I.P. and M.O. have reached a particular outcome. It is NOT an opportunity for the Subject Member to attempt to exhort the I.P. to change their mind or to present “evidence” to them. I.P.s do not conduct “investigations” or “fact finding” exercises. These are done by the M.O. in cases that are not referred for formal investigation, or by the independent Investigator in cases referred for investigation.
- ix. The meeting may also be used by the subject Member as an opportunity to raise with the IP concerns they may have about any pressures that they might be facing from other Elected Members by virtue of the fact that these other Members know about the complaint. Whilst the IP may not have direct powers to intervene in such circumstances, they might be able to discuss with the MO any intervention (from the

MO) to try to preserve the integrity of the complaints process (such as the MO talking to the other Members or their political parties)

- x. The I.P. will report back to the M.O. after the meeting a summary of the discussion.
- xi. If the I.P. takes notes of the meeting these will be as an aide memoire for the I.P. only and will not act as a formal minute. The Subject member is free to make their own notes
- xii. If the Subject member, contrary to this Protocol, submits information or evidence that is material to the handling of the complaint, this information or evidence will be shared by the I.P. with the M.O. (and an Investigator where one is appointed) and acted upon appropriately.
- xiii. There will only be one such meeting per complaint, save in exceptional circumstances which are to be approved by the MO and the IP.

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**Procedure for dealing with subject (Elected) Member who fails to act upon an outcome of “informal resolution”**

The Council’s “Code of Conduct” and associated “Arrangements” govern the principles and processes to be applied when a standards complaint is made alleging misconduct by an Elected Member. To date, most complaints have been resolved by “informal resolution”, an outcome which is applied in circumstances where a potentially valid complaint is made, but where it is not deemed to be in the interests of justice to proceed to a full investigation and where instead a fair and proportionate outcome can be achieved by some other action (often an apology, coupled with an offer to revisit the original topic i.e. a Ward issue). It is the judgement of the Monitoring Officer and Independent Person as to whether to conclude that “informal resolution” is appropriate (with or without the consent of the complainant and subject member).

The Standards Committee, at its meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014 endorsed the following process for dealing with cases where a Subject Member fails to co-operate with such a recommendation:

- Step 1 – The Subject Member shall be invited to a meeting with the Chair of Standards, The relevant Independent Person and the Monitoring Officer to explain their reasons for non-compliance
- Step 2 – If compliance is not forthcoming after Step 1, the Chair of Standards and the Monitoring Officer may refer the matter for “political action” (e.g. for the Subject Member’s political Group to take any action it deems appropriate)
- Step 3 – In addition to or as an alternative to Step 2 above, the Subject Member’s non-compliance may be treated as a fresh potential breach of the Code of Conduct and a new complaint lodged, this time with the Monitoring Officer as the complainant. There will be no direct involvement of the original complainant into this separate complaint.

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