



The Code of Conduct for members of local authorities in Wales

Guidance from the
Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
for members of community councils

Preface

This revised guide from me as Public Services Ombudsman for Wales provides an overview of the Model Code of Conduct (the Code) introduced in 2008. It is intended to help you as a member to understand your obligations under the Code. The Code applies to all members and co-opted members of local authorities, community councils, fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities in Wales. As a member, you are required to sign up to it as part of your declaration of acceptance of office. The Code does not apply to the actions of authorities as a whole, or to the conduct of their officers and employees. There is a separate code of conduct applying to officers of local authorities in Wales.

This is a separate version of this guidance aimed at Community and Town Councillors (referred to throughout this guidance as Community Councillors). The guidance differs in many parts from the original document (and the guidance to County Councillors) as it recognises the different role that Community Councillors undertake. The Guidance will be adapted from time to time to reflect case law and any changes to the Code. It contains examples drawn from recent cases considered by the Adjudication Panel for Wales and standards committees across Wales.

The following pages aim to provide you with a general understanding of the Code and its requirements. Section 1 provides an introduction, while Section 2 outlines your obligations under the Code, referencing specific paragraphs for further information. Sections 3 and 4 deal with general issues surrounding interests, and aim to clarify a number of provisions which you will find in Parts 3 & 4 of the Code. You can obtain a copy of the Code by contacting your Clerk.

The guide is intended to help you to understand the Code and how it applies, but it cannot hope to cover every conceivable circumstance. Ultimately, it is your responsibility to take specific advice from your Clerk or Monitoring Officer and to make a decision as to the most suitable course of action.

I have used examples throughout the report to help to bring the guidance to life. These examples are drawn from actual cases considered by my office and also include decisions reached by local standards committees and the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

As a member you will be offered training on the Code whether by your Clerk, a Monitoring Officer or from a representative body. I expect all members to take advantage of such training, including refresher courses, to ensure that they are fully aware of the provisions of the Code and its interpretation.

In issuing this advice I am very conscious of the importance of standards in ensuring the future health and effectiveness of our democratic institutions. It is important that we should all work collaboratively to drive up standards and to create a culture where members are respected for their selflessness, objectivity and respectful behaviour. If we do so we can build public confidence in our democratic institutions and promote good governance for the benefit of the people of all of our communities.

Peter Tyndall

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

September 2012

This statutory guidance is issued by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales under Section 68 of the Local Government Act 2000 for elected, co-opted and appointed members of Community and Town Councils in Wales.

Separate guidance is available for elected, co-opted and appointed members of County Councils, Fire and Rescue authorities and National Park authorities in Wales.

Acknowledgement

This guidance draws on the guidance prepared and issued by Standards for England on the former English Code of Conduct. It has been extended and amended to refer to the Welsh Code and to the Welsh context. It also reflects responses to the consultation I have undertaken.

First published April 2010.

This edition published September 2012.

Content

	Page
Part 1 – Introduction	5
• The Principles	8
• Deciding when the Code applies to you	10
Part 2 – General obligations under the Code of Conduct	11
• Equality	11
• Treating others with respect and consideration	12
• Bullying and harassment	13
• Compromising the impartiality of officers of the authority	14
• Disclosing confidential information	14
• Preventing access to information	15
• Disrepute	16
• Reporting breaches of the Code	17
• Vexatious complaints	17
• Co-operating with investigations	18
• Using your position improperly	19
• The authority's resources	20
• Using resources for proper purposes only	20
• Reaching decisions objectively	20
• Considering advice provided to you and giving reasons	21
• Expenses	21
• Gifts and hospitality	22
Part 3 – Personal and prejudicial interests	22
• Personal interests	22
• Disclosing personal interests	25
• Prejudicial interests	25
• What to do when you have a prejudicial interest	26
• Dispensations	28
Part 4 – Registration of Interests	29
• Gifts and hospitality	29

1. Introduction

The Local Government Act 2000 created a new ethical framework for local government in Wales. It created a power for the National Assembly for Wales to issue a model code of conduct to apply to members and co-opted members of all relevant authorities in Wales. This power was transferred to the Welsh Ministers by the Government of Wales Act 2006. In 2008, Welsh Ministers issued the current Model Code of Conduct which all relevant authorities are required to adopt.

Authorities were required to adopt the Code in its model form in its entirety, but could make additions to the Code, provided these were consistent with the Model. This was intended to give certainty to members and the public as to what standards are expected. It helps to ensure consistency throughout relevant authorities, avoiding confusion for members on more than one authority and for the public.

Standards committees of principal councils are required to assist members and co-opted members of town and community councils in their area to observe the Code, and to arrange for advice and training to be provided. I strongly recommend that all members should attend training and take advice where it is offered.

Whilst Community Councillors do not act on decision-making bodies such as planning committees you will be called upon to take decisions on the allocation of funding from your precept and to offer guidance, drawing on your valuable local knowledge, to the County Council about the impact of planning applications. It is imperative therefore, that you are fully aware of the Code of Conduct and its implications for your decision-making and indeed, whether you should be involved in making a decision. In light of this I recommend training on the Code of Conduct for all Councillors as early in their term of office as possible.

Ultimately, as a member, you are responsible for the decisions you take and can be held to account for them. However, this doesn't imply that you can take decisions which breach the Code or contrary to advice simply because the decision is yours to take. This guidance explains the constraints you are expected to act within to ensure members of the public can be confident in the way in which authorities in Wales reach their decisions.

It is my role as Public Services Ombudsman to investigate complaints that members of local authorities in Wales have breached the Code. In determining whether to investigate a complaint or whether to continue an investigation of a breach of the Code I will use a two-stage test. In the first instance, I will aim to establish whether there is evidence that a breach actually took place.

The second test I will apply is whether the breach alleged would be likely to lead to a sanction. I have discretion as to whether to investigate or not. I have adopted this test in order to explain how I will usually exercise my discretion and to secure a degree of consistency. In using my discretion, I will take account of the outcomes of previous cases considered by standards committees across Wales and decide accordingly.

If whilst assessing a complaint or at any point where I have commenced an investigation I consider that the second limb of the two stage test has not been met I will invite the Monitoring Officer (in conjunction with the Standards Committee) to consider whether a local investigation is appropriate. If so I will formally refer the matter to the Monitoring Officer for investigation under section 70(4) of the Local Government Act 2000.

However, if I am aware of previous complaints about the same member and believe these may be indicative of a pattern of breaches, I will then often choose to investigate. Where there is prima facie evidence of a breach of the Code, and I do not decide to investigate, I will almost always write to the member concerned making it clear that my decision should not in any way be regarded as approval for any breach of the Code and making clear that I will take it into account if there are further reported breaches.

The process I use for investigating complaints is on my website at www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk. If I find that a complaint is justified, I may refer it either to your Standards Committee or to a tribunal convened by the Adjudication Panel for Wales. If it then finds the complaint proven, it can impose a range of sanctions.

In this guidance I have tried, where possible, to use examples of cases which have been referred to me and which are relevant to Community Councils. Where this has not been possible I have given examples of theoretical scenarios that indicate how the Code of Conduct may be breached whilst you are undertaking your role.

Local Resolution Process

During the course of the life of this guidance I expect principal local authorities across Wales to have implemented local resolution procedures to deal with low level complaints which are made by a member against a fellow member. These mechanisms are initially being adopted by principal councils, but I am supportive of this extending to cover community councils in due course. Typically these complaints will be about alleged failures to show respect and consideration for others as required by paragraph 4(b) of the Code or the duty not to make vexatious, malicious or frivolous complaints against other members under paragraph 6(1)(d) of the Code. Whilst a member may still complain directly to me about a fellow member if the matter being complained about concerns paragraphs 4b and 6(1)(d) I am likely to refer the matter back to the Council's Monitoring Officer for consideration under this process.

In my view such complaints are more appropriately resolved informally and locally in order to speed up the complaints process and to ensure that my resources are devoted to the investigation of serious complaints. The aim of local resolution is to resolve matters at an early stage so as to avoid the unnecessary escalation of the situation which may damage personal relationships within the authority and the authority's reputation. The process may result in an apology being made by the member concerned. However, where a member has repeatedly breached their authority's local protocol then I would expect the Monitoring Officer to refer the matter back to me.

When I have investigated a complaint I may refer the matter to a Standards Committee or the Adjudication Panel for Wales which have the following roles:

Standards Committee

Where a standards committee concludes that a member or co-opted member has failed to comply with the relevant council's code of conduct, it may determine that:

1. no action needs to be taken in respect of that failure;
2. the member or co-opted member should be censured; or
3. the member or co-opted member should be suspended or partially suspended from being a member of that council for a period not exceeding six months.

A censure takes the form of a public rebuke of the member concerned.

A member may appeal against the determination of a standards committee to the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

Adjudication Panel for Wales

The powers available to the tribunal when it determines that a member or co-opted member has failed to comply with the Code are:

1. to disqualify the respondent from being, or becoming, a member of the relevant council concerned or any other relevant council for a period of up to five years;
2. to suspend or partially suspend the respondent from being a member or co-opted member of the relevant council concerned for up to 12 months;
3. to take no action in respect of the breach.

Where either a standards committee or a tribunal suspends or partly suspends a member or co-opted member that member or co-opted member is still subject to the code of conduct, in particular the provisions set out in paragraphs 6(1)(a) (bringing the office of member or authority into disrepute) and paragraph 7 (improperly using the position of member).

The Role of the Clerk

The Clerk is employed by your Council and undertakes a number of tasks including providing administrative support to the Council, advising on the development of policies and procedures and advising the Council on implementing and using its procedures. The Clerk acts in a supporting role and is the person you should turn to in the first instance if you need any advice.

The Clerk has a complex role and will be able to advise Councillors on relevant legislation, including matters relating to the Code of Conduct, and on the Council's standing orders. The Clerk will work closely with the Chair to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed at meetings and that all necessary information is available to Councillors so that they may make informed decisions. Clerks may approach their relevant County Council's Monitoring Officer for advice (see below).

The Clerk is an employee of the Council and is not required to abide by the Code of Conduct. Any issues regarding the performance of the Clerk are personnel matters and should be addressed using appropriate employment procedures. The Ombudsman cannot consider complaints regarding the performance of the Clerk; this is a matter for the Council as the Clerk's employer.

The Role of the Monitoring Officer

The Monitoring Officer is an officer employed by the County Council. Among many other things they advise and assist County Councillors. Monitoring Officers may offer some training to Community Councils.

The Monitoring Officer has a significant role in the local resolution process outlined above and they will also work closely in advising the Standards Committee.

You should always ask your Clerk in the first instance for any guidance or information. The Monitoring Officer may be able to provide information if your Clerk is unavailable.

The Principles

The Local Government Act empowered the National Assembly to issue principles to which you must have regard in undertaking your role as a member. The Code is based on these principles which are designed to promote the highest possible standards. These principles draw on the 7 Principles of Public Life which were set out in the Nolan Report “Standards of Conduct in Local Government in England, Scotland and Wales”. Three more were added to these: a duty to uphold the law, proper stewardship of the Council’s resources and equality and respect for others.

Members elected to local authorities give generously of their time and commitment for the benefit of their communities. The principles provide a framework for channelling your commitment in a way which will reflect well on you and your council, and which will give your communities confidence in the way that your council is governed.

The individual sections of the Code are designed to support the implementation of the Principles. For example, the Selflessness principle is covered by Section 7 of the Code – Selflessness and Stewardship.

The current principles were set out in a statutory instrument¹ and are detailed below.

1. Selflessness

Members must act solely in the public interest. They must never use their position as members to improperly confer advantage on themselves or to improperly confer advantage or disadvantage on others.

2. Honesty

Members must declare any private interests relevant to their public duties and take steps to resolve any conflict in a way that protects the public interest.

3. Integrity and Propriety

Members must not put themselves in a position where their integrity is called into question by any financial or other obligation to individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their duties. Members must on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

4. Duty to Uphold the Law

Members must act to uphold the law and act on all occasions in accordance with the trust that the public has placed in them.

¹The Conduct of Members (Principles) (Wales) Order 2001 SI 2001 No.2276 (W.166)

5. Stewardship

In discharging their duties and responsibilities members must ensure that their authority's resources are used both lawfully and prudently.

6. Objectivity in Decision-making

In carrying out their responsibilities including making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, members must make decisions on merit. Whilst members must have regard to the professional advice of officers and may properly take account of the views of others, including their political groups, it is their responsibility to decide what view to take and, if appropriate, how to vote on any issue.

7. Equality and Respect

Members must carry out their duties and responsibilities with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity for all people, regardless of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion, and show respect and consideration for others.

8. Openness

Members must be as open as possible about all their actions and those of their authority. They must seek to ensure that disclosure of information is restricted only in accordance with the law.

9. Accountability

Members are accountable to the electorate and the public generally for their actions and for the way they carry out their responsibilities as a member. They must be prepared to submit themselves to such scrutiny as is appropriate to their responsibilities.

10. Leadership

Members must promote and support these principles by leadership and example so as to promote public confidence in their role and in the authority. They must respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees.

The principles are not part of the Model Code, and failure to comply with the Principles is not of itself, therefore, indicative of a breach of the Code. However, it is likely that a failure, for example, to adhere to the principle concerning equality and respect would constitute a breach of the requirements at paragraphs 4 (a) and (b) in the Code in respect of equality of opportunity and respect.

In any event, the Principles offer a sound basis for your conduct in office and I encourage members to have regard to them at all times.

Deciding when the Code applies to you

See paragraphs 2 and 3

The Code applies to you:

1. Whenever you act in your official capacity, including whenever you are conducting the business of your council or acting, claiming to act, or give the impression you are acting, in your official capacity as a member or as a representative of your council.
2. At any time, if you conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or your council into disrepute or if you use or attempt to use your position to gain an advantage or avoid a disadvantage for yourself or any other person or if you misuse your council's resources.

Where you act as a representative of your council on another relevant authority, or any other body, you must, when acting for that other authority, comply with their Code of Conduct. When you are nominated by your council as a trustee of a charity you are obliged when acting as such to do so in the best interests of that charity, in accordance with charity law and with the guidance which has been produced by the Charity Commission (see its website: www.charity-commission.gov.uk).

If you are acting as a representative of your council on another body, for example on an event committee, which doesn't have a code of conduct relating to its members, you must comply with your council's own code unless it conflicts with any legal requirements that the other body has to comply with.

If you refer to yourself as councillor, the Code will apply to you. This applies in conversation, in writing, or in your use of electronic media. There has been a significant rise in complaints to me concerning the use of Facebook, blogs and Twitter. If you refer to your role as councillor in any way or comments you make are clearly related to your role then the Code will apply to any comments you make there. Even if you do not refer to your role as councillor, your comments may have the effect of bringing your office or authority into disrepute and could therefore breach paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct.

If you are suspended from office for any reason, you must still observe those elements of the Code which apply, particularly as set out in paragraph 2(1)(d), while you are suspended.

Example

Councillor A made remarks about Councillor B at a committee meeting organising a waterfront parade. The parade was being arranged by a group of volunteers which had asked the Community Council to provide representatives to help it remain aware of Community issues when making the arrangements. I was satisfied that Councillor A was acting in his capacity as a Councillor at the committee meeting, as his role on the committee was as the Council's representative and were it not for this fact he would not have been present at the meeting. However, in this case I was satisfied that the comments made by Councillor A were not sufficiently serious that, if proven, it would lead to a sanction being imposed on the accused member by a Standards Committee, therefore I did not investigate this complaint.

Conversely a complaint was received that Councillor J was intoxicated and behaving inappropriately at a street party. It was established that Councillor J did not have to undertake any action on behalf of the Council at the party. Therefore, in my view, she attended the party as a member of the public and as she did not seek to rely on her status as a Councillor in any way the Code of Conduct did not apply (except for paragraph 6(1)(a)). Whilst her behaviour may have been considered inappropriate by some it was not relevant to her role as a Councillor and in my view did not bring the Council into disrepute so paragraph 6(1)(a) also did not apply. I did not investigate this complaint.

2. General obligations under the Code of Conduct

Equality

See Paragraph 4(a)

You must carry out your duties with due regard to the principle that there should be equality of opportunity for all people regardless of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion. Although the Code is not explicit about trans-gender status, I will normally consider it to be included under the gender category, and expect the principle of equal opportunity to be applied.

You should at all times seek to avoid discrimination. There are four main forms of discrimination:

- Direct discrimination: treating people differently because of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion.
- Indirect discrimination: treatment which does not appear to differentiate between people because of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion, but which disproportionately disadvantages them.
- Harassment: engaging in unwanted conduct on the grounds of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion, which violates another person's dignity or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.
- Victimisation: treating a person less favourably because they have complained of discrimination, brought proceedings for discrimination, or been involved in complaining about or bringing proceedings for discrimination.

The introduction of the Equality Act 2010 reinforces the importance of this part of the Code. It imposes positive duties to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and to promote equality. Under equality laws, your council may be liable for any discriminatory acts which you commit. This will apply if you do something in your official capacity in a discriminatory manner.

You must be careful not to act in a way which may amount to any of the prohibited forms of discrimination, or to do anything which hinders your council's fulfilment of its positive duties under equality laws. Such conduct may cause your council to break the law, and you may find yourself subject to a complaint that you have breached this paragraph of the Code.

You must also be mindful that at all times including when acting in your private capacity you must not act in a way that would bring your Council into disrepute. It is likely that engaging in behaviour which could be considered to be in breach of the Equality Act in your private capacity is likely to fall into this category.

Example

A member of a County Council was a member of the Council's Recruitment Panel to appoint a new Chief Executive. Five applicants were shortlisted. After one candidate had finished his presentation and left the room Councillor A said "good candidate, shame he's black". The Adjudication Panel for Wales found that paragraph 4(a) of the Code had been breached and that Councillor A had brought the office of member and his authority into disrepute (in breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code). Having taken into consideration mitigating factors on behalf of the member the Panel decided that no further action was necessary.

Treating others with respect and consideration

See Paragraph 4(b)

You must show respect and consideration for others.

Political groupings in authorities are expected to campaign for their ideas, and they may also seek to discredit the policies and action of their opponents. Criticism of ideas and opinion is part of democratic debate, and it is unlikely that such comments would ever be considered to be a breach of the Code of Conduct for failing to treat someone with respect and consideration.

Furthermore, members' freedom of expression attracts enhanced protection when their comments are political in nature. "Political" comments are not confined to those made within council meetings and, for example, include comments members may generally make on their council's policies or about their political opponents. Therefore, unless the comments are highly offensive or outrageous, it is unlikely that I will investigate complaints made in this context and councillors need a "thicker skin" in dealing with, and responding to, politically motivated comments.

Likewise, when members raise "political" issues with officers, e.g. the Clerk to a Council, depending on the circumstances of the case I may also decline to investigate if I take the view that the member was entitled to question the officer concerned and the conduct was not sufficiently serious to amount to a failure to show respect and consideration.

Whilst it is acknowledged that some members of the public can make unreasonable demands on members, members should always treat members of the public courteously and with consideration. Rude and offensive behaviour lowers the public's expectation and confidence in its elected representatives. This is the case in face to face settings such as meetings as well as when communicating by phone, letter, e-mail or other electronic means.

Example

The Adjudication Panel upheld a finding of a Standards Committee about a Councillor who was accused of failing to show respect and consideration for others by posting comments about other Councillors and the way in which the Council was run.

The member sought judicial review of this decision. The Court found that whilst the comments which were posted were sarcastic and mocking and the tone ridiculed his fellow members, because the majority of the comments related to the way in which the Council was run, how its decisions were recorded and the competence of the Councillors, the comments were "Political Expression". The ruling

said no account had been taken for the need for politicians to have “thicker skins”. In view of the member’s freedom of expression and the fact that the majority of comments were directed at fellow Councillors the finding of a breach in this case was a disproportionate interference with the member’s rights under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Standards Committee’s decision to censure the member was therefore set aside.

Example

A member of a town council wrote to a Deputy Minister of the Welsh Assembly Government about an employee (“Mr Smith”) of a county council, which was also copied to the Council. In the letter the member questioned Mr Smith’s competence and motivation and he made a number of comments of a disparaging and personal nature about Mr Smith and his associates. He raised the issue of homosexuality and referred to it as a “notorious disability” and that “homosexuality is only a demon which can be driven out”. The member was referred to the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

The Panel found that the member had breached paragraph 4(b) in that he had failed to show respect and consideration for others. It also found that by his use of words he had brought the office of member into disrepute in breach of paragraph 6(1)(a) of the Code.

The member was disqualified for 12 months from being or becoming a member of a local authority.

Bullying and harassment

See Paragraph 4(c)

You must not use any bullying behaviour or harass any person including other councillors, council officers (the Clerk or Proper Officer) or members of the public.

Harassment is repeated behaviour which upsets or annoys people. Bullying can be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviour. Such behaviour may happen once or be part of a pattern of behaviour directed at a weaker person or person over whom you have some actual or perceived influence. Bullying behaviour attempts to undermine an individual or a group of individuals, is detrimental to their confidence and capability, and may adversely affect their health.

I will always consider allegations of bullying and harassment from the perspective of the alleged victim. The question to be answered is whether the individual was reasonably entitled to believe they were being bullied rather than whether the person accused of bullying thought that he or she was doing so. Bullying is often carried out face to face, but increasingly, it can be carried out in print or using electronic media. The standards of behaviour expected are the same, whether you are expressing yourself verbally or in writing.

Example

Community Councillor P disagreed with the County Council’s arrangements for the enforcement of parking breaches within the town. Councillor P used disrespectful and abusive language and behaved in a bullying and intimidating manner towards Council Civil Enforcement Officers on four occasions. He also sought to use his position as a Councillor improperly in relation to a parking offence. The Standards Committee found that Councillor P had breached paragraph 4c of the Code of Conduct as he had pursued a course of conduct of threatening behaviour towards the County Council employees. The Standards Committee also established that Councillor P breached paragraphs 4(b), 7(a) and 6(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct. He was suspended from acting as a Councillor for 12 months.

Compromising the impartiality of officers of the authority

See Paragraph 4(d)

You must not compromise, or attempt to compromise, the impartiality of anyone who works for, or on behalf of, your Council.

You should not approach anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the Council with a view to pressurising them to carry out their duties in a biased or partisan way. They must be neutral and should not be coerced or persuaded to act in a way that would undermine their neutrality. For example, you should not get officers to help you prepare party political material, or to help you with matters relating to your private business. You should not provide or offer any incentive or reward in return for acting in a particular way or reaching a particular decision or threaten someone if they are not minded to act in a particular way.

If a member develops a close personal relationship with an officer, this becomes a personal and possibly a prejudicial interest under the Code.

Hypothetical Scenario

The Clerk is responsible for allocating allotments from a waiting list, the allotments are very popular and vacancies very rarely arise. The Clerk advised the Council that an allotment had become vacant and that they would consult the list and allocate the allotment to the person who had been waiting the longest in accordance with the Council's allotment allocation procedure. Councillor D's father had been waiting for an allotment for almost seven years. Councillor D approached the Clerk after the meeting and asked to see the list. He noted that one person was ahead of his father by only one month. Councillor D asked the Clerk to give the vacant allotment to his father, he said that as so much time had elapsed since his father and the other person had applied, the other person was unlikely to question who was first and in any event it would not be difficult to retype the list. Councillor D suggested that in return for this favour he would encourage the Council to look favourably on the charity suggested by the Clerk when it came time to decide where to allocate funds raised at a fun day the following month.

Disclosing confidential information

See Paragraph 5(a)

You must not disclose confidential information, or information which should be reasonably regarded to be of a confidential nature, except in any of the following circumstances:

- You have the consent of the person authorised to give it.
- You are required by law to do so.

The Information Commissioner has issued helpful guidance on the Freedom of Information Act and Data Protection Act which is available on his website at www.ico.gov.uk or by calling 0303 123 1113.

As a Community Councillor you may have sight of sensitive information, for example of a commercial nature. You must also be mindful that, as a Councillor, you hold a position of trust and you may find

that members of the public will provide you with information that could reasonably be regarded as confidential and you should always confirm (where possible obtain an agreement in writing) that you have the permission to disclose such information before doing so.

As a general rule, you should treat items discussed in the confidential sections of meetings (exempt items) as confidential. Similarly, legal advice is almost always covered by legal privilege and should not be disclosed.

Example

A Community Councillor (S) received an e-mail from another Councillor (T) regarding the employment of the caretaker. The e-mail was marked as confidential. Councillor S disclosed the e-mail to the caretaker's wife, information in the e-mails was subsequently used against the Council in a tribunal hearing relating to the caretaker's employment. I concluded that Councillor S might have breached paragraph 5(a) of the Code of Conduct.

Preventing access to information

See Paragraph 5(b)

You must not prevent any person from accessing information which they are entitled to by law. This includes information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 or those copies of minutes, agendas, reports and other documents of your Council which they have a right to access. To find out more about what types of information the public can access, contact the Information Commissioner's Office by visiting www.ico.gov.uk or by calling 0303 123 1113 or for specific queries, you should ask your Monitoring Officer or Clerk.

Any information that you produce in your official capacity is liable to be subject to the disclosure requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, and your Council may be required to release it in response to a request. If you do not provide the information to the Clerk on request, you will be in breach of the Code.

Your Council needs to decide whether to disclose information or whether it may be covered by an exemption. Even if you believe that information you hold is exempt, you must provide it to your Clerk if requested to allow the council to reach a decision. As well as being a breach of the Code, it is a criminal offence if information is destroyed after a Freedom of Information Act request has been received.

Example

A leader of a county council refused to give the Council's Information Officer a letter he had written to the Wales Audit Office on behalf of the Council's Executive. As a result the Council could not respond appropriately to a Freedom of Information Act request which resulted in a complaint being made to the Information Commissioner's Office. The member continued to refuse to disclose the letter despite having received clear and unequivocal advice from the Information Officer. His refusal led to an adverse finding from the Information Commissioner's Office. The Adjudication Panel found that the member had breached paragraphs 5(b) and 6(1)(a) (disrepute) in respect of this matter and other related matters. By the time the case was considered by the Panel the member had resigned from office. He was disqualified from holding office for 12 months.

Disrepute

See Paragraph 6(1)(a)

You must not behave in a way which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your office or authority into disrepute at any time.

As a member, your actions and behaviour are subject to greater scrutiny than those of ordinary members of the public. You should be aware that your actions in both your public and private life might have an adverse impact on your Council.

Dishonest and deceitful behaviour will bring your Council into disrepute, as may conduct which results in a criminal conviction, especially if it involves dishonest, threatening or violent behaviour, even if the behaviour happens in your private life. Making unfair or inaccurate criticism of your Council in a public arena might well be regarded as bringing your Council into disrepute. Inappropriate e-mails to constituents might well bring the office of member into disrepute.

Example

A Community Councillor had been abusive to a shop proprietor and two members of her staff and had attempted to obtain a discount on a private purchase by saying it was being bought on behalf of the Community Council, and when his request for a discount was refused he had made threats against the business. The Adjudication Panel found that the member had brought the office of member into disrepute and suspended him for 9 months.

Example

A member of a County Borough Council who regularly wrote an article for a local monthly publication referred in his article to a recent road traffic accident in which a 10 year old boy was injured. The complainant was the mother of the boy who was with the injured child. After the article was published she telephoned the Councillor who she said was abusive towards her during the call. In a subsequent e-mail exchange the Councillor told her that she had “failed to take any responsibility for her child allowing him out alone”, that her “ill educated in the highway code son” was to blame and said “don’t you dare try and shift your inadequacies as a parent upon me”.

The member was found in breach of paragraphs 4(b) (respect & consideration) and 6(1)(a) (disrepute). The matter was referred to the Adjudication Panel for Wales. Although the member had claimed to have apologised for his behaviour what he had actually said was “I have nothing to apologise for... I do apologise if, for some reason it upset you”.

The Panel found that the member had breached paragraphs 4(b) (treating others with respect) and 6(1)(a) (disrepute). He had previously been suspended by the Panel for 2 months for sending inappropriate e-mails in 2006. He was suspended for 12 months in respect of these breaches.

Reporting breaches of the Code

See paragraph 6(1)(c)

If you reasonably believe that a breach of the Code has occurred, you must report it to me and to your Monitoring Officer. In order to have a reasonable belief that a breach has occurred, you will need to have evidence which supports this. If you are in doubt as to whether a breach has occurred, you should consult your Monitoring Officer as soon as possible. Where the breach is a very minor or technical one, or where there is no clear evidence that a breach occurred, your Monitoring Officer may advise you of the likely threshold I will set. Nonetheless, the decision as to whether to investigate a breach rests with me. The balance of any doubt should always favour reporting. It is helpful if you specify which aspect of the Code you believe has been breached, but this is not essential.

To report a breach, you can contact my office by phone at 0845 6010987, by email to ask@ombudsman-wales.org.uk or via the website at www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk. A special leaflet on making complaints about alleged breaches of the Code is available on request or on the website.

In determining whether to investigate a complaint of a breach I will use the two stage test which I have outlined on pages 5 and 6 above. You should ensure that you provide any evidence you have available when you make a complaint including minutes of meetings, correspondence, contemporaneous notes or e-mails. If there are other individuals who have witnessed the alleged breach, you should let us know who they are. This latter point is especially important as if I only have one person's word against another's, it's usually not possible for me to make a finding that a breach has occurred, and in the absence of independent confirmation, I won't usually begin an investigation.

Vexatious complaints

See paragraph 6(1)(d)

You must not make complaints against other members or staff members or people working on behalf of your Council which are not founded in fact and which are motivated by malice (a desire to do them harm) or by political rivalry. Unfortunately, there have been instances where members have sought to bring complaints about rivals which are designed to disadvantage them, sometimes in the run-up to elections, and where the evidence of any breach is thin or non-existent. I consider that in the first instance such conduct should be considered under the relevant authority's local resolution process if there is one in place.

Where specific details of such complaints are passed to local press and media, this may prejudice an investigation and so also may be a breach of the Code. You must report well-founded alleged breaches to me and to your Monitoring Officer, not to your local newspaper or radio station. The press will properly cover the business of any hearings and their outcomes, and members making allegations should not generate publicity in advance of these.

You should also avoid making complaints which have little or no substance (frivolous complaints) or which are designed mainly to annoy the person complained about.

It became necessary during the year to correspond with the Clerk of a Council in relation to our mutual concern about the number of complaints I had received in respect of its members. During 2011/12, I received 65 complaints about members of this Council out of a total of 206, representing 32% of the complaints about Community Councils. This level of complaints is entirely disproportionate. Such a level of complaints, in my view, reflected a very hostile set of interactions between councillors and must inevitably lower the esteem in which the Council was held by its electors. I urged the Council to reflect on the culture which gave rise to these complaints and how behaviour might be changed to reverse this trend. I made clear that if there was no reduction in the number of complaints by members against other members I would not hesitate to investigate the matter under paragraph 6(1)(d) of the Code.

You should note that the Code of Conduct only applies to those who have been elected, co-opted or otherwise appointed to a body which is covered by the Code of Conduct. It does not apply to members of the public. Whilst I appreciate that it can be frustrating if a member of the public makes repeated complaints against you which you consider to be vexatious or frivolous in nature, I am required to consider each complaint on its own merit. However, it is likely that such complaints would not pass the two stage test and result in an investigation.

Co-operating with investigations

See paragraph 6(2)

You must co-operate with an investigation when it is being conducted by me or by your Monitoring Officer using our statutory powers. Not to do so is itself a breach of the code. This means that you should reply promptly to all correspondence and telephone calls, make yourself available for interview if required and make available copies of any requested documents. My office and your Monitoring Officer will make reasonable allowances for urgent pressures you face and arrangements previously made, e.g. for holidays. However, they will expect you to give priority to their investigations, to avoid matters being needlessly drawn out. The requirement to co-operate with an investigation applies whether you are a witness or the subject of the investigation.

(In the course of my work I have unfortunately become aware of instances where members accused of breaches of the Code have sought to put pressure on the individuals making the complaint or on other witnesses. I regard such behaviour as entirely unacceptable. You must not intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person who is or is likely to be a complainant, a witness, or involved in the administration of any investigation or proceedings relating to a failure to comply with the Code.

However much you may be concerned about allegations that you or a fellow councillor failed to comply with the Code, it is always wrong to bully, intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person involved in the investigation or hearing. Even though you may not have breached the Code, you will have your say during any independent investigation or hearing, and you should let these processes follow their natural course.

If you intimidate a witness in an investigation about your conduct, for example, you may find yourself subject to another complaint that you have breached paragraph 4(c) of the Code with regard to bullying or harassment, for example, or paragraph 6(1)(a) in respect of bringing the office of member into disrepute.

Using your position improperly

See Paragraph 7(a)

You must not use, or attempt to use, your position improperly to the advantage or disadvantage of yourself or anyone else. This paragraph applies at all times and not just when you are carrying out your duties as a member. You should not use, or attempt to use, your public office either for your or anybody else's personal gain or loss. For example, your behaviour would be improper if you sought to further your own private interests through your position as a member. This also applies if you use your office to improve your wellbeing at the expense of others.

Members who own land, or whose close personal associates own land, need to be particularly cautious where planning matters are concerned. If you are in any doubt, you should take advice. This applies equally to members of community councils when your Council is consulted on planning matters. Similarly, while it is reasonable to expect members to help constituents apply to the Council e.g. for housing, it is quite inappropriate to seek to influence the decision to be taken by the officers.

The provisions of the Bribery Act 2010 apply to members carrying out their public functions. Should a member be convicted of a criminal offence under this Act then it is likely that they will also have used their position improperly (in breach of paragraph 7(a)) and be likely to have brought the office of member or their authority into disrepute in breach of paragraphs 6(1)(a) and (b). If any complaint which is made to me concerns conduct which may amount to a criminal offence then I am likely to refer the matter to the police.

Example

Councillor D was a 'joint co-ordinator' of a community group. Councillor D did not notify the Council of her position in this group. She took part in the considerations and voted on the decision to negotiate a new lease in respect of a workshop used by this community group. A Standards Committee found that she had used her position on the Council improperly as the decision on which she voted benefitted a group in which she clearly had an interest which she had not made the Council aware of. She was found in breach of paragraph 7(a) of the Code of Conduct and suspended from acting as a Councillor for four weeks.

The authority's resources

See Paragraph 7(b)

You must only use or authorise the use of the resources of the Council in accordance with its requirements.

If your Council provides you with access to resources (for example telephone, computer and other IT facilities), you must only use these resources for carrying out your council business and any other activity which your Council has authorised you to use them for.

You must be familiar with the rules applying to the use of these resources made by your Council. Failure to comply with your Council's rules is likely to amount to a breach of the Code.

If you authorise someone (for example a member of your family) to use your Council's resources, you must take care to ensure that this is allowed by your Council's rules.

Using resources for proper purposes only

See Paragraphs 7(b)(v) and 7(b)(vi)

You must make sure you use the Council's resources for proper purposes only. It is not appropriate to use, or authorise others to use, the resources for political purposes, including party political purposes. When using the Council's resources, you must have regard, if applicable, to any guidance issued by your Council.

Example

A member of a county council was found in breach of the Code for making improper use of his council-owned computer equipment for private purposes by downloading inappropriate adult pornographic images and sending a number of letters to a local newspaper, which he falsely represented as being from members of the public. The Adjudication Panel found that the member had misused the Council equipment in breach of the Code and had brought the office of member into disrepute. He was disqualified from being or becoming a member of a local authority for 2 years and 6 months.

Reaching decisions objectively

See paragraph 8

When taking part in meetings of your Council, or when arriving at decisions relating to the Council's business, you must do so with an open mind and objectively. During the decision-making process you must act fairly and take proper account of the public interest.

Most decisions taken by a Community Council relate to local matters and funding of local projects. Although the amounts of money being spent are smaller than at County level all decisions must be taken on the basis of the facts in front of you, and you must not have made your mind up in advance to such an extent that you're entirely unprepared to consider all of the evidence and advice you receive. Having a completely closed mind is known as pre-determination. You are entitled to hold a preliminary view about a particular matter in advance of a meeting (pre-disposition) as long as you

keep an open mind and are prepared to consider the merits of all the arguments and points made about the matter under consideration before reaching your decision.

Pre-determination on the other hand would be where you have clearly decided on a course of action in advance of a meeting and are totally unwilling to consider the evidence and arguments presented on that matter during the meeting. Pre-determination could not only invalidate the decision, it would also amount to a breach of the Code.

Considering advice provided to you and giving reasons

See Paragraph 8

You must have regard to all of the advice you receive from your Clerk. The Clerk is usually also the Proper Officer and it is part of their role to research the policy, guidelines and legislation relevant to advice given when taking decisions.

It is always helpful, if you can, to get advice as early as possible. If you can, ask for advice in good time before a meeting, rather than at the meeting or immediately before it starts. Make sure you give the Clerk all of the information they need to take into account when giving you advice.

If you seek advice, or advice is offered to you, for example, on whether or not you should register a personal interest, you should have regard to this advice before you make your mind up. Failure to do so may be a breach of the Code.

As a matter of good practice, where you disagree with the Clerk's recommendations in making a decision, you should give clear reasons for your decision. If you decide to vote against their advice, you should ensure that your reasons for doing so are recorded in the relevant minutes.

Expenses

See paragraph 9(a)

You need to follow the law and your Council's requirements in claiming expenses and allowances. If you are in any doubt about your entitlements, or the proper way to claim, you should ask your Clerk for advice. You need to keep proper records of expenditure supported by receipts where appropriate, so that you can properly evidence your claims. Even if a particular scheme does not require you to submit receipts, you are strongly advised to keep these so that you can prove how much you have actually spent on the items you are claiming for.

Gifts and hospitality

See paragraph 9(b)

It's important that you don't accept any gifts or hospitality for yourself, or on behalf of others, which would place you under obligation or appear to do so. Accepting such gifts or hospitality could be regarded as compromising your objectivity when you make decisions or carry out the work of your Council. This is also true of any services or gifts in kind.

This does not prevent you from attending official events such as a civic reception or working lunch where these are authorised by your Council.

3. Personal and prejudicial interests

The elements of the Code which cover personal and prejudicial interests give rise to many questions from members. They are designed to safeguard the principles of selflessness and objectivity. They are intended to give members of the public confidence that decisions are being taken in their best interests, and not in the best interests of members of authorities or their close personal associates.

Personal interests relate to issues where you or a close personal associate may have some link to a matter under discussion. These interests become prejudicial where an informed independent observer could conclude that the interest would influence your vote, or your decision. Guidance on registering interests is at Section 4.

The paragraphs below are designed to offer guidance on a very complex subject. I would strongly recommend that if you are in any doubt about whether you have a personal or prejudicial interest, and what you need to do if so, you should ask your Clerk for advice.

Personal Interests

See paragraph 10

While you are carrying out your duties, you need to decide if you have a personal interest, and if so, whether you need to disclose it. Most members know that you need to disclose personal interests at meetings, but as you will read below, there are other occasions, such as when speaking to the Clerk about the matter concerned, when you may also need to do so.

You have a **personal interest** in any business of your Council, including when making a decision, where it relates to or is likely to affect:

1. your job or your business;
2. your employer, or any firm in which you are a partner or paid director;
3. any person who has paid towards the cost of your election or your expenses as a member;
4. any company in which you hold shares with a nominal value of more than £25,000 or where your holding is more than 1% of the total issued share capital, which has premises or land in your Council's area;

5. any contract that your Council makes with a firm in which you are a partner, paid director or hold shares in as described in 4;
6. any land in which you have an interest and which is in your Council's area (this is especially important in all planning matters including strategic plans);
7. any land let by your Council to a firm in which you're a partner, paid director or a body as set out in 4;
8. any body to which you've been elected, appointed or nominated by your Council;
9. any
 - public authority or body exercising functions of a public nature,
 - company, industrial and provident society, charity or body directed to charitable purposes,
 - body whose main role is influencing public opinion or policy,
 - trade union or professional association,
 - private club, society or association operating in your Council's area in which you have membership or are in a position of general control or management, or
10. any land in your Council's area which you have a license to occupy for at least 28 days.

It is always safer to declare an interest, however, if in doubt consult your Monitoring Officer.

Matters affecting your well being or financial position

If a decision might be seen as affecting your well being or financial position or the well being or financial position of any person who lives with you or with whom you have a close personal association to a greater extent than other people in your Council's area, you also have a personal interest.

Examples of decisions of this kind include obvious issues like contracts being awarded to your partner's company but also issues about the location of developments, where it might make a big difference to where you or your close personal associates live. Examples have included the location of playgrounds, where elected members have opposed them near their houses because of issues about noise.

What is "a body exercising functions of a public nature"?

The phrase "a body exercising functions of a public nature" has been subject to broad interpretation by the courts for a variety of different purposes. Although it is not possible to produce a definitive list of such bodies, here are some of the criteria to consider when deciding whether or not a body meets that definition:

- Does that body carry out a public service?
- Is the function exercised under legislation or according to some statutory power?
- Can the body be judicially reviewed?

When conducting Community Council business it is likely that you will be acting on a body which is exercising functions of a public nature. You may also be doing this if you have been appointed to act on behalf of the Council on a community project or interest group.

What does “affecting well-being or financial position” mean?

The term ‘well-being’ can be described as a condition of contentedness and happiness. Anything that could affect your quality of life, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect your well-being.

A personal interest can affect you or your close personal associates positively and negatively. So if you or they have the potential to gain or lose from a matter under consideration, you need to declare a personal interest in both situations.

Who is a close personal associate?

Close personal associates include people such as close friends, colleagues with whom you have particularly strong connections, business associates and close relatives. It does not include casual acquaintances, distant relatives or people you simply come in contact with through your role as member or your work in the local community.

Close personal associates can also include someone with whom you have been in dispute, or whom you may be regarded as having an interest in disadvantaging. For example, being a member of the same golf club as another person would not of itself constitute a close personal association but having that person as a weekly golf partner might well do. If you are in doubt, you should ask your Monitoring Officer.

“Twin hatted” members

If you are a member of both a community council and a county council you are not prevented from discussing the same matters at both. You may, for example, take part in a discussion about a planning application about which your community council has been consulted and still go on to participate in a decision about the application if you sit on the planning committee of your county council.

If you do so, you would be well advised to state at the community council meeting that you would be looking at the matter afresh when you consider it at the county council, and that you would take into account all of the information and advice provided to you. At the planning committee, you should make it clear that you are not bound by the views of the community council. The advice about objective decision making in respect of paragraph 8 of the Code is also relevant here.

Obviously, if the application was one submitted by the community council, then you would have both a personal and a prejudicial interest, and you would be required to declare it and withdraw in line with the guidance on “what to do if you have a prejudicial interest” below.

Example

Councillor F participated in a meeting which was considering whether to approve the complainant’s nomination for the post of school governor; Councillor F’s husband had also applied for the post. Not only did the Adjudication Panel find that she should have declared a personal interest in the item of business by virtue of her close personal association with her husband, but it also took the view that as there had been a history of animosity directed towards the member by the complainant which had been reported publicly, she also had a personal interest by virtue of her close personal association with the complainant.

A further element to this complaint was that after the complainant had made a complaint to me about the member, the member sat on the Council's Standards Committee when it considered a separate complaint from the complainant against another member. The Adjudication Panel took the view that, in light of the acrimonious relationship between the member and the complainant, the member's participation in the Standards Committee hearing could reasonably have been regarded as affecting the complainant's wellbeing because she was entitled to a fair and unbiased hearing of her complaint.

What if I am not aware of my personal interest?

Your obligation to disclose a personal interest to a meeting only applies when you are aware of or reasonably ought to be aware of the existence of the personal interest.

Clearly you cannot be expected to declare something of which you are unaware. It would be impractical to expect you to research into the employment, business interests and other activities of all your close associates and relatives. However, you should not ignore the existence of interests which, from the point of view of a reasonable and objective observer, you should have been aware.

Disclosing personal interests

See paragraph 11

At meetings, you must declare that you have a personal interest, and the nature of that interest, before the matter is discussed or as soon as it becomes apparent to you except in limited circumstances. You must declare any interest orally if discussing a matter with the Clerk or another Member as soon as you become aware of the interest and subsequently confirm it in writing within 14 days.

If you have agreed with your Monitoring Officer that the information about your personal interest is sensitive information then you should disclose the existence of a personal interest, and confirm that the Monitoring Officer has agreed that the information about it is sensitive. More information about this is included in the separate section below.

Prejudicial Interests

See paragraph 12

If you declare a personal interest you can remain in the meeting, speak and vote on the matter, unless your personal interest is also a prejudicial interest.

What is a prejudicial interest?

Your personal interest will also be a prejudicial interest in a matter if a member of the public, who knows the relevant facts, would reasonably think your personal interest is so significant that it is likely to prejudice your judgement of the public interest. There are exemptions to this which are contained in paragraph 12(2) of the Code of Conduct although many of the examples are unlikely to apply to business undertaken by a community council.

What is so significant that it is likely to prejudice your judgement?

If a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the relevant facts would think that your judgement of the public interest might be prejudiced, then you have a prejudicial interest. This is an objective test. You must decide not whether you would take the decision without prejudice, but whether you would be seen as doing so.

You must ask yourself whether a member of the public – if he or she knew all the relevant facts – would think that your personal interest was so significant that it would be likely to prejudice your judgement. In other words, the interest must be perceived as likely to harm or impair your ability to judge the public interest.

The mere existence of local knowledge, or connections within the local community, will not normally be sufficient to meet the test. There must be some factor that might positively harm your ability to judge the public interest objectively. The nature of the matter is also important, including whether a large number of people are equally affected by it or whether you or a smaller group are particularly affected.

Some general principles must be remembered when applying this test. You should clearly act in the public interest and not in the interests of any close personal associates. You are a custodian of the public purse and the public interest and your behaviour and decisions should reflect this responsibility.

You would have a prejudicial interest in the consideration and decision on whether to support a planning application proposal if a close personal associate of yours (e.g. your son or a good friend) lives next to the proposed site. This is because your close personal associate would be likely to be affected by the application to a greater extent than the majority of the inhabitants of your council area and this gives you a personal interest in the issue. The close personal association means a reasonable member of the public might think that it would prejudice your view of the public interest when considering the planning application. It does not matter whether it actually would or not.

In other cases, where there has been a dispute between you and an individual who could be disadvantaged by a decision, an informed reasonable member of the public might conclude that you would be inclined to vote accordingly, whether this is the case or not.

Community Councillors don't have a prejudicial interest in decisions made by their council in respect of grants, loans or other financial assistance to community groups or voluntary organisations where the value doesn't exceed £500. Furthermore community councillors who have been appointed to the community group or voluntary organisation concerned by their community council e.g. to the board of a community hall, will not have a prejudicial interest in decisions made by their council in respect of any grants, loans or other financial assistance. If, on the other hand, you are on such a board in your own capacity and haven't been appointed by your Council, then you will have a prejudicial interest.

What to do when you have a prejudicial interest

See paragraph 14

Even where you have a prejudicial interest, the Code supports your role as a community advocate and enables you in certain circumstances to represent your community and to speak on issues important to them and to you.

Key points:

If you have a **prejudicial interest** in a matter being discussed at a meeting, you must, having declared your personal interest in the matter, leave the room (or any other venue in which the meeting is being held including, for example, the location of a site meeting), **unless members of the public are allowed to make representations, give evidence or answer questions about the matter**, by statutory right or otherwise. If that is the case, you can also attend the meeting for that purpose.

However, you must immediately leave the room or chamber once the period for considering representations has finished, and before any discussion on the item begins, even if members of the public are allowed to remain. You cannot remain in the public gallery to observe the vote on the matter.

In addition, you must not seek to influence a decision in which you have a prejudicial interest. This rule is similar to your general obligation not to use your position as a member improperly to your or someone else's advantage or disadvantage. This means that as well as leaving meetings where the item is discussed, you should also not write or make any oral representations about the matter.

The Code does not provide you with a general right to speak to a meeting where you have a prejudicial interest.

The Code aims to provide members with the same rights as ordinary members of the public to speak on certain matters in meetings, despite having a prejudicial interest. These rights are usually governed by your Council's constitution, procedure rules or standing orders, and may be subject to conditions including time limits or the fact that representations can only be made in writing.

If an ordinary member of the public would be allowed to speak to a meeting about an item, you should be provided with the same opportunity. You will be able to make representations, answer questions or give evidence, even if you have a prejudicial interest in the item. You may not take part in the discussion or observe the vote.

When must I leave the place where the meeting is held?

You must leave immediately after the time for making representations, giving evidence or answering questions is finished, and before any debate starts.

What does influencing a decision mean?

You must not make any representations or have any involvement with decisions in which you have a prejudicial interest, except where you are entitled to speak as described above.

What if the public are not allowed to speak to the meeting on the matter?

If an ordinary member of the public is not allowed to speak on the matter, you cannot do so if you have a prejudicial interest. You must leave the place where the debate is being held and not seek to influence the debate in any way.

This may be the case, for example, where your Council is discussing a confidential matter in closed session or does not have procedure rules or standing orders in place that allow members of the public to speak at a meeting of your Council. Like the public, you are not allowed to participate if you have a prejudicial interest. However, where the public may be allowed to sit in the public gallery to observe the meeting, you will be required to leave the room during the debate and vote.

Example

Councillor R attended a workshop with the Local Park Authority relating to the consideration of land for inclusion in the Local Development Plan (LDP). Councillor R had previously submitted an application for land he owned to be included in the LDP. I considered that Councillor R had a prejudicial interest in the item which was being discussed as the outcome could have a significant impact on his property and could affect his financial well being. The Standards Committee found that he was in breach of paragraph 14(1)(a) of the Code of Conduct by not declaring an interest and leaving the room when discussions concerning the area in which his own land was situated took place.

Dispensations

If I have a prejudicial interest, can I obtain a dispensation to allow me to take part in the meeting?

You can apply in writing to your County Council's Standards Committee for a dispensation on one or more of the following grounds:

- at least 50 per cent of the council or committee members would be prevented from taking a full part in a meeting because of prejudicial interests;
- the nature of your interest is such that your participation wouldn't harm public confidence;
- your interest is common to a significant proportion of the general public;
- you have a particular role or expertise which would justify your participation;
- the business relates to the finances or property of a voluntary organisation and you sit on its board or committee in your own right and you don't have any other interest, although in this instance, any dispensation won't let you vote on the matter, or
- the committee believes that your participation would be in the interests of the people in your Council's area and that the committee notifies Welsh Ministers within seven days.

You can apply for a dispensation individually and in certain circumstances, you can make joint applications where a number of members want to obtain a dispensation to speak or vote on the same matter. If the Standards Committee approves your application, it must grant the dispensation in writing and before the meeting is held. If you need a dispensation, you should apply for one as soon as is reasonably possible.

Only the Standards Committee can grant the dispensation and will do so at its discretion. The Standards Committee will need to balance the public interest in preventing members with prejudicial interests from taking part in decisions, against the public interest in decisions being taken by a reasonably representative group of members of the Council. If failure to grant a dispensation will

result in a council or committee not achieving a quorum, this may well constitute grounds for granting a dispensation.

Where you hold a dispensation, you can also make written representations but you must provide details of the dispensation in any correspondence. If you make oral representations, whether in person or by phone, you must refer to the dispensation and confirm this in writing within 14 days.

4. Registration of Interests

Gifts and hospitality

Key points:

You must notify your Clerk of any gifts or hospitality worth more than the amount specified by your Council that you receive in connection with your official duties as a member, and the source of the gift or hospitality.

Like other interests in your register of interests, you may have a **personal interest** in a matter under consideration if it is likely to affect a person who gave you a gift or hospitality that is registered. If that is the case, you must declare the existence and nature of the gift or hospitality, the person who gave it to you, how the business under consideration relates to that person, and then decide whether that interest is also a **prejudicial interest**.

It is also good practice to provide a note of any offers of gifts which you have declined.

Is the gift or hospitality connected to my official duties as a member?

You should ask yourself, would I have been given this if I was not on the Council? If you are in doubt as to the motive behind a gift or hospitality, we recommend that you register it or speak to your Clerk.

You do not need to your Clerk gifts and hospitality which are not related to your role as a member, such as Christmas gifts from your friends and family, or gifts which you do not accept. However, you should always notify your Clerk of any a gift or hospitality if it could be perceived as something given to you because of your position or if your Council requires you to.

What if I do not know the value of a gift or hospitality?

The general rule is, if in doubt as to the value of a gift or hospitality, you should notify your Clerk of it, as a matter of good practice and in accordance with the principles of openness and accountability in public life.

You may have to estimate how much a gift or hospitality is worth. Also, an accumulation of small gifts you receive from the same source over a short period that add up to the value specified by your Council or over should be registered.

The Code also refers to material benefit or advantage. The measure of this would be if an informed independent observer could conclude that you might be perceived to be better off as a consequence.

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
1 Ffordd yr Hen Gae
Pencoed
CF35 5LJ

Tel: 01656 641150

Fax: 01656 641199

E-mail: ask@ombudsman-wales.org.uk

Web: www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk