

Spelthorne Borough Council

Members' Code of Conduct Committee

Hearing Procedures - Final Hearings

To encourage the confidence of members and the public the following procedures have been adopted by the Members' Code of Conduct Committee to ensure a consistent approach is taken to determining matters locally.

The Panel will comprise of three voting members of the Standards Committee (councillors) selected by the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chairman of the Standards Committee. The councillors shall, wherever possible, be selected on a politically proportionate basis. An Independent Member is invited to Chair the Panel but legally cannot vote on the decision.

The investigation shall be carried out promptly, with the expectation that all investigations, resolutions and hearings will be completed within a maximum period of three months. All those involved in the complaint should do their utmost to ensure that this can happen.

There will be an expectation that the Hearing will sit from 10.00am to 4.00pm and if there is a need for the hearing to continue then the hearing will re-convene the following day.

INTERPRETATION

Member - means the councillor or co-opted member of the authority who is the subject of the allegation being considered by the Standards Committee, unless otherwise stated.

Investigator - means the Monitoring Officer, an independent investigator appointed by the Monitoring Officer or a senior officer of Spelthorne Borough Council or another local authority who has agreed to assist the Committee.

Committee - also refers to a Hearings Panel of the Standards Committee;

Legal Advisor - means the officer responsible for providing legal advice to the Standards Committee. This may be the Monitoring Officer, another legally qualified officer of the authority, or someone appointed for this purpose from outside the authority.

Representation - the member may be represented or accompanied during the meeting by a fellow councillor, a solicitor or counsel, or with the permission of the committee another person.

Legal Advice – the Committee may take legal advice, in private if necessary, from its legal advisor at any time during the hearing or while they are considering the outcome. The substance of any legal advice given to the committee should be shared with the Member and the Investigator if they are present.

Pre-hearing Process

1. The Monitoring Officer or the Hearings Panel may conduct a pre-hearing process in order to narrow the issues between the parties and make appropriate provision for the smooth running of the Hearing. Where this happens the Monitoring Officer will provide a letter to all parties outlining the issues to be determined for and the arrangements for making decisions about all such matters.
2. In complex cases it may be appropriate for the Hearings Panel to meet in advance to deal with all such procedural issues but the Monitoring Officer will provide an agenda for such meeting outlining the matters to be resolved.

3. The Legal Advisor will advise the Chairman whether the hearing should be in public or private. The Access to Information Rules will apply to this hearing as it would apply to any other meeting of the Council. In order to air procedural matters properly in advance of a hearing it is normally expected that the Panel will take place in private unless there are exceptional circumstances which dictate otherwise.

Hearings Procedure

4. At the start of the hearing the Chairman will:
 - Introduce members of the committee and others in attendance
 - Explain the purpose of the meeting and how it will proceed
5. The Legal Advisor will advise the Chairman whether the hearing should be in public or private. The Access to Information Rules will apply to this hearing as it would apply to any other meeting of the Council. In order to give confidence to the public it is expected that the Panel will take place in public unless there are exceptional circumstances which dictate otherwise.
6. The Committee will then resolve any other issues or disagreements about how the hearing should continue, which have not been resolved during the pre-hearing process.
7. If there are disagreements about the facts the Investigator, if present, will be invited to make representations to support the findings of their report and with the Committee's permission to call supporting witnesses. The committee will give the Member an opportunity to challenge any evidence put forward by a witness but any direct questions are put through the Chairman.
8. The Member will then have the opportunity to make representations to support his or her version of the facts and with the Committee's permission to call supporting witnesses. The Committee will give the Investigator an opportunity to challenge any evidence put forward by a witness.
9. At any time the Committee may question the investigator, the Member or their witnesses.
10. The Committee will not allow the member to raise a disagreement with the facts, which was not raised prior to the hearing, unless the Member satisfies the Committee there were good reasons for not raising the disagreement before. If the Investigator is not present the committee will consider whether or not it would be in the public interest to continue in the Investigator's absence. After considering the position and the Member's explanation for not raising the disagreement at an earlier stage the committee may:
 - (a) Continue the hearing, relying on the information in the Investigator's report;
 - (b) Allow the Member to make representations about the issue and invite the Investigator to respond and call any witnesses necessary; or
 - (c) Postpone the hearing to arrange for the Investigator to be present if he or she is not already or for appropriate witnesses to be present.
11. The Investigator and Member will normally be given the opportunity to make short closing statements before the Committee retires to reach its decision. The Member will speak last to have the final say.
12. The Committee will then consider its decision based on the facts presented in private.
13. If any clarification or legal advice is needed this will be undertaken with all parties present.

14. On their return to the hearing, the Chairman will announce the Committee's findings of fact and whether the Member has failed to follow the Code of Conduct.
15. If the Committee decides that the Member has failed to follow the Code of Conduct, the chairman will inform the Member of this finding.
16. The Investigator and the Member will be invited to make any final relevant points as regards the sanction which should be imposed.
17. The Committee will then consider the representations and make its decision in private and will consider any representations from the Investigator and the Member as to:
 - (a) Whether or not the committee should set a penalty; and
 - (b) What form any penalty should take.
18. The Committee will then consider in private whether or not to impose a penalty on the Member and, if so, what the penalty should be.
19. The Chairman will then announce the committee's decision.
20. The Committee will then consider whether it will make any recommendations to the Council on any future preventative measures or tightening up procedures, with a view to promoting high standards of conduct among members. In doing so they will consider any verbal or written representations from the investigator.
21. The Committee will announce its decision on the day and provide a short written decision on that day. It will issue a full written decision as soon as practicable and send it to all concerned with the hearing.

Adopted 27 February 2013

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