

Hearings Procedure

The following process will be followed when a decision has been taken that a hearing, as to whether a member has breached the code of conduct, is required.

Pre-hearing process

The Monitoring Officer will, where possible, arrange for the Standards Panel to meet to hear the complaint within 3 months of receiving the Investigating Officer's report. They should aim to find a date which the witnesses, the Investigating Officer, the complainant and the Subject Member (the member against whom the complaint has been made) can attend. They should give all those involved, particularly the Subject Member, sufficient notice of the hearing. The Monitoring Officer should aim to arrange a hearing which can take place in one day or consecutive days without the need to have gaps between sittings or lengthy days.

The Standards Committee and the Standards Panel are subject to the normal requirements on confidential and exempt information as any other Committee under ss100 A to K and Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The Monitoring Officer will consider whether these provisions apply in advance of the hearing.

The Monitoring Officer will require the Subject Member to give his/her 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.

If the Subject Member wishes to rely on evidence at the hearing, they should provide it to the Monitoring Officer as soon as possible. The Investigating Officer may have taken a witness statement from them or set out their comments in their report but if the Subject Member wishes to add to what the Investigating Officer has written they should provide a witness statement to the Monitoring Officer as soon as possible.

The Panel will not allow new arguments or evidence to be presented at the hearing.

The Monitoring Officer will decide what evidence will need to be heard, and what written evidence can be read at the hearing. The Monitoring Officer should take account of the views of the witnesses and the Subject Member in reaching such decisions.

The Monitoring Officer can consult the Chair of the Hearing Panel if he/she feels their guidance would assist and ask the Chair to issue directions in relation to the pre-hearing process.

The Monitoring Officer may wish to offer to cover the expenses of witnesses associated with their attendance at the hearing.

The Monitoring Officer will consider whether it is appropriate to hear two complaints together, for example if they relate to the same member, or relate to the same incident or occasion.

The Subject Member should be provided with the Investigating Officer's report and any evidence which will be heard at the hearing.

The Monitoring Officer should provide the members of the Hearing Panel with all the evidence in advance of the hearing so that they can read it to identify any potential conflicts of interest.

The Monitoring Officer will provide the Hearing Panel with a report which summarises the allegation. This should include a list of agreed facts and disputed issues and outline the proposed procedure for the hearing.

The Monitoring Officer will act as a point of contact for the Subject Member, the complainant, the Independent Person and any witnesses who will give evidence.

The Hearing

The hearing will generally take place in public.

An Independent Person will be invited to attend the hearing and may be asked to comment if the Panel thinks it is appropriate. This will be an Independent Person who has not previously been consulted by the Subject Member.

If the Subject Member does not attend the hearing, the Panel may adjourn the hearing or may continue to reach a decision on the basis of the Investigating Officer's report and any evidence they hear, if they decide to hear evidence.

Whilst the hearing is a meeting of the authority, it is not a court of law. It does not hear evidence under oath. The rules of natural justice should nevertheless be followed and the Hearing Panel will have due regard to the seriousness of the proceedings for those involved, the Council and the public.

The Panel will decide disputed issues and whether the Subject Member has breached the code on the balance of probabilities.

Representation

The Subject Member may choose to be represented by any person they wish. They will have to bear any cost of being represented. The Panel may refuse to allow a representative to remain at the hearing if they are disruptive. The Panel will have the discretion to hear opening or closing arguments from the Subject

Member and the Investigating Officer if they feel it would assist them in reaching a decision.

Evidence

The Panel will control the procedure and evidence presented at a hearing, including the number of witnesses and the way they are questioned. All matters relating to the evidence and procedure are within their discretion.

Generally the Subject Member is entitled to present their case as they see fit.

The Panel will usually have regard to submissions from the Subject Member if they are considering whether to hear particular evidence.

Witnesses of facts that are disputed would normally be expected to attend to be questioned. Character witnesses will normally provide written evidence which can be read at the hearing.

Witnesses should be treated with courtesy throughout the pre-hearing stage and at the hearing.

Witnesses may be questioned by the Panel, the Monitoring Officer and the Subject Member. This discretion should generally be unfettered by the Panel unless there is good reason to do so.

The onus is on the Subject Member to ensure the attendance of witnesses who they would like to give evidence to assist them. The Panel can limit the number of witnesses or the issues which can be covered by them.

Neither the Panel nor the Subject Member will have any power to compel witnesses to give evidence.

At the Hearing

At the hearing, the Investigating Officer will present his/her report, call such witnesses as he/she considers necessary and make representations to substantiate his/her conclusion that the member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct. The Investigating Officer is likely to ask the complainant to attend and give evidence to the Panel. The Investigating Officer may be asked about their report or any matters relating to their involvement.

Role of Monitoring Officer

References to the Monitoring Officer should be read to include any representative of the Monitoring Officer.

The Monitoring Officer has a key role in ensuring the smooth running of the pre-hearing and hearing process. They will remain neutral throughout and will provide independent advice to the Panel

Role of the complainant

The role of the complainant will usually be limited to being a witness and they are not a party to the proceedings. However, the Panel may wish to consult them at any stage in the hearing if they feel their comments would assist them.

Decision

The Panel must consult the Independent Person in reaching their decision.

The Panel may wish to retire to consider their decision. The Monitoring Officer may assist them in constructing the reasons for their decision. The Monitoring Officer will not express any view on the evidence heard or the decision to be reached.

The Panel will reach a decision as to whether the subject member has breached the code of conduct. If they decide that the Subject Member has not breached the code of conduct they will take no further action. If they decide that the Subject Member has breached the code of conduct they should go on to decide what sanction, if any, is appropriate.

Sanctions

The Panel must consult the Independent Person before imposing any sanction and give the Subject Member the opportunity to make representations.

The Panel should consider all the mitigating and aggravating circumstances that appear to them to be relevant. For example, they may wish to consider:

- What were the actual and potential consequences of the breach?
- How serious was the breach?
- What is the attitude of the Subject Member now? Have they apologised?
- Has the Subject Member previously been dealt with for a breach of the code?

The following are example of mitigating and aggravating factors but these lists should not be regarded as exhaustive.

Mitigating Factors

- An honest but mistaken belief that the action was not a breach of the code
- A previous record of good service
- Evidence that they were suffering from ill health at the time of the breach

Aggravating Factors

- Dishonesty
- Continuing to deny the facts or blaming other people

- Evidence of a failure to follow advice or warnings

The priority of the Panel should be to ensure that there are no further breaches of the code and that public confidence is maintained.

Sanctions

The sanctions available to the Panel are:

- Publish its findings in respect of the member's conduct,
- Write a formal letter to the councillor found to have breached the code,
- Report its findings to Council for information,
- Seek formal censure through a motion at Council,
- Recommend to the Member's Group Leader (or in the case of un-grouped members, recommend to Council or to Committees) 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 particular Portfolio responsibilities,
- Instruct the Monitoring Officer to arrange training, mediation or other appropriate remedy, for the Member.
- Recommend to Council or to the Town/Parish Council (if applicable) that the member be removed from some/all outside appointments to which he/she has been appointed or nominated by the authority or by the Town/Parish Council.

Notice of decision

As soon as is reasonably practicable after the hearing, the Monitoring Officer shall prepare a formal decision notice in consultation with the Chair of the Hearings Panel, and send a copy to the complainant, the Subject Member, make that decision notice available for public inspection and report the decision to the next convenient meeting of the Council.