



Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries



*Local Government
Act 1995 Review*
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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT REVIEW ►► DELIVERING FOR THE COMMUNITY

Guidelines on the Model Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates

March 2021

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Model Code of Conduct

Introduction

Local government is vital for the delivery of key services and infrastructure in the community. Individuals who are, or seek to be, members of local councils and council committees are entrusted by their community to represent local views, make sound decisions, and utilise public funds effectively to deliver services and amenities for their community. As such, a high standard of professional and ethical conduct is expected of council members and committee members in local governments, as well as candidates in local government elections.

A review of the *Local Government Act 1995* (Act), including consultation with community and sector stakeholders, led to the implementation of priority reforms under the *Local Government Amendment Act 2019* (Amendment Act).

The Amendment Act was developed in response to stakeholder feedback that there was a need for governance reforms, including a Code of Conduct for council members, committee members and candidates that clearly reflects community expectations of behaviour and supports consistency between local governments in relation to the overall process for managing alleged breaches of that Code.

As a result, key reforms under the Amendment Act include the introduction of a Model Code of Conduct (Model Code) that must be adopted by local governments and applied to council members, committee members and candidates; as well as a separate Code of Conduct for Employees.

The Model Code replaces the previous statutory requirement for local governments to develop and implement an individual code of conduct for their council members, committee members and employees.

The *Model Code of Conduct Regulations 2021* (Regulations) have been developed to give effect to the Amendment Act, and provide for:

- overarching principles to guide behaviour;
- behaviours and complaints which are managed by local governments; and
- rules of conduct, contraventions of which are considered by the independent Local Government Standards Panel (Standards Panel) where appropriate.

Definitions

The Model Code defines key terms to aid understanding and compliance. Where a term is not defined in either the Regulations or the Act, then the generally accepted meaning of the term applies. Some additional guidance is provided as follows:

Candidate: an individual is considered a candidate when their nomination for election is accepted by a Returning Officer under section 4.49 of the Act. The Model Code applies to the individual from that point. Any alleged breach of the Model Code may only be addressed if and when the individual is elected as a council member.

Council member: references to 'council member' in the Regulations mean an individual who has been elected as a council member under the Act. The requirements of the Regulations also apply to a council member who is a committee member on a council committee.

Committee member: under the Regulations, a 'committee member' includes any council member, local government employee or unelected member of the community who has been engaged by the council to participate in a council committee.

Evidence: references to 'evidence' in the Regulations means the available facts or information indicating whether an allegation is true or valid. Local governments must use evidence provided by the complainant and by the person to whom the complaint relates, as well as other relevant information, to decide whether an alleged breach of the Model Code has occurred.

Local government(s): per the approach in the Act, references to 'local government' in the Regulations mean the body corporate that is the local governing body made up of the council, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and administrative staff appointed and managed by the CEO.

Where a statutory function entails decision-making on governance matters, the council is responsible for making those decisions unless the matter is delegated. This includes decisions on complaints regarding the conduct of council members, committee members and candidates, as set out in the Regulations.

Further guidance on certain terms in the Model Code is provided in these Guidelines.

Purpose

The purpose of the Model Code is to guide the decisions, actions and behaviours of members, both in council and on council committees, and of candidates running for election as a council member.

Members must comply with the provisions in the Model Code in fulfilling their role and responsibilities in council and on council committees, as set out in the Act.

An individual who has nominated as a candidate for election as a council member is also required to demonstrate professional and ethical behaviour during their election campaign. If elected, the individual must continue to comply with the Model Code in council and on council committees.

It is the individual responsibility of council members, committee members and candidates to become familiar with the Model Code, these Guidelines and any relevant policies of their local government, and to follow the Code at all times.

Where the behaviour of a council member, committee member or candidate does not comply with the Code, it is intended that the local council address the behaviour through education and other remedial actions that the council considers appropriate, rather than formal sanctions.

Where an individual does not comply with any action required by the council, then the council may determine that the matter is to be referred to the Standards Panel as an

alleged contravention of a rule of conduct. The Standards Panel has the authority to make binding decisions regarding allegations of minor misconduct.

Adoption

Section 5.104 of the Act requires that local governments adopt the Model Code as their Code of Conduct within three months of the Regulations coming into operation (by 3 May 2021).

In accordance with section 5.104(4), the Model Code applies until the local government adopts it as their Code. This means that the principles, behaviour requirements and rules of conduct of the Regulations apply to council members, committee members and candidates even if their local government has not yet adopted the Model Code.

While local governments may not amend Division 2 (Principles) or Division 4 (Rules of Conduct), additional behaviour requirements can be included in Division 3 (Behaviours) if deemed appropriate by the local government. Any additions must be consistent with the Model Code of Conduct (section 5.104(3) of the Act).

In preparing the Code for adoption, local governments are encouraged to review their existing Code and consider incorporating any additional behaviour requirements that are not represented in the Model Code. This may include specific dress standards or the appropriate use of technology.

To adopt the Code, a resolution passed by an absolute majority of the council is required. Once the Code is adopted, it must be published on the local government's official website (section 5.104(7)).

Division 2 – General Principles

This section of the Regulations set out the fundamental rules that council members, committee members and candidates are expected to adhere to, promote and support. Adhering to these rules will assist individuals to comply with the behaviours outlined in Division 3 and 4.

The principles outline the overarching approach that members and candidates should demonstrate in their role as public representatives, or potential public representatives. Individuals should consider all behaviours in light of these principles, including any behaviour and conduct that is not covered specifically in Division 3 and 4.

The principles are grouped into three key areas: Personal Integrity; Relationships with others and Accountability. Additional guidance on these areas is provided as follows:

Integrity and conflicts of interest

Members and candidates are generally active in their local area which may lead to a conflict between the public interests of the community and the personal interests of the individual, their family members and associates.

It is the individual responsibility of members and candidates to disclose any such conflicts and ensure that they are managed appropriately to comply with the Model Code and serve their community as expected by the local electors.

Individuals should also consider perceived and potential conflicts of interest. While an individual may be confident of the integrity of their actions, it is important to reflect on how their actions may appear to others, and/or how an action taken now could lead to a conflict of interest in future. If an interest is identified, the individual should disclose and manage this to avoid a conflict with the public interest.

Avoidance of reputational damage

Elected members and candidates may hold strong concerns in relation to actions, or a lack of action, by their local government on certain matters.

It is the individual responsibility of members to ensure that they comply with the Model Code by raising concerns in a respectful and constructive manner and working effectively with their colleagues for their community, as expected by the local electors.

During an election campaign, it is the individual responsibility of candidates to ensure that any concerns they raise regarding the current local government is based on accurate information and expressed in a respectful and constructive manner that demonstrates to local electors their suitability as a potential public representative.

Decision-making and accountability

Council and committee members regularly make decisions that impact on their local area. The community expects that members will make council and committee decisions based on information that is relevant and factually correct. This will vary according to the decision to be made and the information available to the council members and committee members at that time.

In general, individuals are responsible for ensuring their decisions are based on information that is accurate and pertinent to the matter at hand; and can be reasonably considered accurate and relevant by others.

As part of being accountable to their community, council members and committee members should accept responsibility for the decisions they make in the performance of their role.

Division 3 – Behaviour

This section of the Regulations sets the standards of behaviour which reflect the general principles outlined in Division 2.

It is the individual responsibility of members and candidates to demonstrate, promote and support professional and ethical behaviour as provided in the Model Code.

Complaints regarding alleged breaches of the Model Code in Division 3 are managed by the local council as the decision-making body of the local governments, unless this function has been delegated.

The division also provides a principles-based process for responding to alleged breaches. The emphasis is on education and development, rather than punitive sanctions, with the aim of establishing or restoring positive working relationships and avoiding further breaches.

Failure to comply with this Division may give rise to a complaint regarding the conduct of a council member, committee member or candidate, which may lead to the council making a formal finding of a breach and requiring remedial action by the individual.

It is recommended that local governments develop further guidance on dealing with complaints through the introduction of a complementary policy or procedure on complaints management to the extent it is not provided for in the Regulations. There are resources on effective complaints management available on the Ombudsman WA's website at www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au.

Complaints

Process for making a complaint

Clause 11 of the Regulations provides that a person can make a complaint alleging a breach of Division 3 within one month of the alleged breach occurring.

Local governments should ensure that making a complaint is a simple and accessible process so that any member of the local community can raise concerns about the conduct of council members, committee members and candidates.

Local governments should make it clear that it is important a complainant provides details in their complaint, with supporting information where feasible to do so, because the complaint will form part of the evidence considered by the council when deciding whether a breach of the Model Code has occurred.

Action required

Local governments must authorise at least one person to receive complaints regarding members and candidates. While the Regulations do not include specific requirements and a local government may decide that the complaints officer is appropriate, other options could include:

- President or Mayor,
- Deputy President or Mayor (especially for complaints about the President or Mayor),
- Chief Executive Officer, or
- External consultant

The Regulations also provide that complaints are to be made in writing in a form approved by the local government.

Action required

Local governments must determine whether there will be a specific template for complaints and process for how they are to be lodged.

Local governments may choose to:

- establish a specific email address for conduct complaints
- provide a name/position to whom complaints should be addressed
- prepare an online complaint form
- engage an independent person to support the resolution of a complaint. Local governments may consider sharing the services of an independent person.

The Department has prepared a template form for complaints to assist local governments. The template is available on the department's website at www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au.

The authorised person(s) should acknowledge the receipt of every written complaint in a timely manner. As part of the acknowledgment process, the complainant should be provided information on how the complaint will be progressed and an expected timeframe for the matter to be finalised. This may include providing the complainant with a copy of the complaint policy.

The local government may determine that the person who is authorised to receive complaints takes responsibility for the administrative process. This may include preparing the necessary report to the council or committee tasked with making a decision on the complaint.

The report should contain a summary of the alleged breach, including evidence provided by the complainant. It should also contain information from the person to whom the complaint relates.

Dealing with a complaint

The Regulations do not specify a timeframe by when complaints should be dealt with, however, a timeframe could be included in a local government's policy.

In the interests of procedural fairness, all complaints should be dealt with in a timely manner and allow all parties the opportunity to provide information regarding the alleged conduct.

Clause 12 of the Regulations outlines the process for dealing with complaints regarding the conduct of elected members and candidates. The Model Code leaves it open to local governments to determine the most appropriate and effective process for how this is undertaken. Possible options could include:

Council considered

Under this option, all complaints received are considered by the council. This would require a report to be provided to the council – either with or without a recommendation (this is a matter for the Council to determine).

The council may choose to appoint an independent/external consultant to review complaints and provide a report to the council. If an independent consultant is tasked with reviewing complaints, it may be preferable that they also make a recommendation as to whether a breach has occurred.

If the person authorised to receive complaints prepares the report, it may be more appropriate that no recommendation is made, and council make a finding on the basis of the information they are provided.

Committee considered

Under this option, a committee is established to consider complaints. The makeup of the committee will depend on whether the power to make a finding can be delegated to the committee, or whether they are tasked with making a recommendation for council consideration.

In establishing a committee, local governments may like to consider forming a behaviour review committee that contains a member from some surrounding local governments and an independent person, to review all complaints for those local governments. The committee would prepare a recommendation which is submitted to the relevant council for consideration.

If the committee is tasked with making a recommendation for council consideration, and the council do not accept the recommendation, the reasons why it is not accepted should be noted in the minutes.

CEO considered

As with a number of functions in the Act, this function can be delegated to the CEO. Councils may choose to make it the responsibility of the CEO so as to remove council members from the decision-making process. However, consideration also needs to be given as to whether it is appropriate for the CEO to be responsible for making findings on council members' behaviour.

Triaging complaints

Local governments should consider how they are going to respond to complaints, and whether complaints are going to be addressed based on seriousness or impact of the allegation or on the order in which complaints are received. This should be outlined in the complaint policy.

Action required

Local governments must determine who will be considering complaints received and how complaints will be prioritised and managed.

Clause 12(2) of the Regulations require that the person to whom the complaint relates is given a reasonable opportunity to be heard. This should include providing a copy of the complaint to that person in a timely manner and allowing them an opportunity to respond to the allegations in writing. The information provided by that person will assist the local government in forming a view as to whether a breach has occurred.

Mediation

Local governments may choose to introduce mediation following the receipt of a complaint. This could be in the form of informal or formal mediation, conducted either internally or with an external mediator. Mediation may prove to be a valuable tool to resolve matters quickly, before they escalate. If mediation is successful, there is the ability for a complaint to be withdrawn.

Making a finding

Clause 12(1) requires the local government (which could be the council or a committee) to consider whether the alleged matter which is the subject of a complaint, did occur and make a finding on whether the matter constituted a breach of the Code of Conduct.

The same approach should be used as the Standards Panel in their deliberations and decision-making; that is, based on the complaint and other evidence received by the council, the council must be satisfied that, on the balance of probabilities, it is more likely than not that a breach occurred.

At a minimum, the information used to make a finding will include the information provided by the complainant and the person to whom the complaint relates. While not mandatory, there is nothing that prohibits local governments seeking further evidence to assist in making a decision, such as statements from witnesses.

Conflicts of interest

Members will be required to disclose an impartiality interest. This will include the complainant (if applicable) and person to who the alleged breach applies.

An impartiality interest does not require a member to leave the room for the debate or decision. By having both the complainant and accused in the room, it may also allow further input and clarification around the circumstances of the complaint.

The Presiding Member must keep control of the meeting and ensure everyone is provided with an opportunity to speak. Members should remain respectful and open-minded and make a decision on whether a breach has occurred or not using the information available.

Action Plans

Clause 12(4) provides that if a finding that a breach of the Code of Conduct did occur, the local government may determine that no further action is required; or that an action plan must be prepared and implemented.

An action plan should be designed to provide the member with the opportunity and support to demonstrate the professional and ethical behaviour expected of elected representatives.

The action plan does not need to be complex. The plan should outline:

- the behaviour(s) of concern;
- the actions to be taken to address the behaviour(s);
- who is responsible for the actions; and
- an agreed timeframe for the actions to be completed.

An action plan should not include measures that are intended to be a punishment, and instead should focus on mechanisms to encourage positive behaviour and prevent negative behaviour from occurring again in future.

The Code requires that in preparing the action plan, consultation must be undertaken with the elected member to whom the plan relates. This is designed to provide the member with the opportunity to be involved in matters such as the timing of meetings or training. Note: some members may not be willing to engage with the opportunity to participate in the process.

The council or a delegated person should monitor the actions and timeframes set out in the action plan. This is important because if the member does not comply with the action/s within the agreed timeframe, then under the Regulations it is considered a contravention of a rule of conduct.

Dismissal of complaints

While local governments are required to consider all complaints, they can be dismissed if:

- the behaviour occurred at a council or committee meeting and the behaviour was dealt with at that meeting (clause 13), or
- the complaint is withdrawn (clause 14).

Clause 13 allows a complaint to be dismissed if the behaviour occurred at a council or committee meeting, and that behaviour was addressed at the time. This could have been by the presiding member, or remedial action was taken in accordance with the local government's standing orders or local law.

Where agreement cannot be reached

Circumstances may arise when a local council cannot agree on a finding, whether the complaint can be dismissed under clause 13, or an appropriate course of action following a finding of breach.

While the presiding member has the casting vote, in a divided situation, the local government may decide to engage an independent person/consultant to review the evidence and make a recommendation. If this occurs, the council (or committee) should give due consideration to the advice and recommendation, and if they don't accept the recommendation they should state the reasons why in the minutes.

Withdrawal of a complaint

Clause 14 provides the option for a complaint to be withdrawn before it is considered by the council.

Local governments may elect to include in their complaints policy the option for mediation between the complainant and the member. Mediation may resolve any specific issues before the council is required to make a finding and may lead to the complainant withdrawing the complaint. Clause 14 requires a withdrawal to be made in writing and provided to the person(s) authorised to receive complaints.

Division 4 – Rules of Conduct

Contraventions of rules of conduct are matters that:

- negatively affect the honest or impartial performance of an elected member;
- involve a breach of trust placed in the elected member; or
- involve the misuse of information or material.

Division 4 sets out rules of conduct for elected members and candidates that relate to the principles in Division 2 and the behaviours in Division 3. This Division also introduces a new rule of conduct to address situations where an elected member does not undertake the actions required by the local council following a breach of the Model Code. A contravention of this rule of conduct is considered a minor breach, as defined in the Act.

The process for complaints under Division 4 is outlined in the Act. Complaints in the first instance are directed to the complaints officer at the local government. The Act provides that the complaints officer is the CEO or another officer with delegated responsibility.

A council may decide to refer an alleged contravention of Division 4 to the independent Standards Panel in accordance with the Act. As the Panel does not have investigative powers, decisions are made based on the information received by the Panel from the local government. The Standards Panel must be satisfied that, on the balance of probabilities, it is more likely than not that a breach has occurred for the Standards Panel to make a finding of breach.

Where the Standards Panel makes a finding against an elected member or candidate, sanctions will be imposed in accordance with the Part 5 Division 9 of the Act.

Nothing in this Division removes the obligations placed upon council members and employees (including the CEO) of the local government under the *Corruption, Crime and Misconduct Act 2003*.

Further information on the Standards Panel process is available on the Department's website.

Further information

The aim of the Model Code of Conduct is to foster a high standard of professional and ethical conduct by council members and candidates, and to support consistency across local governments in relation to their response to complaints regarding conduct.

Local governments are encouraged to seek guidance and advice on specific matters whenever necessary. For queries, please contact: actreview@dlgsc.wa.gov.au