

Agenda

Standards Committee

Date:	Thursday, 21 March 2024 at 6:30 pm
Venue:	Town Hall, St Annes, FY8 1LW
Committee members:	Councillor Susan Fazackerley MBE (Chairman) Councillor Peter Collins (Vice-Chairman) Councillors Ellie Gaunt, Matthew Lee, Viv Willder.
Independent Persons:	Helen Broughton, Brian Horrocks, Peter Clements

	PROCEDURAL ITEMS:	PAGE
1	Declarations of Interest: Declarations of interest, and the responsibility for declaring the same, are matters for elected members. Members are able to obtain advice, in writing, in advance of meetings. This should only be sought via the Council's Monitoring Officer. However, it should be noted that no advice on interests sought less than one working day prior to any meeting will be provided.	1
2	Substitute Members: Details of any substitute members notified in accordance with council procedure rule 23(c).	1
	DECISION ITEMS:	
3	Standards Complaints Handling Procedure	3 - 10
	INFORMATION ITEMS:	
4	Issues Raised with the Monitoring Officer	11 - 12

Contact: Sharon Wadsworth - Telephone: (01253) 229286 – Email: democracy@fylde.gov.uk

The code of conduct for members can be found in the council's constitution at

<http://fylde.cmis.uk.com/fylde/DocumentsandInformation/PublicDocumentsandInformation.aspx>

© Fylde Council copyright 2024

You may re-use this document/publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium. You must re-use it accurately and not in a misleading context.

The material must be acknowledged as Fylde Council copyright and you must give the title of the source document/publication.

Where we have identified any third party copyright material you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This document/publication is also available on our website at www.fylde.gov.uk

Any enquiries regarding this document/publication should be sent to us at the Town Hall, St Annes Road West, St Annes FY8 1LW, or to listening@fylde.gov.uk.

DECISION ITEM

REPORT OF	MEETING	DATE	ITEM NO
MONITORING OFFICER	STANDARDS COMMITTEE	21 MARCH 2024	3
STANDARDS COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE			

PUBLIC ITEM

This item is for consideration in the public part of the meeting.

RELEVANT LEAD MEMBER

This item is within the remit of Lead Member for Finance and Resources (Councillor Ellie Gaunt).

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The Committee on Standards in Public Life conducted a review of ethical standards in local government in 2019. One of the recommendations was that a local authority should have straightforward and accessible guidance available on its website on how to make a complaint under the Code of Conduct and explain the process for complaints handling.

As a result, the former Audit and Standards Committee considered and adopted a complaint handling procedure which was drafted in consultation with a number of stakeholders.

This procedure has broadly worked well but both Fylde and Blackpool Monitoring Officers agreed that some refinements would be helpful. This was to give clarity on differing issues.

RECOVERABILITY

This decision is recoverable under section 7 of part 3 of the constitution.

RECOMMENDATION

1. To adopt the revised Standards Complaints Handling Procedure.

REPORT

1. The Committee on Standards in Public Life conducted a review of ethical standards in local government in 2019. One of the recommendations was that a local authority should have straightforward and accessible guidance available on its website on how to make a complaint under the Code of Conduct and explain the process for complaints handling.
2. As a result, the former Audit and Standards Committee considered and adopted a complaint handling procedure which had been drafted in consultation with a number of stakeholders.
3. This procedure has broadly worked well but both Fylde and Blackpool Monitoring Officers agreed that some refinements would be helpful. This was to give clarity on differing issues.

4. As a result a proposed revision is therefore attached for review and adoption. The draft has been prepared in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee, the three Independent Persons, and the Monitoring Officers and their respective Deputies from both Fylde and Blackpool Councils.
5. The revision has been undertaken with colleagues with Blackpool Council as the intention is to continue to have common procedures across both council's which will assist in the reciprocal work in this area. Both councils also share the three Independent Persons, and this provides an excellent shared resource to call upon in reviewing standards issues. Sharing of information and discussions on the standards framework between the two councils also provides a collegial approach to this area of work.

CORPORATE PRIORITIES	
Economy – To create a vibrant and healthy economy	✓
Environment – To deliver services customers expect	✓
Efficiency – By spending money in the most efficient way	✓
Tourism – To create a great place to live and visit	✓

IMPLICATIONS	
Finance	No direct implications
Legal	No direct implications
Community Safety	No direct implications
Human Rights and Equalities	No direct implications
Sustainability and Environmental Impact	No direct implications
Health & Safety and Risk Management	No direct implications

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS DECISIONS
26 th November 2020 – the former Audit and Standards Committee adopted a complaints handling procedure

BACKGROUND PAPERS REVELANT TO THIS ITEM		
Name of document	Date	Where available for inspection
Complaints handling procedure		web address

LEAD AUTHOR	CONTACT DETAILS	DATE
Tracy Manning	Tracy.manning@fylde.gov.uk Tel: 01253 658521	28 th February 2024

Attached documents.
Revised complaints handing procedure

LOCALISM ACT 2011

ARRANGEMENTS FOR DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE CONDUCT OF MEMBERS

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Section 28(6) of the act requires Fylde to put in place arrangements by which allegations of failure to comply with the code can be investigated and under which decisions on allegations can be made. This protocol sets out Fylde’s arrangements. It was originally adopted at the Audit and Standards Committee meeting held on 26 November 2020. This revision was approved by the Standards Committee on XXX.
- 1.2. This document should be read alongside the code. The code sets out the behaviours which councillors are expected to adhere to.
- 1.3. Words used in this protocol have the same meanings as in chapter 7 of part 1 of the act. In addition, the following words have the meanings given below:

Act	The Localism Act 2011
Chairman	The chairman of the committee
Code	The code dealing with the conduct of members adopted by Fylde or (as applicable) a relevant parish council under section 27(2) of the act
Committee	Fylde’s Standards Committee, or any other committee of Fylde to which the powers under chapter 7 of part 1 of the act have been delegated
Complainant	The person making an allegation
Fylde	Fylde Borough Council
Independent Person	A person appointed for the purposes of section 27(6) of the act
Investigating Officer	A person to whom the monitoring officer has referred an investigation under paragraph 7.1 of these arrangements, or the monitoring officer undertaking an investigation themselves
Member	A member or co-opted member
Monitoring Officer	Includes a deputy or any other officer carrying out the functions of the monitoring officer in their place if the monitoring officer has recused themselves under paragraph 3.4 below
Parish Council	A parish council for which Fylde is the principal authority
Qualifying Criteria	The criteria set out in paragraph 4.2 of these arrangements
Relevant Parish Council	Where an allegation concerns the conduct of the subject member as a parish councillor, the parish council concerned
Subject Member	The member whom the allegation is against

2. Independent Person

- 2.1. Fylde will normally appoint three independent persons. They will, where possible, be the same persons that Blackpool Borough Council has appointed as independent persons.

3. Receipt and consideration of allegations by the monitoring officer

- 3.1. The monitoring officer is the proper officer to receive allegations. They will normally acknowledge receipt of an allegation within 5 working days of receiving it. They will consider all allegations sent to them by post or by email. They may also, in their discretion, consider allegations made in writing received through another route.
- 3.2. The monitoring officer will consider allegations in two stages. First, they will decide if the allegation meets the qualifying criteria. Second, if it does, they will decide whether to refer it for investigation. These arrangements set out how the monitoring officer will make those decisions and other procedures for investigating and making decisions on allegations.

Draft for Standards Committee 21/3/24

- 3.3. No member or officer will participate in any stage of the arrangements if they have, or may have, any personal conflict of interest in the matter.
- 3.4. The monitoring officer will recuse themselves and ask their deputy or another senior Fylde officer or other appropriate person to carry out their functions in their place if it appears to them appropriate to do so.
- 3.5. If, exceptionally, the monitoring officer considers that a particular decision which would otherwise fall to be made by them ought to be made by the committee instead, they may refer it to the committee.

4. Qualifying criteria

- 4.1. The first decision that the monitoring officer will make will be whether the allegation meets the qualifying criteria.
- 4.2. An allegation will meet the qualifying criteria only if:
 - It is against one or more named members;
 - The subject member was in office at the time of the alleged conduct;
 - It does not concern conduct which has previously been the subject of another allegation which has already been disposed of; and
 - The complainant has supplied their name and contact details, except where the monitoring officer considers (after consulting an independent person) that the conduct complained of is of such gravity that it ought to be considered for investigation notwithstanding that the complainant has not supplied their name or contact details.
- 4.3. If the monitoring officer decides that the allegation does not meet the qualifying criteria, they will inform the complainant in writing (if possible) and close the matter.
- 4.4. If the monitoring officer decides that the allegation meets the qualifying criteria they will inform the subject member and any relevant parish council about the allegation and consider whether to refer it for investigation.

5. Confidentiality

- 5.1. If a complainant has asked for their identity to be withheld, this request will be considered by the monitoring officer when deciding whether the allegation meets the qualifying criteria.
- 5.2. The monitoring officer will only agree to withhold the identity of the complainant where they consider that there are exceptional circumstances which outweigh the considerations of fairness and natural justice which would normally support the subject member being told who has complained about them. Such circumstances may include the complainant's belief, on reasonable grounds, that they or any witness may be at risk of physical emotional or psychological harm, or that their employment may be jeopardised.
- 5.3. If the monitoring officer decides to refuse a request by a complainant for confidentiality, they will offer the complainant the option to withdraw the complaint, rather than proceed with their identity being disclosed.

6. Decision whether to refer an allegation that meets the qualifying criteria for investigation

- 6.1. The monitoring officer will confer with an independent person before making the decision whether to refer an allegation that meets the qualifying criteria for investigation. The monitoring officer may also:
 - obtain additional factual information;
 - request information from the subject member;
 - seek the views of any relevant parish council; and
 - take steps to facilitate an informal resolution of the matter.
- 6.2. The monitoring officer will only refer a matter for investigation if it appears to them that:
 - The alleged conduct would be likely to be a breach of the code;
 - The subject member was acting in their official capacity at the time of the alleged misconduct;

Draft for Standards Committee 21/3/24

- The allegation does not concern 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;
 - An investigation would be a proportionate use of public resources and in the public interest;
 - The allegation is not motivated principally by personal animosity, political considerations or as a response to a previous complaint;
 - The alleged misconduct would not be more appropriately addressed by the subject member receiving training or mentoring;
 - The subject member is not an inexperienced member who has failed to comply with the code of conduct because of inexperience; and
 - Having regard to any steps taken to facilitate an informal resolution, the matter is unlikely to be capable of being resolved informally.
- 6.3. If the monitoring officer decides to refer an allegation for investigation, they will give notice of the referral to the complainant, the subject member and any relevant parish council. The notice will contain a brief outline of the allegation and of the reasons for the decision to refer it for investigation. It will outline that the subject member should keep the matter confidential but may confer with an independent person (other than the one the monitoring officer conferred with). The notice will be copied to the independent persons. Inappropriate sharing of information could compromise the integrity of the complaints process.
- 6.4. The monitoring officer will make any reasonable and appropriate pastoral support available on request to the subject member during the investigation and hearing process.

7. Investigation

- 7.1. If the monitoring officer decides to refer an allegation for investigation, they may investigate the allegation themselves, or refer it to another Fylde officer, an officer of another council, or an external investigator. In deciding who should carry out the investigation, the monitoring officer will have regard to the reciprocal arrangements between Fylde and Blackpool Council, the complexity and sensitivity of the allegation and the need for investigations to be carried out economically and expeditiously.
- 7.2. The investigating officer will investigate the allegation independently and objectively, but will follow any instructions issued by the monitoring officer directed to ensuring proportionality and the cost-effective use of council resources.
- 7.3. The investigating officer will interview those individuals they feel could assist in the investigation including the subject member. The format of any interview will be at the discretion of the investigating officer. The investigating officer will make such arrangements as they consider appropriate for a record of the interview to be taken.
- 7.4. Where interviews are conducted in person, the interviewee may be accompanied by one companion for support. If the interview is remote, a companion may still attend to provide support. Any accompanying companion should allow the interviewee to answer questions themselves without interference.
- 7.5. The subject member is also invited to engage with an independent person not previously consulted by the monitoring officer for further pastoral support. This is in a supportive role as opposed to engaging in the merits of the case or otherwise.
- 7.6. After the investigating officer has completed the investigation, they will prepare a report and submit it, together with any supporting papers, to the monitoring officer. The report should set out the investigating officer's findings of fact, conclusions on the allegation and the reasons for them, but should not itself include or annex statements or interview records. Any interview record, recordings or notes of an interview will, subject to any legal duty to the contrary, remain confidential and will only be shared with the investigating officer and the monitoring officer.
- 7.7. The monitoring officer will give a copy of the investigators report to an independent person as soon as possible after receiving it.

Draft for Standards Committee 21/3/24

7.8. If the monitoring officer, following consultation with an independent person, is not satisfied that the investigation has been conducted satisfactorily, they may ask the investigating officer to reconsider their report and conclusion.

8. Investigating Officer finding of insufficient evidence of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct

8.1. If the investigating officer's report finds no breach of the code of conduct, the monitoring officer will (unless they consider that the investigation has not been conducted satisfactorily), make a confirmation decision to confirm the finding of no failure to comply with the code.

8.2. The monitoring officer will write to the complainant, the subject member and any relevant parish council, with a copy of the confirmation decision and the monitoring officer may, at their discretion, provide to any or all of them a copy of the investigating officer's report.

9. Local Resolution Process following investigation

9.1. Following completion of the investigation, the monitoring officer will review the findings with the independent person. If a breach of code is found and accepted, the monitoring officer will summarise the relevant parts of the report to the complainant, subject member, and any relevant parish council.

9.2. The monitoring officer and independent person will initially attempt resolution through consultation with the complainant and subject member. Potential resolutions include an apology, training, or other remedial actions from the subject member.

9.3. If a resolution is agreed to by the subject member, the monitoring officer will report the outcome to the committee and parish council, but will take no further action.

9.4. If no reasonable resolution can be reached, the monitoring officer will refer the matter to the committee for a formal hearing and determination. This will be done without further consultation with the complainant or subject member.

10. Determination by the Standards Committee

10.1. Unless the committee decides otherwise, the committee will follow the procedure in the appendix when determining a complaint.

10.2. The committee has delegated authority to determine whether the subject member has failed to comply with the code and, if so, whether to apply a sanction. Where it finds a failure to comply with the code, the committee will determine what sanction, if any, to impose in order to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

10.3. Sanctions which may be considered include reporting its findings to full council or to the relevant parish council for information. Other sanctions that may be imposed include:

10.3.1 Publishing its findings and the investigator's report;

10.3.2 Recommending to the subject 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;

10.3.3 Recommending to the relevant group leader that the subject member be removed from a position of special responsibility if relevant;

10.3.4 Instructing the monitoring officer to arrange training for the subject member;

10.3.5 Removing the subject member from outside body appointments;

10.3.6 Withdrawing facilities provided to the member by the council, such as a computer, website and/or email and Internet access; or

10.3.7 Excluding 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.

Where the breach of the code of conduct took place in the member's capacity as a parish councillor, the committee may recommend any of the sanctions to the relevant parish council.

APPENDIX

DETERMINATION BY THE COMMITTEE

BEFORE THE MEETING

- A1 The monitoring officer will ensure that:
- i. the investigating officer and one independent person (other than an independent person who has been consulted by the subject member) will be at the meeting;
 - ii. the subject member has been informed of their right to make written or oral representations to the meeting, and has had adequate time to seek clarification on their understanding on matters; and
 - iii. the investigating officer's report, the observations of the monitoring officer and any written representations made by the subject member at least ten working days before the meeting are included in the agenda for the meeting, and that the agenda has been sent to committee members in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions.
- A2 Committee members will read the investigating officer's report and any written representations made by or on behalf of the subject member.
- A3 The chairman will (after consulting committee members if they feel it appropriate to do so) inform the monitoring officer of any matters arising out of the investigating officer's report on which they feel that the committee might welcome explanation, clarification or more information, and the monitoring officer will inform the investigating officer so they can be prepared to address those matters.

DURING THE MEETING

- B1 The meeting will take place in public unless the necessary resolution is agreed by the committee to exclude the public.
- B2 The committee may take legal or procedural advice (from both the monitoring officer and the head of governance or other legal advisor) at any time. The committee may adjourn while the advice is being prepared.
- B3 While they are present, the subject member may be accompanied or represented by any person.
- B4 Except as mentioned in paragraph B5, no person should participate in the meeting if they have been interviewed as part of the investigation, or if they are, or have a close association with, the complainant, the subject member, the investigating officer, or any person representing or accompanying the subject member.
- B5 The subject member (and anyone representing them) and the investigating officer may be present at the meeting until the subject member has made their representations, and may return to the meeting when invited to do so to hear the committee's decision. They may only participate in the meeting when invited to do so in accordance with this procedure.

HEARING PROCEDURE

- C1 The chairman opens the meeting, introduces the persons who will participate and briefly explains the procedure.
- C2 The investigating officer presents any points of explanation or clarification, or any additional information, that they have been asked by the chairman to address.
- C3 The independent person is invited to make observations to the committee (or, if the independent person has submitted written observations, those observations are brought to the attention of the committee).
- C4 Committee members have the opportunity to ask the investigating officer questions about their report.
- C5 The chairman will draw the attention of the committee to any written representations made by or on behalf of the subject member. The subject member (or any person acting on their behalf) may address the committee up to a time limit of fifteen minutes to amplify any written submissions.

Draft for Standards Committee 21/3/24

- C6 The committee, along with a governance officer, will retire and deliberate in private in order to reach its decisions on (i) whether it finds that the subject member has been in breach of the code and (ii) if so, what, if any, sanction to apply to the subject member. During its deliberations, the committee may ask additional questions for clarification of the independent person, monitoring officer or legal advisor.
- C7 The investigating officer and the subject member will be given the opportunity to return whilst the chairman informs all parties of the committee's decision. The committee's decision will be final.
- C8 The committee will publish a record of its decision on Fylde's webpages. The record will use the template attached and will include the following:
- If the committee disagrees with the investigating officer's conclusion that the subject member has been in breach of the code, it will include a summary of the reasons for its disagreement.
 - If the committee finds that the subject member has been in breach of the code and imposes a sanction, it will include a summary of its reasons for imposing that sanction.
 - If the committee finds the subject member has been in breach of the code and imposes no sanction, it will include a summary of its reasons for not imposing a sanction

INFORMATION ITEM

REPORT OF	MEETING	DATE	ITEM NO
MONITORING OFFICER	STANDARDS COMMITTEE	21 MARCH 2024	4
ISSUES RAISED WITH THE MONITORING OFFICER			

PUBLIC ITEM

This item is for consideration in the public part of the meeting.

SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

The Monitoring Officer has been appointed as Proper Officer to receive allegations of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct regarding councillors, town and parish councillors and co-opted members. The Monitoring Officer has delegated authority, after consultation with the 'Independent Person', to determine whether an allegation of members' misconduct requires investigation and arrange as such an investigation.

The Monitoring Officer should seek resolution of complaints without formal investigation wherever practicable and she has the discretion to refer matters to the Standards Committee where she feels it is inappropriate for her to take a decision on a referral for investigation. She should also periodically prepare reports for the Standards Committee on the discharge of this function. This report fulfils this by keeping members informed as of the number and general nature of matters brought to her attention.

It is a point of clarification that there are several stages in dealing with allegations of member misconduct. Some matters are brought to the attention of the Monitoring Officer without merit. In other instances where a breach may have been considered to arise, and in line with agreed procedures, wherever possible the Monitoring Officer should seek the resolution of complaints without the need for formal investigation.

SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Monitoring Officer.

WHY IS THIS INFORMATION BEING GIVEN TO THE COMMITTEE?

Periodic reports to the Standards Committee are brought to ensure that members of the Standards Committee have an overview of the volume and nature of complaints arising.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact Tracy Manning, Monitoring Officer Tel: 01253 658521

INFORMATION

1. The tables below shows the nature of the allegations of misconduct made since May 2023 to date. The nature of complaints can be wide-ranging in subject matter and alleged breaches refer to varying aspects of the differing Codes of Conduct in place. However, they can be broadly summarised as either being related to failure to treat others with respect, bringing the authority into disrepute or interest related matters.

PARISH MATTERS	Number Received	Closed	Resolved Informally	Referred for Investigation
Failure to treat others with respect	7	3	1	3
Bringing the authority into disrepute	1	1	0	0
Interests	0	0	0	0

BOROUGH MATTERS	Number Received	Closed	Resolved Informally	Referred for Investigation
Failure to treat others with respect	0	0	0	0
Bringing office or council into disrepute	4	4	0	0
Interests	2	1	0	0