

Local Government Association Model Member Code of Conduct

Response to consultation from Worcestershire County Council Standards and Ethics Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the draft Model Member Code of Conduct. Our comments cover general issues and then move on to specific parts of the Code.

General comments

Consistent Code

Worcestershire County Council's current Code of Conduct has been written in association with all the District Councils in the County and is consistent. Parish Councils are encouraged to adopt it too. We therefore support the principle of a single Code to avoid ambiguity across different sectors of local government.

Sanctions

The Committee considers that the effectiveness of any Code can be enhanced by the introduction of proportionate sanctions. We acknowledge that this would require a change in the law. We urge the LGA to lobby Government to introduce this change into the legislative process.

Independent Members – Right to Vote

The Committee values the involvement of Independent members on the Committee. It considers that this should be recognised by reintroducing the right to vote for such members.

Definitions

Where words or terms are defined, we suggest that a well-known source is used so this is consistent. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary for 'Civility' and the ACAS Code for defining bullying and harassment.

Application of the Code

In our view the wider explanation of the application of the Code, as referred to in footnotes 1 and 2 of the draft under this paragraph, should apply and be emphasised. Committee members are concerned that we are seeing an increasing number of complaints from the public about how members have expressed themselves on social media, and some concrete guidance about councillors' obligations and expectations would be welcome. A Councillor who uses social media – whether or not they state that any views are their own – risks opening themselves up to complaints. For example, they may use it to promote the work of their council and then express a robust view about another issue. Given their profile locally, this is often perceived by the public to be acting as a councillor.

Specific Obligations of General Conduct

The legal requirement to observe the Code must be clear and emphasised.

Civility

We support the use of the word 'civility' but suggest where definitions are used then they should be attributable e.g. the Oxford English Dictionary definition.

Gifts and Hospitality

The current Worcestershire Code uses a value of £15 to register gifts and hospitality and we consider that it should remain at this figure rather than the £25 proposed in the draft LGA Code.

Cllr S Mackay

Chairman, Standards and Ethics Committee, Worcestershire County Council