

Procedure for Local Investigation of Referred Complaints

Introduction and Summary

This note sets out the procedure which will be followed in the local investigation of allegations of misconduct by Councillors¹. No departure will be made from this procedure unless and until the Monitoring Officer² has first notified the Councillor against whom the allegation has been made of the proposed variation to the procedure and the reasons for that variation.

This procedure will apply to the investigation of allegations of breaches of the authority's Code of Conduct by elected and co-opted members of the authority and to breaches of the Parish Council Code of Conduct by parish councillors, and the word "Subject Member" is taken to refer to all such persons. The authority has also resolved that the same procedure shall apply to the investigation of allegations of breaches of the authority's local protocols³, in so far as they apply to Councillors.

Where the Assessment Panel of the Standards Committee receives an allegation that a Subject Member has breached the authority's Code of Conduct for Members, the Panel can refer the allegation to the Monitoring Officer for investigation. The Monitoring Officer must write to the following parties informing them of the decision and, if appropriate, advising who will be responsible for conducting the investigation.

- any member subject to an allegation ("the Subject Member")
- the person who made the allegation ("the Complainant")
- the Standards Committee of any other authority concerned
- any Parish Council or other authority concerned

The Monitoring Officer must also consider any relevant guidance issued by the Standards Board for England and must comply with any relevant direction given by it.

Following an investigation the Monitoring Officer must prepare a written report concerning the investigation and findings, which must be sent to the member subject to the allegation, and refer the report to the Standards Committee. Where the Assessment Panel has referred an allegation that a Subject Member has breached the authority's Code of Conduct for Members to the Standards Board for England, the Ethical Standards Officer may carry out an investigation and refer the investigation report back to the Standards Committee for determination.

The Monitoring Officer can refer a matter back to the Assessment Panel which has been referred for local investigation if:

¹ This procedure will apply to allegations of breach of the authority's Code of Conduct by elected and co-opted members of the authority and by the directly elected mayor of the authority (if any), and the word "Subject Member" is to be taken to refer all such persons.

² The "Monitoring Officer" is an officer of the Council who has been designated as the authority's Monitoring Officer under section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

³ Authorities may supplement their Code of Conduct for Members with local protocols which do not form part of the Code of Conduct. Allegations of a breach of a local protocol may also constitute breaches of the Code of Conduct. Where a particular allegation of breach of protocol does not form a breach of the Code of Conduct, it would also fall to be investigated and determined by the authority concerned. Accordingly this procedure will apply equally to allegations of breach of a local protocol, but by virtue of a delegation from Council rather than by virtue of the Local Authorities (Code of Conduct) (Local Determination) (Amendment) Regulations 2004 – SI 2004 No. 2617.

1) As a result of new evidence or information, the Monitoring Officer believes both of the following:

- the matter is materially more or less serious than may have seemed apparent to the Standards Committee when it made its decision on the initial allegation; and
- the Standards Committee would have made a different decision had it been aware of that new evidence or information.

2) the Member subject to the allegation has died, is seriously ill or has resigned from the authority concerned, and the Monitoring Officer believes that it is consequently no longer appropriate to continue with an investigation

If a matter is referred back in this way, the Assessment Panel must make a decision as if the matter had been referred to it for initial assessment. It can also remove the ability of the Monitoring Officer to refer the matter back again

The Investigating Officer must make one of the following findings:

- Finding of failure - there has been a failure to comply with the Code of the authority concerned or, as the case may be, of any other authority concerned
- Finding of no failure - there has not been a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct of the authority concerned or, as the case may be, of any other authority concerned

The Standards Committee or a sub-committee appointed by it must meet to consider the report of the Investigating Officer and make one of the following findings:

- Finding of acceptance - it accepts the monitoring officer's finding of no failure to comply with the Code of Conduct; or
- The matter should be considered at a formal hearing of the Standards Committee to determine whether a breach of the Code of Conduct has occurred; or
- The matter should be referred to the Adjudication Panel for England for determination

The Standards Committee can only refer a case to the Adjudication Panel if:

- 1) It decides that the action it could take against the member would be insufficient were a finding of failure to be made; and
- 2) The President or Deputy President of the Adjudication Panel has agreed to accept the referral

The Standards Committee must give written notice of a "finding of acceptance" to the parties involved as soon as possible after making it. It must arrange for the decision to be published in at least one local newspaper and, if the committee deems it appropriate, on its website and any other publication, unless the member subject to the allegation request that the decision not be published.

In this process, the function of the Investigating Officer is to ensure, as far as possible, that all the information which is relevant to the allegation is identified and presented to the Standards Committee, to enable the Standards Committee to come to an informed decision as to whether the Subject Member has failed to comply with the authority's Code of Conduct for Members or a local protocol, and upon any consequent action. The Standards Committee acts in an inquisitorial manner, rather than an adversarial manner, seeking the truth in relation to the conduct of the Subject Member on the balance of the information available to it, and may commission further investigation or information if it needs to do so in order to come to a decision.

1. Interpretation

- (a) 'Subject Member' Includes the Subject Member's representative.

- (b) 'Investigating Officer' means the person appointed by the Monitoring Officer to undertake that investigation (which may include the Monitoring Officer, and his or her nominated representative).⁴
- (c) 'The Matter' is the subject matter of the Investigating Officer's report.
- (d) 'The Standards Committee' refers to the Standards Committee or to any Standards Sub-Committee to which it has delegated the conduct of the hearing, unless the context indicates that it refers only to the Standards Committee itself.

2. Notification of Reference of Allegation to the Monitoring Officer

(a) Appointment of Investigating Officer

Upon referral of an allegation from the Standards Committee, the Monitoring Officer will appoint an Investigating Officer in respect of the allegation and instruct him to conduct an investigation and to report thereon to the authority's Standards Committee. The Investigating Officer may be an officer of the authority⁵, an officer of another local authority, or an external Investigating Officer.

The Investigating Officer may appoint persons to assist him in the conduct of his functions and may obtain such professional advice as may be necessary for the conduct of the investigation.

(b) Notification to the Subject Member

The Assessment Panel will then notify⁶ in writing the Subject Member by providing the following information:

- (i) That the allegation has been referred to him for local investigation and determination;
- (ii) The identity of the person making the allegation (unless on the rare occasion at the outset of the investigation where identification of the complainant might prejudice the investigation or put the complainant at risk, this grant of anonymity being subject to constant review);
- (iii) A summary of the complaint. The Assessment Panel does not have to give the Subject Member a summary of the Complaint, if it decides that doing so would be against the public interest or prejudice any investigation.
- (iv) Of the procedure which will be followed in respect of the allegation; and
- (v) Of the identity of the Investigating Officer.

⁴ This definition has been amended to make it clear that, when the Monitoring Officer arranges for someone else to undertake the investigation, the definition of the 'Investigating Officer' no longer includes the Monitoring Officer.

⁵ There are two distinct roles, that of the Investigating Officer and that of legal advisor to the Standards Committee. The Monitoring Officer may him/herself take on the role of the Investigating Officer. Where he / she does so, he / she must also arrange for a separate legal advisor to the Standards Committee in respect of the allegation.

⁶ In very exceptional cases, where the Monitoring Officer has reason to believe that there is a serious risk of intimidation of witnesses or destruction of evidence, the Monitoring Officer may initiate an investigation before notifying the Subject Member.

(c) Notification to the Parish Council Clerk

Where the allegation relates to the conduct of a member of a Parish Council in his capacity as such, at the same time as notifying the Subject Member, the Monitoring Officer will notify the Clerk of the Parish Council concerned in writing of the matters set out in paragraphs 2(b) (i) – (iv) and (vi) above.

(d) Notification to the Complainant

At the same time as notifying the Subject Member, the Monitoring Officer will notify the Complainant in writing of the matters set out in paragraphs 2(b) (i) – (iv) and (vi) above.

(e) Initial response of the Subject Member

In notifying the Subject Member of receipt of the allegation, the Monitoring Officer shall request the Subject Member to respond to the Investigating Officer in writing within 30 days of notification as follows:

- (i) Advising the Investigating Officer whether the Subject Member admits or denies the breach of the Code of Conduct or local protocol which is the subject of the allegation;
- (ii) Listing any documents which the Subject Member would wish the Investigating Officer to take into account in any investigation of the allegation, where possible providing copies of these documents, and informing the Investigating Officer of where the original documents may be inspected;
- (iii) Providing the Investigating Officer with the name, address and telephone number (or other appropriate contact details) of any person or organisation whom the Subject Member would wish the Investigating Officer to interview in the course of any investigation of the allegation; and
- (iv) Providing the Investigating Officer with any information which the Subject Member would wish the Investigating Officer to seek from any person or organisation.

(f) Supporting information from the Complainant

In notifying the Complainant as above, the Monitoring Officer will request the person to respond to the Investigating Officer within 14 days:

- (i) Listing any documents which the person would wish the Investigating Officer to take into account in any investigation of the allegation, where possible providing copies of these documents, and informing the Investigating Officer of where the original documents may be inspected;
- (ii) Providing the Investigating Officer with the name, address and telephone number (or other appropriate contact details) of any person or organisation whom the person would wish the Investigating Officer to interview in the course of any investigation of the allegation; and

- (iii) Providing the Investigating Officer with any information which the person would wish the Investigating Officer to seek from any person or organisation.

3. Conduct of Investigation

(a) Purpose of the Investigation

The purpose of the Investigating Officer's investigation is to enable him to prepare and present to the Standards Committee a report which would provide the Standards Committee with sufficient information to determine whether the Subject Member has acted in breach of the Code of Conduct or local protocol and, where there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct or local protocol, whether any action should be taken in respect of the Subject Member or in consequence of the breach, and what any such action should be.

(b) Termination of the Investigation

- (i) The Investigating Officer may terminate his investigation at any point where he is satisfied that he has sufficient information to enable him to report to the Standards Committee and to enable the Standards Committee to come to a considered decision on the allegation.

(c) References back from the Monitoring Officer

Where a matter is referred to a Monitoring Officer for investigation, the Monitoring Officer may refer that matter back to the Standards Committee concerned if:

- (i) As a result of new evidence or information, the Monitoring Officer is of the opinion that the matter is materially more serious or materially less serious than may have seemed apparent to the Standards Committee when it made its decision to refer the matter and it would have made a different decision had it been aware of that new evidence or information; or
- (ii) The person who is the subject of the allegation has died, is seriously ill or has resigned from the authority concerned and the Monitoring Officer is of the opinion that in the circumstances it is no longer appropriate to continue with the investigation.

- #### (d)
- Following notification of the allegation to the Subject Member, the Investigating Officer will identify an initial list of persons to be interviewed, organisations from whom information is to be sought and documents to be inspected as part of the investigation. Where the Subject Member has provided the Investigating Officer with the information requested in accordance with Paragraphs 2(e) (ii) and (iii) above, the Investigating Officer shall include in this list each document, person and organisation referred to in that response, unless he is of the opinion that the inclusion of that document, person or organisation would unreasonably delay the completion of the investigation rather than to contribute to the accuracy of the Investigating Officer's final report. The Investigating Officer may supplement or amend this list at any stage of the investigation.

⁷ As set out above, District Council Standards Committees would have no jurisdiction in respect of breaches of local protocols by parish and Town Subject Members, which would have to be dealt with by the Parish Council itself unless the Parish Council has delegated the resolution of such matters to the District Council.

(e) Production of documents, information and explanations:

- (i) In the course of the investigation, the Investigating Officer may make such enquiries of any person or organisation, and request any person or organisation to provide any document or information which is in his / its possession or control, or provide any explanation, as he thinks necessary for the purposes of carrying out the investigation.
- (ii) In the course of the investigation, the Investigating Officer and any person authorised on his behalf may require any authority of which the Subject Member is a member to provide any document which is in his / its possession or control which he thinks necessary for the purposes of carrying out this investigation.

(f) Interviews

(i) Requesting attendance

In the course of the investigation the Investigating Officer may request any person to attend and appear before him or otherwise provide any information, document or explanation for the purpose of Paragraph 3(e) as he thinks necessary for the purposes of carrying out the investigation.

(ii) Representation

Any person who appears before the Investigating Officer arranges to be accompanied at their own expense by a solicitor or friend.

(iii) Notes of interviews

Where practicable, following the interview the Investigating Officer shall produce a written note of the material points of the interview, provide two copies of that note to the person interviewed and ask them to return one copy signed as a correct record of the interview, with such corrections or amendments as they may feel necessary for that purpose. All interviews will be tape-recorded.

(g) Costs

The Investigating Officer may, where he considers that it is appropriate in order to facilitate the conduct of the investigation, pay to any person who provides any document, information, advice or explanation in response to his request, all costs incurred, fees and professional charges subject to the maxima set by the authority.

(h) Reference to the Standards Board (allegations of breach of the Code of Conduct for Members only)

At any point in the course of the investigation, if the Investigating Officer is of the opinion

- (i) that the seriousness of the matters which he is investigating, including any additional matters identified under Paragraph 3(c) above, is such that they may merit the application of a sanction beyond the powers of the Standards Committee, or

- (ii) that the nature of the allegations is such that it would be inappropriate for the Standards Committee to determine the matter,

he may, after consulting the Monitoring Officer, suspend his investigation and recommend to the Standards Committee that the matter be referred to Ethical Standards Officer to investigate the matter.

Where the Ethical Standards Officer assumes the responsibility to investigate, the Monitoring Officer shall ensure that the Subject Member concerned, the person who made the complaint, the members of the Standards Committee and any Parish Council is informed of such investigation. Where the Ethical Standards Officer declines to investigate, the Monitoring Officer shall refer the matter back to the Standards Committee for a further decision.

4. The Draft Report

- (a) When the Investigating Officer is satisfied that he has sufficient information to meet the requirement set out in Paragraph 3(a), or has obtained as much information as is likely to be reasonably capable of being obtained, he shall prepare a draft report setting out:
 - (i) The details of the allegation;
 - (ii) The relevant provisions of the statute, of the Code of Conduct and any relevant local protocols;
 - (iii) The Subject Member's initial response to notification of the allegation (if any);
 - (iv) The relevant information, advice and explanations which he has obtained in the course of the investigation;
 - (v) A list of any documents relevant to the matter;
 - (vi) A list of those persons whom he has interviewed and those organisations from whom he has sought information;
 - (vii) A note of any person or organisation who has failed to co-operate with the investigation and the manner in which they have failed to co-operate;
 - (viii) A statement of his draft findings of fact;
 - (ix) His conclusion as to whether the Subject Member has or has not failed to comply with the Code of Conduct for Members of any authority or a local protocol; and
 - (x) Any recommendations which the Investigating Officer is minded to make to any authority concerned for reviewing or reconsidering any decision which was the subject of the breach of the Code of Conduct or local protocol or to remedy the position of any person who may have suffered detriment or injustice as a result of the breach. Where the allegation relates to a Parish Subject Member, such recommendations would be recommendations which the Investigating Officer would recommend that the Standards Committee make to the Parish Council.

- (b) The draft report should also state that the report does not necessarily represent the Investigating Officer's final finding, and that the Investigating Officer will present a final report to the Standards Committee once he has considered any comments received on the draft report.
- (c) The Investigating Officer shall then send a copy of his draft report in confidence to the Subject Member and the person making the allegation, and request that they send any comments thereon to him within 14 days.
- (d) The Investigating Officer may send a copy of, or relevant extracts from his draft report in confidence to any person on whose evidence he has relied in compiling the draft report, and request that they send any comments thereon to him within 14 days.

5. The Final Report

- (a) After the expiry of that period (or such extended period as the Investigating Officer may allow), the Investigating Officer shall reconsider and amend his draft report in the light of any comments received, and produce and send to the Monitoring Officer his final report. The final report should state that the report represents the Investigating Officer's final findings and will be presented to the Standards Committee, and should have appended to it copies of any documents which the Investigating Officer has relied on in reaching his conclusions, such as background documents of telephone conversations, letters, and notes of interviews with witnesses;
- (b) The Monitoring Officer shall then send a copy of the final report to the Subject Member, advising that:
 - (i) Where the final report concludes that there has not been a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct for Members or a local protocol, he will refer the report to the Standards Committee for their consideration; and
 - (ii) Where the final report concludes that there has been a failure by the Subject Member to comply with the Code of Conduct for Members or with a local protocol, he will refer the report to the Standards Committee for a formal hearing.
- (c) The Monitoring Officer shall ensure that, when the agenda for the Standards Committee is sent out to members of the Standards Committee, including the final report, the agenda and the report are also sent to:
 - (i) The person who made the complaint;
 - (ii) The Clerk to the Parish Council (if any);together with a note explaining the circumstances under which the Standards Committee may conduct a hearing into the allegations, and the procedure for these events.
- (d) Where the Standards Committee considers the report in accordance with Paragraph 5(a) above, it shall make one of the following findings:
 - (i) That it accepts the Investigating Officer's finding that the Subject Member has not failed to comply with the Code of Conduct for Members as set out in the allegation;

- (ii) That it accepts the Investigating Officer's finding that, on the facts as set out in the report, the Subject Member has not failed to comply with a local protocol; or
 - (iii) That the matter should be considered at a hearing of the Standards Committee, conducted in accordance with the authority's adopted Procedure for Local Determination Hearings⁸.
- (e) Where the Standards Committee finds as set out in Paragraph 5(b)(i) above (no failure to comply with the Code of Conduct or with a local protocol), the Monitoring Officer shall, as soon as practicable thereafter, send a written notice of that finding and the reasons on which it was based, together with a copy of the Investigating Officer's report to:
- (i) The Subject Member;
 - (ii) The Standards Committee;
 - (iii) The Standards Committee of any other local authority (other than a Parish Council) of which the Subject Member is also a member;
 - (iv) The Parish Council, if the Subject Member was also a member of a Parish Council; and
 - (v) The Complainant.

and shall ask the Subject Member whether he objects to the publication of a notice of the finding in at least one local newspaper, and arrange for the publication of such a notice unless the Subject Member so objects.

- (f) Where the Standards Committee finds as set out in paragraph 5 (b)(ii) above (that the matter should be considered at a full hearing) or the Investigating Officer's report contains a finding that the Subject Member did fail to comply with the Code of Conduct or a local protocol, the Monitoring Officer shall arrange for the matter to be considered at such a hearing in accordance with the authority's adopted Procedure for Local Determination Hearings, subject to the following variations:
- (i) The hearing shall be conducted no sooner than 14 days from, and no later than 3 months from, the date on which the Monitoring Officer received the report of the Investigating Officer;
 - (ii) The Investigating Officer shall be responsible for presenting the report to the Standards Committee and introducing any witnesses whom he considers that the Standards Committee should hear in order to be able to give the matter proper consideration.

⁸ Note that this is not a finding that there has been a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct for Members or with a local protocol, but simply that, on the basis of the Investigating Officer's report, the Standards Committee is not at this stage prepared to come to a final conclusion that there has been no such failure to comply, and that the matter merits consideration at a full hearing.