



# **LOCAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION PROCEDURE**

**Implemented 25 June 2014 (Council minute no 132)**

**Amended .....2018**

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' Guidance on the Code of Conduct for Members of Local Authorities in Wales (September 2012) expects Local Authorities throughout Wales to implement a Local Dispute Resolution Procedure to deal with complaints which are made by a Member against a fellow Member which may not otherwise be investigated by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales ('the Ombudsman') having regard to the Ombudsman's two-stage test.
2. The Vale of Glamorgan Council ('the Council') introduced a Local Dispute Resolution Procedure ('the Procedure') in 2014 to meet the Ombudsman's above expectations, and the Procedure was amended in 2018.
3. Typically the following complaints will fall within the category of complaints dealt with under this Procedure:
  - failure to show respect and consideration for others contrary to paragraph 18.2.4(b) of the Members' Code of Conduct ("the Code") and
  - making vexatious, malicious or frivolous complaints against other Members under paragraph 18.2.6(d) of the Code.
4. Other breaches of the Code may also be determined by the Monitoring Officer to be appropriate complaints to be dealt with under the Procedure.
5. The Procedure is to be read in conjunction with the Code and the Council's Protocol - Standard of Conduct Expected by Members ("the Protocol").
6. The Protocol establishes the behaviour which is acceptable and unacceptable between Members. It sits alongside the Code and fills the gap between behaviour which possibly in itself is not serious, but creates unpleasantness between Members, and behaviour that is approaching the threshold and serious enough for the Ombudsman to hold an investigation. Breaches of the Protocol will also be dealt with under this Procedure.
7. The Ombudsman assumes that where a Member repeatedly breaches this Procedure, the Monitoring Officer will refer the matter to the Ombudsman.
8. Members will continue to be able to complain directly to the Ombudsman where a breach of the Code has occurred. Should the complainant exercise that right then this Procedure will not be used, and any efforts to resolve a complaint using this Procedure will be stopped. The process will only resume if the matter is referred back for local resolution.
9. The Procedure applies to Vale of Glamorgan Council Member complaints against a fellow Vale of Glamorgan Council Member, and not Members of

Town and Community Councils. Complaints made by the public and staff will not be dealt with under this Procedure.

10. The key objectives of the Procedure are to:
  - resolve allegations of breaches of the Code and Protocol locally and quickly,
  - avoid unnecessary escalation of the situation which might impact on personal relationships within the Council and damage the Council's reputation,
  - avoid unnecessary involvement of the Ombudsman so that his resources are devoted to the investigation of more serious or repeated complaints.

### **GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

11. Members will make all reasonable efforts to resolve disputes via the Procedure.
12. Group Leaders individually and collectively will work to ensure compliance with the Procedure.

### **WORKING TO AVOID PROBLEMS**

13. To minimise the number of instances of alleged breaches the Council has committed to:
  - a Member Development Strategy; and
  - providing relevant Member training events.

### **STAGE 1 OF THE PROCEDURE**

14. Any Member who wishes to submit a complaint under the Procedure (“the Complainant”) is to complete the pro-forma Local Dispute Resolution Procedure Complaint Form (‘the Complaint Form’) attached at Appendix A to this Procedure and send it to the Monitoring Officer. Following receipt of the Complaint Form, the Monitoring Officer or the Deputy Monitoring Officer will indicate whether the complaint may be dealt with under this Procedure, whether it should be referred to the Ombudsman or whether it is rejected on the basis that there is no case to answer. A decision to reject a complaint by the Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer will be subject to consultation with the Chairman of the Standards Committee or in his absence an Independent Member of the Standards Committee as nominated by the Chairman of the Standards Committee.
15. If the complaint is to be dealt with under this Procedure the Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer will forward the complaint (including the identity

of the Complainant) to the Member who is the subject of the complaint within **seven working days** of submission of the complaint.

16. The Complainant will submit to the Monitoring Officer in writing within **ten working days** of the submission of the Complaint Form any further details relating to the complaint which are not already detailed in the Complaint Form. The Monitoring Officer will forward the same to the Member who is the subject of the complaint.
17. The Member who is the subject of the complaint will submit to the Monitoring Officer a written response to the complaint within **ten working days** thereafter (having been advised by the Monitoring Officer of the commencement date of the ten working days period) and the Monitoring Officer will forward the same to the Complainant.
18. The Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer will determine whether a Mediation Meeting is convened or whether the complaint is referred directly to a Hearing at Stage 3 of the Procedure.

## **STAGE 2 OF THE PROCEDURE**

### **MEDIATION MEETING**

19. A Mediation Meeting will be held between the Complainant, the Member who is the subject of the complaint, the Leader(s) of the political group for the Complainant and the Member who is the subject of the complaint (for Members that are not in a group they may be accompanied by a colleague or friend) and the Managing Director (or a nominated Director as determined by the Managing Director) within **thirty working days** of the Complaint Form being sent to the Member who is the subject of the complaint. The purpose of the Mediation Meeting will be to attempt to resolve the matter. If deemed necessary the Managing Director or the nominated Director may call on the Monitoring Officer or the Deputy Monitoring Officer for advice and assistance.
20. Where the complaint is made by or concerns a Group Leader the Mediation Meeting will be attended by the Complainant, the Member who is the subject of the complaint, the Managing Director (or a nominated Director as determined by the Managing Director) and the Monitoring Officer or the Deputy Monitoring Officer.
21. If the matter is not resolved at Stage 2, the Complainant may elect to stop the Procedure or proceed to Stage 3 of the Procedure subject to notifying the Monitoring Officer in writing within **seven working days** of the Mediation Meeting.
22. Anything said at the Mediation Meeting is privileged and cannot be referred to at Stage 3 of the Procedure.

## STAGE 3 OF THE PROCEDURE

### HEARING

23. The Hearing will be before three Independent Members of the Standards Committee nominated by the Chairman of the Standards Committee. The designated Democratic Services Officer (“the Democratic Services Officer”) will arrange for the Hearing to take place within **six weeks** following the Complaint being referred to Stage 3 of the Procedure
24. Members involved in the complaint have the right to appear before the Independent Members and call witnesses. Once names of witnesses are provided to the Democratic Services Officer the witnesses will be given an overview of the complaint.
25. Only witnesses who have given statements will be able to give evidence at the Hearing and witnesses that provide statements will be required to attend the Hearing. The parties if calling witnesses must let the Democratic Services Officer know not less than **five working days** prior to the Hearing of the name of the witness(es) and provide a copy of any witnesses statements to the Democratic Services Officer not less than **five working days** prior to the Hearing, who will provide copies of the witness statement(s) to the other party in advance of the Hearing.
26. The procedure to be followed during the Hearing is set out in Appendix B to this Procedure. It being noted that the Independent Member chairing the Hearing has discretion to vary or supplement the procedure as deemed appropriate.
27. Members will have the right to representation or can be accompanied by a colleague, friend, family member or Group Leader. It will be for each of the parties to make their own arrangements regarding representation. The Council will not meet the costs of representation. If either party decides to have legal representation at the Hearing, the Monitoring Officer is to be notified in advance of the Hearing in order to inform the other party to ensure that the opportunity is available to seek legal representation.
28. Neither a representative nor person accompanying a Member will be permitted to give evidence as a witness at the Hearing.
29. If either side wishes not to be present or fails to attend the Hearing the Hearing may be held and determined in their absence.
30. The Independent Members may in determining the matter on the balance of probabilities come to one of three conclusions, namely:-
  - there is no basis to the complaint.

- there is a basis to the complaint but that no further action is required .The Independent Members may also make recommendations to the Council regarding changing any procedures or taking any further action and/or may also direct that an apology be offered to the Complainant and that the Member who is the subject of the complaint attends further training within a specified timescale.
- There is a basis to the complaint and that the Member be censured. The Independent Members may also make recommendations to the Council regarding changing any procedures or taking any further action and/or may also direct that an apology be offered to the Complainant and that the Member who is the subject of the complaint attends further training within a specified timescale.

### **SUPPLEMENTARY MATTERS**

31. Publicity will not be given to the name(s) of the Complainant(s)
32. Publicity will not be given to the name of the Member who is the subject of the complaint unless the Member is censured. Such publicity will take the form of a notice being posted on the Council's website for not less than twenty eight calendar days detailing the name of the Member who is the subject of the complaint, the fact that the Member has been censured pursuant to the Procedure, when the censure decision was made and a summary of the facts as deemed appropriate by the Independent Members presiding at the Hearing.
33. The Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer will provide advice and support at Stages 2 and 3 of the Procedure but will not determine the matter.
34. The Hearing at Stage 3 will be dealt with in private.
35. There is no right of appeal against the decision made by the Independent Members at Stage 3 of the Procedure.
36. The timescales within the Procedure are a guide to ensure that complaints under the Procedure are dealt with quickly in order to minimise the impact of the complaint; Members and Officers are therefore requested to adhere to the timescales.