

## **Standards Committee**

**Membership**                      **8 Members - broadly reflecting the current political balance: 5 Conservative (to include at least one Cabinet member), Chair and Vice chair of O&S (assuming that these are appointments from within opposition groups) and 1 Member from a political group not represented above; plus 2 non-voting Parish Council Representatives**

### **Terms of Reference**

To discharge the functions of the Council relating to Standards as follows, including those contained in Part 1, Chapter 7 of the Localism Act 2011 (other than those which are reserved to Council by law):

1. To promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members of the Borough Council and to make recommendations to Council on improving standards.
2. To advise and assist Town and Parish Councils and Town and Parish Councillors to observe their respective codes of conduct and to maintain high standards of conduct and to make recommendations to Town and Parish Councils on improving standards.
3. To advise the Borough Council on the adoption of or revisions to its Code of Conduct.
4. To advise, train or arrange to train Members, Co-opted Members and Town and Parish Councillors on matters relating to the Code of Conduct.
5. To monitor and assess the operation and effectiveness of the Code of Conduct and to review and manage the Arrangements for dealing with Code of Conduct Complaints.
6. To advise on local ethical governance protocols and procedures.
7. To monitor and review the procedures for the Register of Members' Interests and declaring gifts and hospitality.
8. To receive periodic reports from the Monitoring Officer on the number and nature of complaints received and action taken as a result in consultation with the Independent Person.

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9. To receive an annual report on the Borough Council's ethical governance arrangements.
10. To grant dispensations pursuant to S33(2) of the Localism Act 2011 where:
  - (iii) without the dispensation, the representation of different political groups on the body transacting the business would be so upset as to alter the outcome of any vote on the matter.
  - (iv) that the authority considers that the dispensation is in the interests of persons living in its area; or
  - (v) where the Committee considers that it is otherwise appropriate to grant a dispensation.
11. Oversight of the Constitution in relation to ethical matters and overview of complaints handling and Ombudsman investigations where probity issues are raised.
12. Determination of written complaints to any Statutory Officer about alleged breaches of Local Protocols adopted by the Council.
13. The consideration of applications received from any officers of the Authority for exemption from political restriction under Section 1 and 2 of the Local Government Act 1989 in respect of the post held by that Officer and can direct the Authority that the post shall not be considered to be a politically restricted post and that the post be removed from the list maintained by the Authority under Section 2(2) of the Act.

**Notes**

- (i) The procedure rules applying to Committee meetings also apply to meetings of the Standards Committee except where otherwise required in order to comply with adopted procedures or statutory requirements.
- (ii) The Access to Information Procedure Rules apply to meetings of the Committee but not to Hearing Panels.

**Quorum:**

One quarter of the total membership.

## **Arrangements For Dealing With Code Of Conduct Complaints Under The Localism Act 2011**

### **1. Context**

- 1.1 These Arrangements are made under section 28 of the Localism Act 2011. They set out the process that the Borough Council has adopted for dealing with complaints that an elected or co-opted member or parish/town councillor has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.

### **2. Interpretation**

- 2.1 'Borough Council' means the Ashford Borough Council.
- 2.2 'Code of Conduct' means the Code of Conduct, which the Borough Council has adopted under section 27(2) of the Localism Act 2011.
- 2.3 'Complainant' means a person who has submitted a complaint in accordance with these Arrangements alleging that a Subject Member has breached the Code of Conduct.
- 2.4 'Disclosable Pecuniary Interest' means those disclosable pecuniary interests that meet the definition prescribed by regulations (as amended from time to time) as set out in Annex 2 to the Code of Conduct.
- 2.5 'Hearing Panel' means the panel appointed by the Borough Council to determine the outcome of any complaint alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct by a Subject Member in accordance with these Arrangements.
- 2.6 'Independent Person' means a person or persons appointed by the Borough Council under section 28(7) of the Localism Act 2011:
- (a) whose views must be sought and taken into account by the Borough Council before a decision is made on any complaint alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct by a Subject Member;
  - (b) who may be consulted by the Subject Member about the complaint.
- 2.7 'Investigating Officer' means the person appointed by the Monitoring Officer to undertake a formal investigation of a complaint alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct by a Subject Member. The Investigating Officer may be another senior officer of the Borough Council, an officer of another authority or an external investigator.

- 2.8 'Monitoring Officer' is a senior officer of the Borough Council who has statutory responsibility for maintaining the Register of Members' Interests and who is responsible for administering the arrangements for dealing with any complaint alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct by a Subject Member. It includes any other officer of the Borough Council nominated by the Monitoring Officer to act on their behalf.
- 2.9 'Parish Council' means the relevant parish/town council within the Borough of Ashford.
- 2.10 'Parties' means the Complainant, Subject Member and the Investigating Officer, as appropriate.
- 2.11 'Subject Member' means an elected member or co-opted member of the Borough Council or Parish Council against whom a complaint has been made alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct.

### **3. Appointment of Independent Person**

- 3.1 The Borough Council will appoint the Independent Person (and any substitute) in accordance with the requirements of section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 upon such terms as to remuneration and expenses as may be determined by the Borough Council from time to time.
- 3.2 The Independent Person (and any substitute) will be treated as if they were a member of the Borough Council for the purposes of the Borough Council's arrangements for indemnifying and insuring its Members.

### **4. Making a complaint**

- 4.1 A complaint alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct by a Subject Member must be made in writing and addressed to the Monitoring Officer using the Complaint Form. Complainants who find difficulty in making their complaint in writing (e.g. because of a disability), will be offered assistance.
- 4.2 The Subject Member will normally be informed of the identity of the Complainant and details of the complaint made against them, but the Complainant's identity and/or details of their complaint may be withheld at the Complainant's request if it appears to the Monitoring Officer that there are sound reasons for granting such a request (refer to paragraph 5 of Annex 1 to these Arrangements).
- 4.3 The Monitoring Officer will normally acknowledge receipt of a complaint within 15 working days of receiving it. At the same time (and subject to para. 4.2 above), the Monitoring Officer will send a copy of the

complaint to the Subject Member in accordance with paragraph 2 of Annex 1 to these Arrangements.

## **5. Criminal conduct**

5.1 In accordance with section 34 of the Localism Act 2011, it is a criminal offence if, without reasonable excuse, you:

- (a) fail to notify the Monitoring Officer of a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest before the end of 28 days beginning with the day you become, or are re-elected or re-appointed, a Member or Co-opted Member of the Authority;
- (b) fail to notify the Monitoring Officer of a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest before the end of 28 days beginning with the day you become aware of it, where you are acting alone in the course of discharging a function of the Authority (including making a decision in relation to the matter) and the interest is not already registered or is not the subject of a pending notification to the Monitoring Officer;
- (c) fail to disclose a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest at a meeting, where such interest has not already been registered or notified to the Monitoring Officer;
- (d) fail to notify the Monitoring Officer of a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest before the end of 28 days beginning with the day you disclose it at a meeting, where such interest has not already been registered or notified to the Monitoring Officer;
- (e) take part in discussions or votes at meetings that relate to the Disclosable Pecuniary Interest, unless a dispensation has been granted;
- (f) knowingly or recklessly provide false or misleading information in any of the above disclosures or notifications.

5.2 Where a complaint against a Subject Member relates to conduct of a criminal nature referred to above, the Monitoring Officer will deal with the complaint in accordance with paragraph 4(4) of Annex 1 to these Arrangements.

## **6. Anonymous complaints**

6.1 Complainants must provide their full name and address. An anonymous complaint will only be accepted by the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Independent Person, providing it is accompanied by corroborating evidence that indicates to the Monitoring Officer that it is in the public interest to accept the complaint.

## **7. Role of Independent Person**

7.1 The Independent Person must be consulted and have their views taken into account before the Authority makes a finding as to whether a Member has failed to comply with the Code or decides on action to be taken in respect of that Member. At any other stage of the complaints process under these Arrangements, the Independent Person may be consulted by the Monitoring Officer and/or the Subject Member.

## **8. Preliminary tests**

8.1 The Monitoring Officer will, in consultation with the Independent Person, put the complaint through a number of preliminary tests, in accordance with paragraph 1 of Annex 1 to these Arrangements.

8.2 In the event that the Independent Person is unavailable or unable to act, the time limits specified in paragraph 1 of Annex 1 to these Arrangements will be extended.

## **9. Informal resolution**

9.1 The Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, may consider that the complaint can be resolved informally at any stage in accordance with paragraph 6 of Annex 1 to these Arrangements (whether without the need for an investigation or before or after an investigation has been commenced or concluded).

## **10. Investigation**

10.1 If the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, decides that the complaint merits formal investigation, they will, normally within 30 working days of receiving it, appoint an Investigating Officer to undertake the investigation, and inform the Parties of the appointment.

10.2 The Investigating Officer will investigate the complaint in accordance with Annex 2 to these Arrangements.

## **11. Hearing**

11.1 If the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, considers that informal resolution is not appropriate or is unlikely to be achieved, then they will convene a meeting of the Hearing Panel to determine the outcome of the complaint in accordance with Annex 3 to these Arrangements.

**12. Sanctions**

- 12.1 Where a Subject Member has been found by the Hearing Panel to have breached the Code of Conduct, the Hearing Panel may apply any one or more sanctions in accordance with paragraph 4 of Annex 3 to these Arrangements.

**13. Appeal**

- 13.1 There is no right of appeal for the Complainant or the Subject Member against decisions of either the Monitoring Officer or the Hearing Panel.

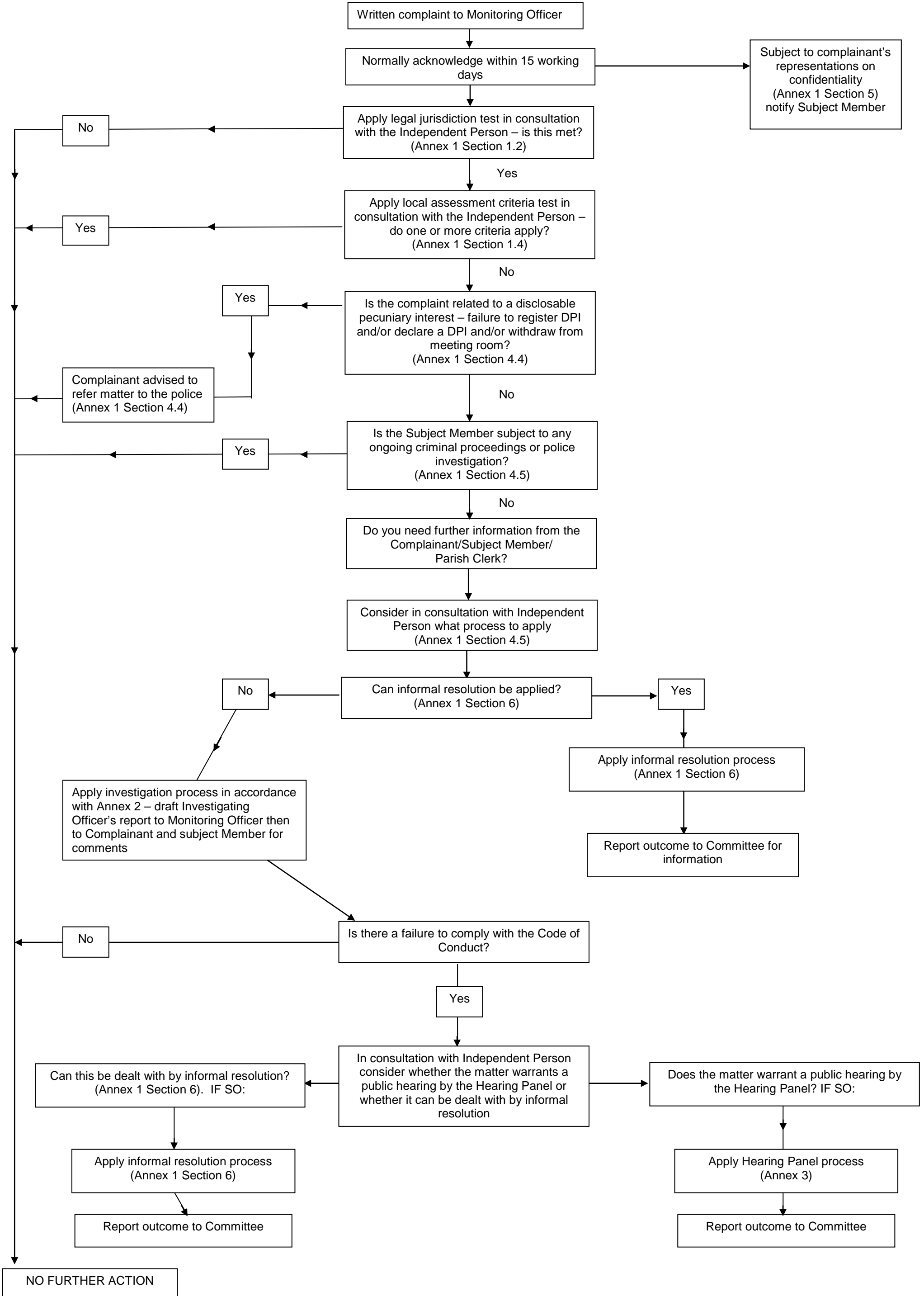
**14. Revision of these Arrangements**

- 14.1 The Borough Council may by resolution agree to amend these Arrangements and has delegated to the Monitoring Officer and the Hearing Panel the right to depart from these Arrangements, where considered expedient to do so in order to secure the effective and fair consideration of any matter.

**15. Flowchart**

- 15.1 The flowchart attached summarises the various steps taken and procedural stages following receipt of a complaint. In the event that there is a conflict between the flowchart and the text of these Arrangements, the latter will prevail.

**Procedure on Receipt of a Complaint**





**Annex 1**

## **Procedure on Receipt of a Complaint**

### **1. Preliminary tests**

1.1 The complaint will be assessed by the Monitoring Officer alone or in consultation with the Independent Person against the legal jurisdiction test in paragraph 1.2 and, if applicable, the local assessment criteria test in paragraph 1.4 below.

#### **1.2 Legal jurisdiction criteria test:**

- (a) Did the alleged conduct occur before the adoption of the Code of Conduct?
- (b) Was the person complained of a member of the Borough Council or Parish Council at the time of the alleged conduct?
- (c) Was the person complained of acting in an official capacity at the time of the alleged conduct?
- (d) Did the alleged conduct occur when the person complained of was acting as a member of another authority?
- (e) If the facts could be established as a matter of evidence, could the alleged conduct be capable of a breach of the Code of Conduct?
- (f) The complaint is about dissatisfaction with the Borough Council's or Parish Council's decisions, policies and priorities, etc.

1.3 If the complaint fails one or more of the jurisdiction tests, no further action will be taken by the Monitoring Officer and the complaint will be rejected. The Complainant will be notified accordingly with reasons, normally within 30 working days of receipt of the complaint by the Monitoring Officer. There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer's decision.

#### **1.4 Local assessment criteria test:**

If the complaint satisfies the jurisdiction test, the Monitoring Officer will then apply the following local assessment criteria test:

- (a) The complaint is a 'repeat complaint', unless supported by new or further evidence substantiating or indicating that the complaint is exceptionally serious or significant;

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- (b) The complaint is anonymous, unless supported by independent documentary evidence substantiating or indicating that the complaint is exceptionally serious or significant;
  - (c) No or insufficient information/evidence to substantiate the complaint has been submitted by the Complainant;
  - (d) The complaint is malicious, trivial, politically motivated or ‘tit-for-tat’;
  - (e) The Complainant is unreasonably persistent, malicious and/or vexatious;
  - (f) The alleged misconduct happened more than 3 months ago;
  - (g) The complaint is relatively minor and/or dealing with the complaint would have a disproportionate effect on both public money and officers’ and Members’ time;
  - (h) The circumstances have changed so much that there would be little benefit arising from an investigation or other action;
  - (i) The complaint has been the subject of an investigation or other action and there is nothing more to be gained by further action being taken;
  - (j) The complaint is such that it is unlikely that an investigation will be able to come to a firm conclusion on the matter, e.g. where there is no firm evidence on the matter;
  - (k) The complaint is about a deceased person;
  - (l) The complaint is about a person who is no longer a Borough Councillor or Parish Councillor or Co-opted Member.
- 1.5 If one or more of the local assessment criteria applies to the complaint, no further action will be taken by the Monitoring Officer and the complaint will be rejected. The Complainant will be notified accordingly with reasons, normally within 30 working days of receipt of the complaint by the Monitoring Officer. There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer’s decision.
- 2. Notification of complaint to Subject Member**
- 2.1 Subject to any representations from the Complainant on confidentiality (see paragraph 5 below), the Monitoring Officer will notify the Subject Member [and, if applicable, the Parish Clerk] of the complaint.
- 2.2 The Monitoring Officer may invite the Subject Member [and, if applicable, the Parish Clerk] to submit initial views on the complaint

which will be taken into account by the Monitoring Officer when they decide how to deal with the complaint (see paragraph 4 below).

**3. Asking for additional information**

- 3.1 The Monitoring Officer may ask the Complainant and the Subject Member [and, if applicable, the Parish Clerk] for additional information before deciding how to deal with the complaint.

**4. What process to apply - informal resolution or investigation and/or no action?**

- 4.1 The Monitoring Officer may at any stage (whether without the need for an investigation or before or after the commencement or conclusion of an investigation) seek to resolve the complaint informally in accordance with paragraph 6 below. Where the Subject Member or the Monitoring Officer make a reasonable offer of informal resolution, but the Complainant is not willing to accept this offer, the Monitoring Officer will take account of this in deciding whether the complaint merits formal investigation.
- 4.2 The Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Independent Person may refer the complaint for investigation when:
- (a) it is serious enough, if proven, to justify the range of sanctions available to the Standards Committee (see paragraph 4 of Annex 3 to these Arrangements);
  - (b) the Subject Member's behaviour is part of a continuing pattern of less serious misconduct that is unreasonably disrupting the business of the Borough (or Parish) Council and there is no other avenue left to deal with it short of investigation. In considering this, the Monitoring Officer may take into account the time that has passed since the alleged conduct occurred.
- 4.3 Where the complaint is referred for investigation, the Monitoring Officer will appoint an Investigating Officer who will conduct the investigation in accordance with the procedure at Annex 2 to these Arrangements.
- 4.4 If the complaint identifies potential criminal conduct or potential breach of other regulations by the Subject Member or any other person, the Complainant will be advised by the Monitoring Officer to report the complaint to the police or other prosecuting or regulatory authority. Alternatively the Monitoring Officer will consider the complaint against the legal jurisdiction criteria test and if the complaint passes that test he may pass the complaint to the police. Where a complainant has been advised to refer a matter to the police or the Monitoring Officer has referred the matter to the police the complaints process under these Arrangements will be suspended, pending a decision/action by the

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police or other prosecuting or regulatory authority. Where the police or other prosecuting or regulatory authority decide to take no action on the complaint, the Monitoring Officer will lift the suspension and, in consultation with the Independent Person, will apply the local assessment criteria test in paragraph 1.4 above.

- 4.5 The Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Independent Person, will take no action on the complaint when one or more of the following apply:
- (a) on-going criminal proceedings or a police investigation into the Subject Member's conduct or where the complaint is suspended in accordance with paragraph 4.4 above;
  - (b) investigation cannot be proceeded with, without investigating similar alleged conduct or needing to come to conclusions of fact about events which are also the subject of some other investigation or court proceedings;
  - (c) the investigation might prejudice another investigation or court proceedings;
  - (d) genuine long term (3 months or more) unavailability of a key party;
  - (e) serious illness of a key party.
- 4.6 Within 60 working days of receipt of the complaint, the Monitoring Officer will notify the Complainant, Subject Member [and, if applicable, the Parish Clerk] of their decision and reasons for applying one of the following processes in the format of the Decision Notice template (appended to this in Annex 2):
- (a) not to refer the complaint for investigation; or
  - (b) to refer the complaint for investigation; or
  - (c) to apply the informal resolution process either before or after an investigation; or
  - (d) to refer the complaint to the relevant political group leader for action.
- 4.7 The decision notice will be published on the Borough Council's website. There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer's decision. However, in the event that the Complainant submits additional relevant information, the Monitoring Officer will consider and decide if the matter warrants further consideration under these Arrangements, in which case it shall be treated as a fresh complaint.

## **5. Confidentiality**

- 5.1 If the Complainant has asked for their identity to be withheld, this request will be considered by the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Independent Person when they initially assess the complaint (see paragraph 1 above).
- 5.2 As a matter of fairness and natural justice, the Subject Member will usually be told who the Complainant is and will also receive details of the complaint. However, in exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate to keep the Complainant's identity confidential or not disclose details of the complaint to the Subject Member during the early stages of an investigation. The Monitoring Officer may withhold the Complainant's identity and/or details of the complaint if they are satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that the Complainant or any other person (e.g. a witness):
- (a) is either vulnerable or at risk of threat, harm or reprisal;
  - (b) may suffer intimidation or be victimised or harassed;
  - (c) works closely with the Subject Member and are afraid of the consequences, e.g. fear of losing their job;
  - (d) suffers from a serious health condition and there are medical risks associated with their identity being disclosed (medical evidence will need to be provided to substantiate this);
  - (e) may receive less favourable treatment because of the seniority of the person they are complaining about in terms of any existing Borough or Parish Council service provision or any tender/contract they may have with or are about to submit to the Borough or Parish Council.
- OR where early disclosure of the complaint:
- (a) may lead to evidence being compromised or destroyed; or
  - (b) may impede or prejudice the investigation; or
  - (c) would not be in the public interest.
- 5.3 Relevant public interest factors favouring disclosure (not an exhaustive list) include:
- (a) to facilitate transparency and ethical governance accountability: recognising that decision-making may be improved by constructive contributions from others;

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- (b) to raise public awareness: disclosing the complaint or part of it may inform the community about matters of general concern;
  - (c) justice to an individual: the balance of the public interest may favour disclosure of the complaint to the Subject Member when it may not be in the public interest to disclose it to the world at large;
  - (d) bringing out in the open serious concerns about the behaviour/conduct of an individual.
- 5.4 The Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Independent Person, will balance whether the public interest in accepting the complaint outweighs the Complainant's wish to have their identity (or that of another person) withheld from the Subject Member. If the Monitoring Officer decides to refuse the Complainant's request for confidentiality, they will offer the Complainant the option to withdraw their complaint. The Complainant will be notified of the Monitoring Officer's decision, with reasons, by the Monitoring Officer. There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer's decision to refuse the Complainant's request for confidentiality.
- 6. Informal resolution**
- 6.1 The Monitoring Officer may, after consultation with the Independent Person, seek to resolve a complaint informally at any stage in the process, whether without the need for an investigation or before or after an investigation has been commenced or concluded. In so doing, the Monitoring Officer will consult with the Complainant and the Subject Member to seek to agree what they consider to be a fair resolution, which will help to ensure higher standards of conduct for the future.
- 6.2 Informal resolution may be the simplest and most cost effective way of resolving the complaint and may be appropriate where:
- (a) The Subject Member appears to have a poor understanding of the Code of Conduct and/or related Borough or Parish Council procedures; or
  - (b) There appears to be a breakdown in the relationship between the Complainant and the Subject Member; or
  - (c) The conduct complained of appears to be a symptom of wider underlying conflicts which, if unresolved, are likely to lead to lead to further misconduct or allegations of misconduct; or
  - (d) The conduct complained of appears common to a number of members of the Borough or Parish Council, demonstrating a lack of awareness, experience or recognition of the particular

provisions of the Code of Conduct and/or other Borough or Parish Council procedures, etc; or

- (e) The conduct complained of appears to the Monitoring Officer not to require a formal sanction; or
- (f) The complaint appears to reveal a lack of guidance, protocols and procedures within the Borough or Parish Council; or
- (g) The Complainant and the Subject Member are amenable to engaging in an informal resolution; or
- (h) The complaint consists of allegations and retaliatory allegations between councillors; or
- (i) The complaint consists of allegations about how formal meetings are conducted; or
- (j) The conduct complained of may be due to misleading, unclear or misunderstood advice from officers.

6.3 Informal resolution may consist of one or more of the following actions, which do not have to be limited to the Subject Member, but may extend to other councillors including the whole Borough or Parish Council where it may be useful to address systemic behaviour:

- (a) training;
- (b) conciliation/mediation;
- (c) mentoring;
- (d) apology;
- (e) instituting changes to the Borough (or Parish) Council's procedures;
- (f) conflict management;
- (g) development of the Borough (or Parish) Council's protocols;
- (h) other remedial action by the Borough (or Parish) Council;
- (i) other steps (other than investigation) if it appears appropriate to the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Independent Person.

6.4 If the Subject Member is agreeable to and complies with the informal resolution process, the Monitoring Officer will report the matter to the Standards Committee [and, if applicable, the Parish Council] for information, but will take no further action against the Subject Member.

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- 6.5 Where the Subject Member will not participate in the informal resolution process or if, having agreed to one or more actions under the informal resolution process, the Subject Member refuses or fails to carry out any agreed action, the Monitoring Officer will report the matter to the Standards Committee.
- 6.6 If the Complainant or Subject Councillor do not agree the precise details of the Informal Resolution eg the actual wording of an apology, the Monitoring Officer shall still be entitled to resolve the Complaint by Informal Resolution.



**Annex 2**

## **Procedure for Investigating the Complaint**

### **1. Preliminaries**

- 1.1 The Investigating Officer will be appointed by the Monitoring Officer and will be aware of their obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998, Equalities Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998 and other relevant legislation.
- 1.2 The Investigating Officer is responsible for gathering all the facts, documents and, where applicable, for interviewing witnesses with knowledge of the facts, and they should remain objective, impartial and unbiased at all times.
- 1.3 The Subject Member and the Complainant will be advised that the investigation is for fact finding purposes only.
- 1.4 Witnesses will be identified at the investigation stage and their evidence supported by signed and dated witness statements and/or notes of interview with the Investigating Officer. The Investigating Officer cannot compel the attendance of witnesses or their co-operation.
- 1.5 The Investigating Officer will not make recommendations on sanctions.
- 1.6 Within 20 working days of being appointed, the Investigating Officer will notify the Subject Member and the Complainant of their appointment and:
  - (a) provide details of the complaint to the Subject Member;
  - (b) detail the procedure to be followed in respect of the investigation and the relevant timescales for responses and concluding the investigation;
  - (c) detail the sections of the Code of Conduct that appear to be relevant to the complaint;
  - (d) request contact details of any potential witnesses;
  - (e) require that confidentiality is maintained and that details of the complaint not be disclosed to any third party, unless disclosure is to a representative, witness, immediate family members or otherwise as may be required by law or regulation. However, the fact that an investigation is being conducted does not need to remain confidential.

- 1.7 It may be necessary for the Investigating Officer to agree with the Subject Member which documents will be submitted in evidence. This will generally include documents that will be relied on, or in support of, the Subject Member's case and which are relevant to the complaint.
- 1.8 The Investigating Officer may terminate their investigation at any point, where they are satisfied that they have sufficient information to enable them to report to the Monitoring Officer or Hearing Panel.

## **2. The draft report**

- 2.1 On the conclusion of their investigation the Investigating Officer will issue a draft report (clearly labelled 'DRAFT') to the Monitoring Officer for review.
- 2.2 Following review by the Monitoring Officer, the draft report will be sent in confidence to the Subject Member and the Complainant (not witnesses) for comment. The draft report will be clearly labelled 'CONFIDENTIAL' and will detail:
- (a) the relevant provisions of the law and the relevant paragraphs of the Code of Conduct;
  - (b) a summary of the complaint;
  - (c) the Subject Member's response to the complaint;
  - (d) relevant information, explanations, etc, which the Investigation Officer has obtained in the course of the investigation;
  - (e) a list of any documents relevant to the matter;
  - (f) a list of those persons/organisations who have been interviewed;
  - (g) a statement of the Investigating Officer's draft findings of fact and reasons;
  - (h) the Investigating Officer's conclusion as to whether the Subject Member has or has not failed to comply with the Authority's Code of Conduct;
  - (i) that the Investigating Officer will present a final report once they have considered any comments received on the draft.
- 2.3 Once the Investigating Officer has received any responses from the Subject Member and/or the Complainant, they will finalise the draft report and make their final conclusions and recommendations to the Monitoring Officer. The report will be clearly labelled 'FINAL'.

**3. Consideration of Investigating Officer's final report**

- 3.1 The Monitoring Officer will review the Investigating Officer's final report and any comments submitted by the Parties, in consultation with the Independent Person.
- 3.2 Where, on the basis of the Investigating Officer's report, the Monitoring Officer, having consulted with the Independent Person, concludes that there is no evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct; they will inform the Parties in writing that no further action is considered necessary. There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer's decision.
- 3.3 Where, on the basis of the Investigating Officer's report, the Monitoring Officer, having consulted with the Independent Person, concludes that there is evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, they will either:
- (a) take no action or
  - (b) seek informal resolution or
  - (c) refer the matter for consideration by the Hearing Panel in accordance with the relevant procedure detailed in Annex 3 to these Arrangements.

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Example template – Decision Notice

## Example Template - Decision Notice (of The Monitoring Officer): e.g. Referral For Investigation

*Parties should take care when passing on information that is in the notice or about the notice. For example, some details such as names and addresses may be confidential or private in nature, or may be personal information.*

### **Complaint No:**

Complaint

On [insert date], the Monitoring Officer considered a complaint from [insert name of complainant] concerning the alleged conduct of [insert name of councillor], a member of [insert authority name]. A general summary of the complaint is set out below.

### **Complaint summary**

[Summarise complaint in numbered paragraphs]

### **Consultation with Independent Person**

[Summarise the Independent Person's views in numbered paragraphs]

### **Decision**

Having consulted and taken into account the views of the Independent Person, the Monitoring Officer decided to refer the complaint for investigation.

Potential breaches of the Code of Conduct identified

At this stage, the Monitoring Officer is not required to decide if the Code of Conduct has been breached. They are only considering if there is enough information which shows a potential breach of the Code of Conduct that warrants referral for investigation.

The Monitoring Officer considers that the alleged conduct, if proven, may amount to a breach of the following paragraphs of the Code of Conduct. The Monitoring Officer has appointed [insert name] as the Investigating Officer.

Please note that it will be for the Investigating Officer to determine which paragraphs are relevant, during the course of the investigation.

[detail relevant Code of Conduct paragraphs]

### **Notification of decision**

This decision notice is sent to the:

- Complainant
- Member against whom the complaint was made
- [Clerk to the relevant Parish or Town Council]
- Kent County Council's Monitoring Officer (*applicable only where the Subject Member is serving at both Borough and County level*)

### **What happens now**

The complaint will now be investigated under the Borough Council's Arrangements for Dealing with Code of Conduct Complaints under the Localism Act 2011.

### **Appeal**

There is no right of appeal against the Monitoring Officer's decision.

### **Additional Help**

If you need additional support in relation to this decision notice or future contact with the Borough Council, please let us know as soon as possible. If you have difficulty reading this notice, we can make reasonable adjustments to assist you, in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. We can also help if English is not your first language. Please contact our Customer Services: email: [customer.care@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:customer.care@ashford.gov.uk) , telephone 01233 331111 or call in to one of our offices – either the Civic Centre or the Ashford or Tenterden Gateway.

**Signed:**

**Date**

**Print name:**

Monitoring Officer of the Ashford Borough Council

#### **The Monitoring Officer**

Legal and Democratic Services  
Ashford Borough Council  
Civic Centre  
Tannery Lane  
Ashford Kent  
TN23 1PL

## **Hearing Panel Procedure**

- 1. Rules of procedure**
- 1.1 The Hearing Panel consists of 3 voting elected Members drawn from the Standards Committee, one of whom shall be elected as Chairman. *[Where the Subject Member is a Parish Councillor, one of the appointed Parish Council representatives on the Standards Committee may be present (in an advisory capacity with no voting rights) during the hearing.]*
- 1.2 The quorum for a meeting of the Hearing Panel is 3 comprising 3 elected Members.
- 1.3 The Independent Person's views must be sought and taken into consideration before the Hearing Panel takes any decision on whether the Subject Member's conduct constitutes a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct and as to any sanction to be taken following a finding of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct. The Independent Person should normally be present throughout the hearing (but not during the deliberations of the Hearing Panel in private) but in the event that this is not possible, may instead submit their views on the complaint to the Hearing Panel in writing.
- 1.4 The legal requirements for publishing agendas, minutes and calling meetings, will apply to the Hearing Panel. The hearing will be held in public no earlier than 20 working days after the Monitoring Officer has copied the Investigating Officer's final report to the complainant and the Subject Member. Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) will be applied to exclude the public and press from meetings of the Hearing Panel where it is likely that confidential or exempt information will be disclosed.
- 1.5 Once a hearing has started, the Borough Council's Rules of Substitution do not apply to the Hearing Panel's proceedings.
- 1.6 All matters/issues before the Hearing Panel will be decided by a simple majority of votes cast, with the Chairman having a second or casting vote.
- 1.7 Where the Subject Member fails to attend the Hearing Panel and where the [Hearing Panel] is not satisfied with their explanation for their absence from the hearing, the Hearing Panel may in the first instance, have regard to any written representations submitted by the Subject Member and may resolve to proceed with the hearing in the Subject Member's absence and make a determination or, if satisfied

with the Subject Member 's reasons for not attending the hearing, adjourn the hearing to another date. The Hearing Panel may resolve in exceptional circumstances, that it will proceed with the hearing on the basis that it is in the public interest to hear the allegations expeditiously.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Right to be accompanied by a representative**

The Subject Member may choose to be accompanied and/or represented at the Hearing Panel by a fellow councillor, friend or colleague.

## **3. The conduct of the hearing**

3.1 Subject to paragraph 3.2 below, the order of business will be as follows:

- (a) elect a Chairman;
- (b) apologies for absence;
- (c) declarations of interests;
- (d) in the absence of the Subject Member, consideration as to whether to adjourn or to proceed with the hearing (refer to paragraph 1.11 above);
- (e) introduction by the Chairman, of members of the Hearing Panel, the Independent Person, Monitoring Officer, Investigating Officer, legal advisor, complainant and the Subject Member and their representative;
- (f) to receive representations from the Monitoring Officer and/or Subject Member as to whether any part of the hearing should be held in private and/or whether any documents (or parts thereof) should be withheld from the public/press;
- (g) to determine whether the public/press are to be excluded from any part of the meeting and/or whether any documents (or parts thereof) should be withheld from the public/press.

3.2 The Chairman may exercise his/her discretion and amend the order of business, where he/she considers that it is expedient to do so in order to secure the effective and fair consideration of any matter.

3.3 The Hearing Panel may adjourn the hearing at any time.

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<sup>1</sup> Jank v Standards Board for England & Adjudication Panel for England (2007)

#### **3.4 Presentation of the complaint**

- (a) The Investigating Officer presents their report including any documentary evidence or other material and calls their witnesses. No new points will be permitted;
- (b) The Subject Member or their representative may question the Investigating Officer and any witnesses called by the Investigating Officer;
- (c) The Hearing Panel may question the Investigating Officer upon the content of their report and any witnesses called by the Investigating Officer.

#### **3.5 Presentation of the Subject Member's case**

- (a) The Subject Member or their representative presents their case and calls their witnesses;
- (b) The Investigating Officer may question the Subject Member and any witnesses called by the Subject Member;
- (c) The Hearing Panel may question the Subject Member and any witnesses called by the Subject Member.

#### **3.6 Summing up**

- (a) The Investigating Officer sums up the complaint;
- (b) The Subject Member or their representative sums up their case.

#### **3.7 Views/Submissions of the Independent Person**

The Chairman will invite the Independent Person to express their view on whether or not they consider that on the facts presented to the Hearing Panel, there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct.

#### **3.8 Deliberations of the Hearing Panel**

##### **Deliberation in private**

- (a) The Hearing Panel will adjourn the hearing and deliberate in private (assisted on matters of law by a legal advisor) to consider whether or not, on the facts found, the Subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.
- (b) The Hearing Panel may at any time come out of private session and reconvene the hearing in public, in order to seek additional evidence from the Investigating Officer, the Subject Member or the witnesses. If further information to assist the Panel cannot be presented, then the Panel may adjourn the hearing and issue



directions as to the additional evidence required and from whom.

### 3.9 **Announcing decision on facts found**

- (a) The Hearing Panel will reconvene the hearing in public and the Chairman will announce whether or not on the facts found, the Panel considers that there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct
- (b) Where the Hearing Panel finds that there has been a breach of the Code of Conduct, the Chairman will invite the Independent Person, the Subject Member and the Monitoring Officer to make their representations as to whether or not any sanctions should be applied and, if so, what form they should take.
- (c) When deciding whether to apply one or more sanctions, the Hearing Panel will ensure that the application of any sanction is reasonable and proportionate to the Subject Member's behaviour. The Hearing Panel will consider the following questions along with any other relevant circumstances or other factors specific to the local environment:
  - (i) What was the Subject Member's intention and did they know that they were failing to follow the Borough (or Parish) Council's Code of Conduct?
  - (ii) Did the Subject Member receive advice from officers before the incident and was that advice acted on in good faith?
  - (iii) Has there been a breach of trust?
  - (iv) Has there been financial impropriety, e.g. improper expense claims or procedural irregularities?
  - (v) What was the result/impact of failing to follow the Borough (or Parish) Council's Code of Conduct?
  - (vi) How serious was the incident?
  - (vii) Does the Subject Member accept that they were at fault?
  - (viii) Did the Subject Member apologise to the relevant persons?
  - (ix) Has the Subject Member previously been reprimanded or warned for similar misconduct?

- (x) Has the Subject Member previously breached the Borough (or Parish) Council's Code of Conduct?
- (xi) Is there likely to be a repetition of the incident?
- (d) Having heard the representations of the Independent Person, the Subject Member and the Monitoring Officer on the application of sanctions, the Hearing Panel will adjourn and deliberate in private.
- (e) If evidence presented to the Hearing Panel highlights other potential breaches of the Borough (or Parish) Council's Code of Conduct, then the Chairman will outline the Hearing Panel's concerns and recommend that the matter be referred to the Monitoring Officer as a new complaint.

#### **Formal Announcement of Decision**

- 3.10 (a) Where the complaint has a number of aspects, the Hearing Panel may reach a finding, apply a sanction and/or make a recommendation on each aspect separately.
- (b) The Hearing Panel will make its decision on the balance of probabilities, based on the evidence before it during the hearing.
- (c) Having taken into account the representations of the Independent Person, the Subject Member and the Monitoring Officer on the application of sanctions, the Hearing Panel will reconvene the hearing in public and the Chairman will announce:
- (i) the Panel's decision as to whether or not the Subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, and the principal reasons for the decision;
  - (ii) the sanctions (if any) to be applied;
  - (iii) the recommendations (if any) to be made to the Borough (Parish) Council or Monitoring Officer;
  - (iv) that there is no right of appeal against the Panel's decision and/or recommendations.

#### **4. Range of possible sanctions**

- 4.1 Subject to paragraph 4.4 below, where the Hearing Panel determines that the Subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, any one or more of the following sanctions may be applied/recommended:

Part 3  
Responsibility for Functions  
Appendix 4

Terms of Reference of Council Committees and Delegations –  
Standards Committee –  
Annex 3 Hearing Panel Procedure

- (a) That the Subject Member be issued with a formal censure (i.e. the issue of an unfavourable opinion or judgement or reprimand) by motion;
  - (b) Recommending to the Subject Member's Group Leader (or Parish Council), or in the case of a ungrouped Subject Member, to the Borough Council that they be removed from committees or sub-committees of the Council;
  - (c) Recommending to the Leader of the Borough Council that the Subject Member be removed from the Cabinet or removed from particular Portfolio responsibilities;
  - (d) Instructing the Monitoring Officer (or recommendation to the Parish Council) to arrange training for the Subject Member;
  - (e) Recommending to the Borough (or Parish) Council that the Subject Member be removed from one or more outside appointments to which they have been appointed or nominated by the Council;
  - (f) Recommending to the Borough (or Parish) Council that it withdraws facilities provided to the Subject Member by the Council, such as a computer, website and/or email and internet access;
  - (g) Recommending to the Borough (or Parish) Council the exclusion of the Subject 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;
  - (h) Reporting the Panel's findings to the Borough (or Parish) Council for information;
  - (i) Instructing the Monitoring Officer to apply the informal resolution process;
  - (j) Sending a formal letter to the Subject Member;
  - (k) Recommending to the Borough (or Parish) Council to issue a press release or other form of publicity;
  - (l) Publishing its findings in respect of the Subject Member's conduct in such manner as the Panel considers appropriate.
- 4.2 The Hearing Panel has no power to suspend or disqualify the Subject Member or to withdraw basic or special responsibility allowances.

4.3 The Hearing Panel may specify that any sanction take effect immediately or take effect at a later date and that the sanction be time limited.

**5. Publication and notification of the Hearing Panel's decision and recommendations**

5.1 Within 20 working days of the Hearing Panel's announcement of its decision and recommendations, the Monitoring Officer will publish the name of the Subject Member and a summary of the Hearing Panel's decision and recommendations and reasons for the decision and recommendations on the Borough Council's website.

5.2 Within 20 working days of the announcement of the Hearing Panel's decision, the Monitoring Officer will provide a full written decision and the reasons for the decision, including any recommendations, in the format of the Decision Notice template below to:

- (a) the Subject Member;
- (b) the Complainant;
- (c) (the Clerk to the Parish Council)
- (d) Kent County Council's Standards Committee (*applicable only where the Subject Member is serving at both Borough and County level*);
- (e) Borough Council's Standards Committee (*applicable only where the Subject Member is serving at both Borough and County level*).

3.3 The Monitoring Officer will report the Hearing Panel's decision and recommendations to a meeting of the Standards Committee for information.

## Template - Decision Notice of Hearing Panel

### **Complaint No: xxxx**

On [insert date], the Hearing Panel of the [insert name] Council considered a report of an investigation into the alleged conduct of [insert name of councillor], a member of [insert authority name]. A general summary of the complaint is set out below.

### **Complaint summary**

[Summarise complaint in numbered paragraphs as set out in the Investigating Officer's report to the Hearing Panel]

### **Consultation with Independent Person**

[Summarise the Independent Person's views in numbered paragraphs]

### **Findings**

After considering the submissions of the parties to the hearing and the views of the Independent Person, the Hearing Panel reached the following decision(s):

[Summarise the finding of facts and the Hearing Panel's decision against each finding of fact in numbered paragraphs as set out in the Investigating Officer's report to the Hearing Panel, but substitute the Investigating Officer for the Hearing Panel. Please note that the Hearing Panel's findings may differ from that of the Investigating Officer]

The Hearing Panel also made the following recommendation(s)

[Detail recommendations]

### **Sanctions applied**

The breach of the [insert authority name] Code of Conduct warrants a [detail sanctions applied].

### **Appeal**

There is no right of appeal against the Hearing Panel's decision.

### **Notification of decision**

Part 3  
Responsibility for Functions  
Appendix 5  
Delegations to Officers, Proper and Authorised Officers and Designated Posts  
Proper and Authorised Officers and Designated Posts

This decision notice is sent to the:

- Councillor [name of councillor]
- Complainant
- [Clerk to the xxxx Parish/Town Council];
- Kent County Council's Monitoring Officer *[applicable only where the Councillor is serving at both Borough and County level]*

**Additional help**

If you need additional support in relation to this decision notice or future contact with the Borough Council, please let us know as soon as possible. If you have difficulty reading this notice, we can make reasonable adjustments to assist you, in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. We can also help if English is not your first language. Please contact our Customer Services: email: [customer.care@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:customer.care@ashford.gov.uk) , telephone 01233 331111 or call in to one of our offices – either the Civic Centre or the Ashford or Tenterden Gateway.

**Signed:**

**Date**

**Print name:**

Chairman of the Hearing Panel

Ashford Borough Council address