

Meeting:	Standards Panel
Meeting date:	12 January 2022
Title of report	Sampling of monitoring officer resolution decisions between 1 May 2020 and 30 April 2021
Report by:	Monitoring officer

Classification

Open – Report

Appendices 1 to 31 are exempt by virtue of the paragraph(s) of the Access to Information Procedure Rules set out in the constitution pursuant to Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended.

- 1 Information related to any individual

And the public interest in maintaining this exemption whilst the matter is being determined by the panel outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Key Decision

This is not an executive decision.

Wards Affected

All Wards

Purpose and summary

To review a sample of monitoring officer resolution decisions between 1 May 2020 to 30 April 2021

Recommendation

THAT

- (a) **The standards panel provide comments on the level of assurance obtained from sampling, to be reported in the annual code of conduct complaints report by the monitoring officer**

Alternative Options

1. There are no alternative options as it is requirement of the Herefordshire Council constitution that the Standards Panel undertake a sample of decisions taken under monitoring officer resolution.

Key Considerations

2. In accordance with the Localism Act 2011 (“The Act”) this council must have procedures in place to deal with complaints about member conduct. It is entirely for the council to decide the details of those procedures, but they must appoint at least one Independent Person whose views are to be taken into account before making a decision on a complaint that they have decided to investigate.
3. The Council’s arrangements since the introduction of the Act involves decision making by the monitoring officer.
4. As part of the amendments to the constitution agreed at Council on 25 May 2018, an annual sample review of decisions made by the monitoring officer under the code of conduct complaints process was approved as a mechanism for maintaining high standards of conduct by members and ensuring that the council’s arrangements are appropriate.
5. At the audit and governance committee meeting on 30 July 2018, it was requested that the review takes place prior to its meeting in November 2018 so that the views of the panel could be taken into account as part of the annual report on the code of conduct.
6. At the Standards Panel meeting held on 16 October 2018, the following criteria for identifying a sample of complaint to review was approved as follows:
 - a) All complaints which had resulted in dissatisfaction from the subject member or the complainant;
 - b) All complaints handled solely by the monitoring officer without any view from the independent person;
 - c) All complaints which form part of a cluster of complaints which relate either to an individual or an individual parish council;
 - d) All complaints which have been made against members of the cabinet or those acting in support to the cabinet;
 - e) All complaints that have been rejected as out of the scope of the complaints procedure; and
 - f) A random sample of complaints from each of the following categories:
 - I. Rejected under the initial assessment process – with the views of the independent person sought
 - II. Rejected under the initial assessment process – without the views of the independent person sought
 - III. Monitoring officer resolution with a breach of the code of conduct
 - IV. Monitoring officer resolution without a breach of the conduct
 - V. Discontinued with no finding as the subject member has resigned and it is not in the public interest to continue with the complaint.
7. During the period, 1 May 2020 to 30 April 2021, there were 42 complaints received. As at the date of publication, there were 17 complaints still open and as such these have not been included within this sampling process. Three appeals are yet to be heard.
8. The panel should note that during the year there was an issue with timeliness of dealing with complaints. This was due to a combination of the pandemic and staff resource being moved onto other high priority work areas. Steps have been taken to resolve this issue and a Standards Panel is in the process of being set up for 28 January 2022 to undertake a review of the first 6 months of 2021/22 complaints dealt

with.

9. For each of the categories in paragraph 6 above, the following numbers of complaints have been identified:
 - a) Dissatisfaction from the subject member or complainant: 3 using appeal received as the criteria
 - b) Complaints handled solely by the monitoring officer: None
 - c) Cluster of complaints which relate either to an individual or an individual parish: 5 which consists complaints against various councillors in one parish council.
 - d) Complaints against members of the cabinet or those acting in support to the cabinet: 3
 - e) All rejected complaints: 16
 - f) Random sample of complaints with a monitoring officer resolution of breach or not breach of the code: 6
10. In relation to categories in f, many of these are duplicated (complaints in category (i) and (v) are contained in (e) and (ii) is contained in (b)). The random sample therefore contains only complaints with a monitoring officer resolution of breach or no breach of the code.
11. Appendix one of the pack lists the complaints under each of the criteria.
12. Appendices 2 to 31, contains the details of each of the 30 complaints namely the original complaint, the subject members' comments and the decision letter or notice.
13. The panel will have to consider how to undertake their review in assessing the appropriateness of the decision making process, points to consider may include:
 - a) The timeliness of the decision making
 - b) The consistency of the decisions
 - c) The sanctions which were recommended.

Community Impact

14. Having an effective process for dealing with code of conduct complaints upholds principle A and G of the code of corporate governance by ensuring that councillors behave with integrity and that councillors are accountable for their actions. This should provide reassurance to the community that councillors are behaving in the best interests of their communities and that appropriate action is being taken to ensure that the code is being upheld. By undertaking an annual sample of complaints determined under monitoring officer resolution should provide assurance that all code of conduct complaints are being dealt with in a consistent manner.

Equality duty

11. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:-

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

12. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. By doing this sampling we can pick up on and eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation if complainants are making false accusations which go against the act

Resource implications

13. There are no resource implications arising as a result of this report.

Legal Implications

14. There are no legal implications arising as a result of this report.

Risk Management

16. There are no risks arising directly from the report which is for information.
Maintaining high standards of conduct mitigates risks to the reputation of the council.

Consultees

17. None.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 List of all complaints to be sampled
Appendices 2 to 31 Sample complaints

Background Papers

None