

Complaints about the ethical conduct of Councillors

1 The Code of Conduct

All City and Parish Councillors must follow a Code of Conduct which their Council has agreed. You can find a copy of the City Council's Code on the Council's website on this link:

<http://democracy.york.gov.uk/ecSDDisplay.aspx?NAME=SD569&ID=569&RPID=6449972&sch=doc&cat=12830&path=12830>

or inspect a paper copy by contacting the Democratic Services team who are based at West Offices telephone number (01904) 551550.

Parish Council's Codes of Conduct can be inspected by contacting the Clerk to the relevant Parish Council.

The City Council is responsible for putting in place arrangements for dealing with complaints that a Councillor from either the City Council or a Parish Council within York, may have breached the Code of Conduct. In dealing with complaints the Council consults with Independent Persons who are not connected with the Council or Councillors and is appointed to deal with these matters.

2 Making a complaint

If you wish to make a complaint, please write or email to –

The Monitoring Officer
West Offices
Station Rise
York
YO1 6GA

Or –

monitoringofficer@york.gov.uk

The Monitoring Officer is a senior officer of the City Council who is responsible for administering the system in respect of complaints of Councillor misconduct.

So that we have all the information which we need to be able to process your complaint, we ask that you complete our complaint form, which can be downloaded from the authority's website and is available on request from the Democratic Services team at West Offices.

We ask you to provide your name and a contact address or email address, so that we can acknowledge receipt of your complaint and keep you informed of its progress. This also guards against malicious complaints. The Council does not normally investigate anonymous complaints, unless there is a clear public interest in doing so. The Monitoring Officer will normally tell the Councillor that a complaint has been received and who from. If you are concerned about your identity being revealed please advise the Monitoring Officer and he will discuss this with you before processing the complaint.

The Monitoring Officer will normally acknowledge receipt of your complaint within 5 working days of receiving it, and will keep you informed of the progress of your complaint.

3 Will your complaint be investigated?

The Monitoring Officer will review every complaint received and discuss it with the Council's Independent Persons. Independent Persons are not Councillors and have no connection with the Council. Though by law the Independent Person must be consulted when a complaint has been investigated the Council has decided that the Independent Persons will also be consulted by the Monitoring Officer when the complaint is received to provide an external oversight.

He will then normally take a decision as to whether the complaint merits formal investigation. This decision will usually be taken within 14 days of receipt of your complaint.

Before reaching a decision the Monitoring Officer may request further information from you or obtain information which is readily available to him such as notes of Council meetings. If the complaint relates to a Parish Councillor he may consult the Parish Council.

In appropriate cases, the Monitoring Officer may seek to resolve the complaint informally, without the need for a formal investigation. If a Councillor makes a reasonable offer to settle a complaint informally, but you are not willing to accept that offer, the Monitoring Officer will take

account of this in deciding whether the complaint merits formal investigation.

The Monitoring Officer will advise you whether he intends to investigate your complaint. If he decides not to he will explain why. There is no right of appeal against this decision but the Monitoring Officer reports his decisions to the Council's Joint Standards Committee so there is oversight of how he deals with these matters.

If there is evidence that a crime may have been committed the Monitoring Officer has the power to call in the Police and other regulatory agencies.

Occasionally the Monitoring Officer may decide that the decision as to whether a complaint should be investigated should be made by members of the Joint Standards Committee. In this case a small Sub Committee of Councillors and Parish Councillors will meet to consider your complaint.

4 How is the investigation conducted?

If the Monitoring Officer decides that a complaint merits formal investigation, he will appoint an Investigating Officer. The Investigating Officer may be another officer of the authority, an officer of another authority or an external investigator.

The Investigating Officer will usually need to speak to you to discuss your complaint and may need to see relevant documents or interview other witnesses. You will be able to suggest what documents and which witnesses the Investigating Officer should consider seeing.

The Investigating Officer will also normally see the Councillor and provide him or her with the same opportunity to identify sources of evidence.

Unless the case is very straightforward, at the end of his/her investigation, the Investigating Officer will produce a draft report and share it with you and the Councillor concerned on a confidential basis. You will both then be able to identify any matter in that draft report which you disagree with or which you think needs more consideration.

The Investigating Officer will consider any comments you make before sending his/her final report to the Monitoring Officer.

5 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 may ask for further investigations to take place if he feels that is needed. He will consult the Independent Persons on the draft report and, if he is satisfied that the report is sufficient and accepts the finding, the Monitoring Officer will send a copy of the Investigating Officer's final report to you and the Councillor concerned. If the case concerns a Parish councillor he will also send a copy to the Parish Council concerned. That will be the end of the matter.

It is possible that the Monitoring Officer may accept that the report is complete but does not accept the Investigating Officer's judgment that there has been no breach of the Code. In that case the Monitoring Officer may refer the case for a hearing following the procedures set out below.

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

The Monitoring Officer may either send the matter for local hearing before the Hearings Panel or, after consulting the Independent Persons, seek local resolution.

6.1 Local Resolution

If the Monitoring Officer thinks that the complaint can reasonably be resolved without the need for a hearing he will consult with the Independent Persons and with you and seek to agree what you consider to be a fair resolution. It is important though that any resolution also helps to ensure higher standards of conduct for the future. Possible local resolutions might include the Councillor accepting that his/her conduct was unacceptable and offering an apology or a Councillor voluntarily giving up a position on a particular body. If the Councillor complies with the suggested resolution, the Monitoring Officer will report the matter to the Joint Standards Committee (and the Parish Council, where relevant) for information, but will take no further action.

In making a decision about whether a matter can be resolved locally the complainant's views will be given considerable weight but the decision rests with the Monitoring Officer.

6.2 Local Hearing

If the complaint is not resolved through the local resolution process, then the Monitoring Officer will report the Investigating Officer's report to the Hearings Panel. Ordinarily a sub-committee will be chaired by the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Joint Standards Committee and comprise of other members selected to demonstrate their impartiality.

The Hearings Panel will take evidence from yourself, the Investigating Officer and the Councillor as well as any witnesses. This is not a Court process but, in order to be fair to everyone, formalities are followed so that a proper decision can be reached.

The Hearings Panel is not bound to accept the Investigating Officer's finding that the Code has been breached but if it does conclude that the Councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, it will consider what action, if any, the Hearings Panel should take. In doing this, the Hearings Panel will consult the Independent Persons.

7 What action can the Hearings Panel take where a Councillor has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct?

The Hearings Panel may –

- 7.1 Censure the Councillor;
- 7.2 Formally report its findings to the City Council *or* Parish Council for information;
- 7.3 Recommend to the Councillor's Group Leader (or in the case of un-grouped Councillors, recommend to Council or to Committees) that he/she be removed from any or all Committees or Sub-Committees of the Council;
- 7.4 Recommend to the Leader of the Council that the Councillor be removed from the Cabinet, or removed from particular Portfolio responsibilities;

- 7.5 Recommend to Council that the Leader be removed from Office
- 7.6 Instruct the Monitoring Officer to *[or recommend that the Parish Council]* arrange training for the Councillor;
- 7.7 Remove *[or recommend to the Parish Council that the Councillor be removed]* from all outside appointments to which he/she has been appointed or nominated by the authority *[or by the Parish Council]*;
- 7.8 Withdraw *[or recommend to the Parish Council that it withdraws]* facilities provided to the Councillor by the Council, such as a computer, website and/or email and Internet access.

The Hearings Panel has no power to suspend or disqualify the Councillor or to withdraw Councillors' basic or special responsibility allowances. If the Panel decides to withdraw facilities from the Councillor it must ensure that the Councillor is not thereby prevented from undertaking his/her representative duties.

8 What happens after the hearing?

The Monitoring Officer will prepare a formal decision notice in consultation with the Chair of the Hearings Panel, and send a copy to you, to the Councillor and to the Parish Council. The decision notice will be available for public inspection.

9 Who are the Hearings Panel?

The Hearings Panel is a Sub-Committee of the Council's Joint Standards Committee. It normally consists of three Members.

The Independent Persons are invited to attend all meetings of the Hearings Panel and his/her views are sought and taken into consideration before the Hearings Panel takes any decision on whether the Councillor's conduct constitutes a failure to comply with the Code of conduct and as to any action to be taken following a finding of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct.

10 Appeals

There is no right of appeal for you as complainant or for a Councillor against a decision of the Monitoring Officer.

If a Hearings Panel finds that a Councillor has breached the Code then he/she has a right of appeal to a differently constituted Panel made up of members of the Joint Standards Committee.

If you feel that the authority has failed to deal with your complaint properly, you may make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman.