
Ethics Committee

20 March 2025

Name of Cabinet Member:

N/A - Ethics Committee

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director of Law and Governance

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title: Code of Conduct Update

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary

The report updates the Ethics Committee on any national issues in relation to the ethical behaviour of elected Members and the local position in Coventry with regard to Code of Conduct issues.

Recommendations:

The Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the position with regard to matter concerning local authorities nationally.
2. Note the local position relating to the operation of the Council's Code of Conduct and to delegate any actions arising from these to the Director of Law and Governance, following consultation with the Chair of Ethics Committee.

List of Appendices included

None

Other useful background papers

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Code of Conduct Update

1. Context (or background)

1.1 The Council's Ethics Committee has agreed that the Director of Law and Governance will provide a regular update on cases relating to the Members' Code of Conduct on a national basis. This is to facilitate the Ethics Committee's role in assisting the Council with its duties under Section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 to promote and maintain high standards of Members' conduct.

1.2 The National Picture

1.2.1 Councillor S, Spelthorne Borough Council

The Standards Sub-Committee for Spelthorne Borough Council have concluded that Councillor S had not complied with their sanction to apologise to an officer.

The apology was in relation to a Code of Conduct complaint against Councillor S whereby it was found that they breached the code concerning respect for employees. The apology was to be private and given in writing.

Despite the Councillor issuing a statement to the media confirming that they had apologised, the Sub-Committee determined that the Officer had not received an apology and that the reporting of this by the media was incorrect.

It was agreed by Councillors that an update on the proceedings would be published on the Local Authority's website and the press informed that the apology had not been offered.

Councillor S in responding to findings of the Sub-Committee stated, "I accepted the findings of the standards panel in line with their ruling, I duly submitted a written apology. "To the best of my knowledge a majority of members of the panel accepted my written apology and therefore I believed I had followed the panel's ruling and issued the apology that was required."

1.2.2 Councillor F, Torridge District Council

Following what was described as a 'tirade of abuse', with the "sole intent to cause needless anxiety and distress", Councillor F was given a custodial sentence for the harassment of Torridge District Council's Head of Legal Governance.

Having been charged with persistently making use of public communication network to cause annoyance/ inconvenience/ anxiety and harassment without

violence, Councillor F was found guilty of both charges in Exeter Magistrates Court. The Judge in sentencing noted that Councillor F denied the offence of harassment but accepted that they sent repeated emails calling the victim “corrupt and dishonest”.

Among the actions which amounted harassment were Councillor F, referring to the victim as a “disgrace to the human race” and “Hitler”. Although not the subject of the conviction or sentence, Councillor F is also alleged to have “bombarded” the Chief Executive with similar insulting emails over the course of the same period.

The Judge in their sentencing remarks stated that the victim “felt bullied and harassed and described the effect of your campaign of behaviour on her as horrific. She felt the need to be escorted in and out the building, had to install cameras at her home and even considered resigning from her job”. Further the Judge also stated that Councillor F was “persistent and sent messages on an almost daily basis for a period of 8 months, often with multiple messages in the same day. Those messages were derogatory, demeaning and unhinged.”

Councillor F was sentenced to an immediate 18-week custodial sentence, costs of £685, a victim surcharge in addition to being subjected a 4-year restraining order.

The Chief Executive in a statement, highlighted that Councillor F’s actions were dealt with internally in 2022, but the sanctions available were insufficient to stop the Councillor’s behaviour.

1.2.3 Lancashire County Councillor complaints made by Elected Members

Of the 18 allegations raised against Members of Lancashire County Councillors, 6 of them came from other County Council Members and 1 coming from a Member of a District Council.

These complaints predominantly related to comments and remarks made on social media and in meetings that were offensive in nature.

All complaints were informally resolved with 4 found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct and 3 resulted in corrective action being taken or apologies issued.

The Head of Democratic Services said that the Local Authority tries to informally resolve matters where possible and went on to state that, “where there are disputes or debates between county councillors, if we can just get them in a room to speak to each other, we can often resolve lots of things.”

1.2.4 Councillor H, Bracknell Forest Council

Bracknell Forest Council’s Councillor H has been found to have breached

the Local Authority's Code of Conduct following an investigation into a code of conduct complaint.

The Councillor was accused of swearing at officers and stating, "watch it or I'll kick your head in". Despite the language being described as "quite appalling and thoroughly disrespectful", Councillor H claimed the Officers did not take offence and the conversation was "banter" but that they were sorry.

As a result, the Councillor is set to receive behavioural training and must provide a written apology to the staff members. The matter was also referred to the Councillor's group where it could be considered whether 'any actions needs to be taken' in the future.

1.3 The Local Picture

Complaints under the Code of Conduct

- 1.3.1** The Ethics Committee has requested that the Director of Law and Governance reports regularly on any complaints received relating to Members of Coventry City Council.
- 1.3.2** At the time this report was written, the Director of Law and Governance has received 2 complaints in total since those reported at the last meeting (9 January 2025). Both complaints are currently at Stage 1.
- 1.3.3** The Director of Law and Governance will update the Committee on any further complaints received before the meeting and progress on those already received.
- 1.3.4** All complaints are handled in accordance with the agreed Complaints Protocol. No findings have been made by the Local Government Ombudsman in relation to Members of Coventry City Council.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

The Ethics Committee are recommended to:

- 1. Note the position with regard to matters concerning local authorities nationally.
- 2. Note the local position relating to the operation of Council's Code of Conduct and to delegate any actions arising from these to the Director of Law and Governance, in consultation with the Chair of the Ethics Committee.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

Not applicable.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

Not applicable

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Resources and the Director of Law and Governance

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report.

5.2 Legal Implications

There are no specific legal implications arising from this report. The issues referred to in this report will assist the Council in complying with its obligations under Section 27 of the Localism Act 2011.

6. Other implications

None.

6.1 How will this contribute to the One Coventry Plan

Not applicable.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

There is no direct risk to the organisation as a result of the contents of this report.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

No direct impact at this stage.

6.4 Equalities/ EIA

There are no public sector equality duties which are of relevance at this stage.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None at this stage.

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