

 <b>Brent</b>	<b>Audit and Standards Advisory Committee</b> 22 September 2021
	<b>Report from:</b> <b>Director of Legal, HR, Audit &amp; Investigations</b>
<b>Complaints &amp; Code of Conduct</b>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	Not applicable
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> <small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small>	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	One Appendix A: Complaints received over the last 12months
<b>Background Papers:</b>	None
<b>Contact Officer(s):</b> <small>(Name, Title, Contact Details)</small>	Debra Norman, Director of Legal, HR, Audit & Investigations Tel: 020 8937 1578 <a href="mailto:Debra.Norman@brent.gov.uk">Debra.Norman@brent.gov.uk</a>  Biancia Robinson, Senior Constitutional & Governance Lawyer Tel: 020 8937 1544 <a href="mailto:Biancia.Robinson@brent.gov.uk">Biancia.Robinson@brent.gov.uk</a>

## 1.0 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 This report provides an annual review of the complaints received pursuant to, and a review of the Members' Code of Conduct Complaints procedure.

## 2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the:

- a) Audit and Standards Advisory Committee consider and note the contents of the report and note that no recommendations are being made to the Audit and Standards Committee.

### 3.0 Detail

#### **Members' Code of Conduct Complaints Procedure (MCCCP)**

##### Background

- 3.1 The Council has a duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members pursuant to section 27(1) of the Localism Act 2011. As required by section 27(2) of the Localism Act 2011, the Council has adopted a Code of Conduct (Code) dealing with the conduct that is expected of Members and Co-opted Members when they are acting in that capacity.
- 3.2 Section 28 of the Localism Act requires the Council to have arrangements under which it can investigate and make a decision on an allegation of a breach of the Code. The MCCCP complies with this statutory obligation. Any alleged breach of the Brent Code is considered in accordance with the MCCCP, which is used as guidance in the consideration and determination of complaints and reviews.
- 3.3 In accordance with:
  - a) para 1.10 of the MCCCP, *"the Standards Committee will convene from time to time to review the handling of complaints, reviews and decisions made with a view to identifying trends or any improvements in this procedure and the application of it that may be desirable"*; and
  - b) annexe 1, para 1.3 of the MCCCP, the complaint Assessment Criteria are subject to *"an annual review by the Standards Committee"*. This report sets out the annual review.

##### Complaints

- 3.4 In terms of background, in the last 12 months, the Monitoring Officer has received complaints and made determinations regarding seven councillors allegedly in breach of the Members' Code of Conduct. Of these complaints:
  - a) six have been resolved at Initial Assessment Stage;
  - b) three have been resolved at Assessment Criteria Stage;
  - c) two have been partially upheld as in breach of the Code;
  - d) none have been subject to review requests; and
  - e) none have escalated to hearing/formal investigation stage.

Attached as Appendix A is a summary of the complaints received in the last 12 months.

##### Overview

- 3.5 The MCCCP has a two stage assessment process. The first, **the Initial Assessment Stage**, requires an assessment of whether the alleged behaviour falls within the ambit of the Code of Conduct and in turn the Council's procedure. In particular it considers:

- a) the complaint is about a Member of the authority?
- b) the Member was in office at the time of the alleged complaint? and
- c) if proven, the complaint would disclose a breach of the Code?

If the alleged behaviour falls outside of the ambit of the Code or within one of the nine criteria set out in the procedure to be considered at the Initial Assessment Stage (see 3.2 of the MCCCCP), it will not progress to Assessment Criteria Stage, and, subject to a request for a review being received by the specified deadline, is concluded.

- 3.6 The **Assessment Criteria**, apply where the allegations appear to fall within the Code and are not excluded by the Initial Assessment Criteria. At this stage further readily available details are sought to ascertain the facts, and the member who is the subject of the allegations is provided with the opportunity to provide a written response to the complaint. This is then considered and, following consultation with the Independent Person, a determination in respect of the complaint is made in accordance with the seven options set out in the Assessment Criteria in Annex 1 of the MCCCCP. This may conclude the matter (subject to a review request), or may lead to a referral for detailed formal investigation of the complaint.

#### Decision Making

- 3.7 The Assessment Criteria are intended to be a guide and promote consistency in the decision-making. Consistency is also ensured as all complaints alleging breach of the Code are considered by the Monitoring Officer, (or in her absence the Deputy Monitoring Officer). This ensures a consistency of assessment and application of the criteria as the same officers are involved analysing and weighing up the allegations made in complaints. External scrutiny provided by the Independent Person involved in each complaint that reaches this stage provides double check on the thoroughness and fairness of the decision-making.
- 3.8 An advantage of Brent's MCCCCP is that it is very detailed in the procedure and guidance it provides. This is helpful for the Monitoring Officer, complainants and Members who are complained about and supports a higher degree of transparency and consistency than might arise in a less detailed high level procedure.
- 3.9 The Committee will see from Appendix A that the main finding at Initial Assessment Stage in respect of the complaints over the past 12 months is that the complaints "*do not disclose a sufficiently serious breach of the Code to merit further consideration*". The main rationale for this finding has been that no evidence has been submitted to support the allegations made; and when considering the allegations in context, the Councillors concerned were entitled to express the views which they did, be that orally or in writing.
- 3.10 The main recurring factor in relation to escalating complaints to the Assessment Criteria Stage have been the need for further information in order to understand the allegations, which necessitates making basic additional enquiries and seeking comment from the member concerned.

- 3.11 The Committee will be aware that the Code only permits the investigation of complaints against Members made in their “official capacity or when giving the impression [they] are acting as a member of the Council”, unless it relates to a serious criminal offence conducted in the Member's private capacity. Accordingly, any decision that purports to find a breach of the Code whilst the Member in question was acting in their private capacity, would be liable to challenge.
- 3.12 In the last 12 months, two complaints has been partially upheld as a breach of the Code. The Committee will be familiar with the facts of those complaints having considered and noted the findings at its previous meetings. All Standards complaints which are upheld are normally published on the Council's website, which is important for transparency, accountability and demonstrating the commitment to “maintain a high standard of conduct” from all members.
- 3.13 As the Committee is aware, following implementation of the Localism Act 2011, the Council has limited powers against a Member who has been found to have breached the Code. Any changes to strengthen a sanction for breach of the Code requires a change to the existing legislation. Consequently, the sanctions presently available are:
- a) censuring or reprimanding the Member
  - b) publishing a notice in respect of the findings in a local newspaper, or on the Council's website.
  - c) asking the Member to apologise
  - d) asking the Member to undergo training
  - e) recommending to Council/Cabinet that the Member be removed from an outside body
  - f) recommending to the Member's group Leader ( or if independent – full Council) that they be removed from Cabinet/portfolio responsibilities
  - g) recommending to the Member's Leader (or if independent – full Council) that the Committee recommends that they be removed from a Committee.
  - h) Excluding the Member from the Council's offices or other premises, with the exception of meeting rooms necessary for attending Council and Committee meetings.

### Reviews

- 3.14 Step 6 of Paragraph 3.5 of the MCCCCP provides that a “*complainant and the subject member of the complaint will ordinarily be given 10 working days from the date of notification of the decision to make a written request*” that the decision is reviewed. Of the nine Member complaints received no complainants have sought a review.

### Changes to the MCCCCP

- 3.15 Changes to the MCCCCP requires formal approval of the Audit and Standards Committee. Upon reviewing the MCCCCP no changes are presently recommended.

#### **4.0 Financial Implications**

4.1 There are no financial implications arising out of this report.

#### **5.0 Legal Implications**

5.1 The legal implications are contained within the body of this report.

#### **6.0 Equality Implications**

6.1 There are no equality implications arising out of this report.

#### **7.0 Consultation with Ward Members and Stakeholders**

7.1 Not applicable.

#### **8.0 Human Resources/Property Implications (if appropriate)**

8.1 Not applicable.

#### **Report sign off:**

**Debra Norman**

Director of Legal, HR, Audit & Investigations