



Making a complaint about a Devon county councillor

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Introduction

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Part 1 - How do I make a complaint?

The code of conduct for members is set out in the [County Council's Constitution](#).

If you believe that a county councillor has breached the code of conduct for members and you would like to make a complaint, you may do so by submitting a complaint in writing to:

Maria Price (Director of Legal and Democratic Services)
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4QD

who will arrange for it to be considered by the Council's Standards Committee or for any other course of action to be taken, as appropriate.

You may use the official [complaint form](#) or simply set out your complaint in a letter.

Complaints may be sent in by post to the above address or by email to members.services@devon.gov.uk.

If you are unable to download a copy of the form, a copy may be sent to you upon request. We can also help if English is not your first language.

If you are unable to make a written complaint we will offer to transpose your complaint onto a complaint form with an accompanying written statement (if required) which you will then be asked to sign or otherwise indicate to the Council's satisfaction that you wish to make a complaint in those terms.

If you are unwilling to sign the documentation or fail to indicate to the Council's satisfaction that you wish to make a complaint in those terms it will not take any further action on the complaint unless the monitoring officer is satisfied that the circumstances justify a departure from this position.

If you make a verbal complaint and simply decline to confirm the complaint in writing for reasons which the Council does not consider to be justifiable it will take no further action on the complaint.

The Council does understand that complaints about sensitive personal issues, such as alleged harassment, bullying or victimisation may need to be progressed while preserving the confidentiality or anonymity of the complainant.

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Some complaints will fall outside of the scope of this procedure. If that happens the complaints will be forwarded to the relevant officers in the Council the complainant will be advised of this.

Similarly, if your complaint is about a district, unitary or town or parish councillor then you should send it to the relevant district or unitary council – in other words, the council that collects your Council Tax.

Part 2 - What is a Standards Committee?

The County Council's Standards Committee is a group of people appointed by the Council to help it maintain and promote high ethical standards.

The Committee is made up of councillors and co-opted members drawn from the community (who are not councillors or employees of the County Council).

Part 3 - What complaints does the Standards Committee deal with?

The Standards Committee can only deal with complaints about the behaviour of a county councillor. It will not deal with complaints about things that are not covered by the members' code of conduct.

If you make a complaint to the Standards Committee it must be in writing. You should say which county councillor it is about and why you think they have not followed the code of conduct. The Committee cannot look at complaints that:

- are about incidents that happened before the councillor was elected or chosen to serve
- are about incidents that happened before the Council adopted the code of conduct other than incidents of alleged harassment, bullying or victimisation
- are about the way the Council conducts or records its meetings
- would not disclose a breach of the code of conduct

Complaints about the:

- actions of the Council's employees
- way the Council has or has not done something
- decisions of the Council or one of the services it provides

are the subject of a separate complaints system which can be accessed on the County Council's [feedback/complaints system](#).

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If when using this complaints system you think the Council has not dealt with the matter properly and has failed to resolve a complaint locally, you can ask the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman to investigate. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman cannot be used for complaints against elected members.

Part 4 - How should I set out my complaint?

It is very important that you set your complaint out fully and clearly and provide all the information at the outset. You should also provide any documents or other material that you believe is relevant and wish to be considered, wherever possible.

We recommend that you [use our complaint form](#) or provide a covering note summarising what you are complaining about, especially if your complaint includes a lot of supporting documentation.

In the summary you should tell us exactly what each county councillor you are complaining about said or did that has caused you to complain.

If you are sending supporting documentation please cross-reference it in the summary of your complaint.

You should be as specific as possible and substantiate your complaint where you can, to demonstrate why you believe that the councillor(s) complained about has breached the code of conduct.

It is very important that you set your complaint out clearly and provide at the outset all the information you wish the Council to consider. The monitoring officer may need to contact you to seek clarification of your complaint but this will not, hopefully, delay consideration of your complaint.

Part 5 - What happens to my complaint - how is it processed and dealt with?

When a complaint is received (which is within the scope of the councillor complaints process) the Council aims to acknowledge receipt within three working days.

If the monitoring officer considers that the allegation concerned may disclose an offence under the Localism Act 2011 or otherwise, they will, in appropriate circumstances, pass to the police or Director of Public Prosecutions. No prosecution can be brought without the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

If it transpires that no offence was committed, whether following trial or otherwise, the complaint could be reintroduced to this procedure for determination of any breach of the code and appropriate sanction, if any.

The monitoring officer or their nominated representative(s) will carry out a preliminary assessment of whether the alleged behaviour falls within the code of conduct – and collect any information they deem necessary.

This will normally be done within 10 working days. If the allegation is about a matter outside of the code of conduct ([see Part 3](#)) or is within one of the criteria set out below, the complaint will not usually progress beyond the initial assessment stage and the complainant will be notified accordingly, for example:

- if the complaint is substantially the same as a complaint previously dealt with
- if the period since the alleged behaviour is so significant that it is unreasonable or not [in the public interest](#) to pursue
- if the complaint is trivial
- if the complaint discloses a minor breach of the code that it is not [in the public interest](#) to pursue
- if the complaint is/appears to be malicious, politically motivated or tit-for-tat and the complaint doesn't disclose sufficiently serious potential breaches of the code.
- if the complaint is covered by the Council's persistent and vexatious complaints policy and the complaint doesn't disclose sufficiently serious potential breaches of the code.
- if the member against whom the allegation has made reasonable efforts to put things right and the complaint does not disclose sufficiently serious potential breaches of the code
- if the complaint is about a person who is no longer a member of the Council

During the preliminary assessment, the monitoring officer will write to the subject member, attaching a copy of the complaint, and consider any comments the subject member has regarding the complaint.

The monitoring officer will consult with the independent person. The name of the complainant will be disclosed to the subject member unless confidentiality has been requested and the monitoring officer considers that request to be justified.

The monitoring officer will, following consultation with the independent person, determine what action is to be taken on the complaint in accordance with the assessment criteria which can be seen in [Appendix 2](#). The options available are set out in paragraphs 1 to 6 of Appendix 2.

If the monitoring officer is of the view that a local settlement is unachievable, or the complaint warrants it, they shall, following consultation with the independent person, institute a formal investigation and report the findings of that investigation together with the views of the independent person to the full Standards Committee for determination (with neither the complainant nor the subject member having the right of attendance).

The monitoring officer may refer the complaint to a subgroup of the Standards Committee (comprising five or six elected members of the Standards Committee and at least two co-opted members) to determine whether or not the allegation appears to disclose a failure to observe the code of conduct and then, if it judges such a failure, whether the matter merits investigation. These subgroups are appointed at the Annual Council meeting in May.

Thereafter the monitoring officer can:

- consult the independent person if the Standards Subgroup suggests any action other than a formal investigation
- institute a formal investigation if the Standards Subgroup is of the view that the matter merits investigation
- report the findings of that investigation together with the views of the independent person on those findings to the full Standards Committee for determination (with neither party having the right of attendance)

The monitoring officer and the subject member may seek the views of the nominated independent person at any time during the process.

The assessment and determination of complaints will normally be conducted by a Standards Subgroup or the full Standards Committee in 'Part II or closed' session and information relating thereto will be considered exempt under the provisions of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 and Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, subject to the application of the public interest test, as appropriate.

Data protection requirements will be complied with and may prevent the public disclosure of information relating to complaints.

When the Committee has considered the complaint, the outcome will be sent to the subject member and the complainant and the decision notice (that is, the minutes of the meeting) published. This will be available on the Council's website.

Below is a summary of the above process.

Step	Action
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1	If the circumstances of the complaint indicate that an offence under Chapter 7 of Part 1 of the Localism Act 2011 may have been committed and that the complaint ought to be investigated, by the police, then this will be forwarded accordingly.
2	<p>The monitoring officer will consider whether the complaint falls within the Councillor Complaints Procedure. If so, the monitoring officer will write to the subject member with details of the complaint, including who has complained (unless any confidentiality request has been agreed).</p> <p>The monitoring officer will also provide the subject member with the details of the independent person who has been appointed to advise on the complaint and who the subject member may contact to seek their views.</p> <p>The subject member is given an opportunity to provide a written response to the complaint. There may be a time limit given for providing this written response.</p>
3	The subject member can provide a written response and any additional evidence or indicate that they do not wish to provide such a response.
4	The monitoring officer will consider the complaint again in the context of any written submissions and supporting documentation provided by the subject member.
5	<p>The monitoring officer will, following consultation with the independent person, determine what action to be taken on the complaint.</p> <p>The other options could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to make no finding as to whether there has been a breach of the code and take no further action • to make no finding as to whether there has been a breach of the code but determine that some action other than an investigation is appropriate including, for example, some form of local settlement or conciliation • to find no breach of the code • to find a breach of the code without an investigation but take no action • to find a breach of the code without an investigation and take some action • to refer the complaint to a Standards Subgroup to determine whether or not the complaint should be formally investigated • to require the complaint to be formally investigated
6	<p>Where a complaint is investigated, a report shall be generated which shall be presented to the full Standards Committee. Before that happens, the subject member will be consulted on both the draft report and final report (with 10 working days to respond) and their views be reported to the Standards Committee alongside the investigation report.</p> <p>Having considered the investigation report, the Standards Committee shall make a finding as to whether or not there has been a breach of the code and, if there is a finding of a breach, what action should be taken.</p>
7	The outcome of the determination of the complaint will be notified in writing to the complainant and the subject member within five working days.

NB: Steps 1 to 5 above will normally be conducted within 28 days of receipt of the complaint. If it is not possible to complete any such tasks within that time the complainant and subject member will be contacted and advised of the delay and when the steps will be completed.

Part 6 - What happens after my complaint has been looked at?

If potential criminal offences are identified and the complaint referred for investigation with a view to prosecution the appropriate procedures of the police or Council will be followed so as to protect the integrity of their investigation.

When a decision has been reached on your complaint the Council will notify you in writing telling you what that decision is and what action has or will be taken.

Any action or investigation will be implemented. If other action is determined as appropriate and either party declines to cooperate that will be reported to the monitoring officer who may decide to progress the original complaint through the process as set out above.

Any investigations and hearings following the Standards investigation are outside of the scope of this procedure and will be subject to separate procedural rules.

Part 7 - Withdrawal of complaints

Any request to withdraw a complaint will normally be granted but in considering such a request from the complainant the monitoring officer will consider whether:

- [the public interest](#) in taking action on the complaint outweighs the complainant's desire to withdraw it
- the complaint is such that action can or should be taken on it without the complainant's participation
- there appears to be an identifiable underlying reason for the request to withdraw the complaint such as whether there is information to suggest that the complainant may have been pressurised into withdrawing the complaint

Part 8 - Complainant confidentiality

The subject member will, in normal circumstances, be told from the outset who has complained about them.

If a complainant asks for their identity to be withheld their request will be considered by the monitoring officer prior to the member being notified that a complaint has been made.

Each request for confidentiality will be considered on its merits and in determining such a request the following will be considered:

- Whether the complainant reasonably believes that they, or those connected to them, will be at risk of harm if their identity is disclosed.
- Whether the complainant is alleging harassment, bullying, or victimisation.
- That the complainant is reasonably concerned about the consequences to their employment, or those connected to them if their identity is disclosed.
- That the complainant, or somebody closely connected to them, suffers from a medical condition and there is evidence of medical risks associated with their identity being disclosed or confirmation from an appropriate medical professional that that is the case.
- The public interest – in some cases the public interest in proceeding with the complaint may outweigh the complainant's wish to have their identity withheld.

If it is not considered appropriate to grant a request for confidentiality the complainant will be offered the opportunity to withdraw the complaint rather than proceed with it.

Complainants must recognise that maintaining confidentiality may hinder the effectiveness of any investigation.

Part 9 - Conflicts of interests

If any officer has any personal or professional conflict of interest in relation to a complaint, they must have no involvement or no further involvement in dealing with that complaint other than such reasonable steps as are necessary to ensure that the complaint is dealt with by someone other than them.

Any conflicts identified during the course of a matter will be managed appropriately by the monitoring officer or their nominee.

An officer who has previously advised a subject member or has given advice to the complainant about the issues giving rise to a complaint must seek advice from their line manager as to whether they can properly be involved in the conduct of a related complaint. Public perception and [the public interest](#) will be considered.

If any independent person has any personal or professional conflict of interest in relation to a complaint, they must have no involvement or no further involvement in dealing with that complaint other than such reasonable steps as are necessary to ensure that the complaint is dealt with by someone other than them. Where this occurs another independent person will be appointed and the appropriate person(s) notified

Part 10 - Retention of records

All records relating to any complaint and the consideration thereof will be stored in accordance with the County Council's records management policy and procedures and the provisions of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 and Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

Part 11 - Generally

All complaints will be considered on their merits and according to the facts.

The assessment criteria, which are subject to review by the County Council's Standards Committee, will be used as guidance in the consideration and determination of complaints, but the monitoring officer or other decision maker, which will be a Standards Subgroup or the full Standards Committee when it is not the monitoring officer, are entitled to depart from these criteria when they consider it appropriate to do so.

Appendix 1 - Councillor complaints process - public interest

When considering the public interest, the monitoring officer and independent person consider each of the following public interest factors set out below.

These factors are not exhaustive, and not all may be relevant in every case.

The weight to be attached to each of these factors, and the factors identified, will also vary according to the facts and merits of each case.

The seriousness of the breach, for example, has the member brought the Council seriously into disrepute? The more serious the breach the more likely investigation and referral for further consideration are required.

Has the member deliberately sought personal gain for himself or another person at the public expense? If there is evidence of this, it is likely that the complaint will be investigated and referred for further consideration.

Are the circumstances of the breach such that a member has misused a position of trust or authority and caused harm to a person? If there is evidence of this it is likely that the complaint will be investigated and referred for further consideration.

Was the breach motivated by any form of discrimination against the victim's ethnic or

national origin, gender, disability, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation or gender identity? If a member's conduct is motivated by any form of discrimination it is likely that the complaint will be investigated and referred for further consideration.

Is there evidence of previous similar behaviour on the part of the member? If so and the matter complained about is serious enough it is likely that the complaint will be investigated and referred for further consideration.

Is the breach such that an investigation or referral to the Standards Committee is required to maintain public confidence in elected members of Devon County Council? If so it is likely that the complaint will be investigated and referred for further consideration.

Is investigation or referral to the Standards Committee a proportionate response? Namely, would the cost of an investigation or consideration by the Standards Committee be regarded as excessive when weighed against any likely sanction?

Appendix 2 - Assessment criteria

It is recognised that while complaints may relate to the same aspect of the code they may differ considerably in terms of the facts and how serious they are.

There may be huge differences in the relevance and amount of detail regarding the complaint. For these reasons, these assessment criteria can only be a guide.

Overriding criteria

The following tests will be applied during the initial assessment of a complaint:

- Is the complaint about one or more named members of the County Council?
- Was the subject member in office at the time of the alleged conduct?
- Did the incident complained of happen before the Council adopted the code of conduct?
- If proven, would the complaint disclose a breach of the code of conduct?

1. No finding of whether there is a breach of the code and take no further action

If on the facts it is not possible to determine whether there has been or may have been a breach of the code and the alleged conduct does not merit an investigation, having regard to [the public interest](#), this is the appropriate finding to make.

2. No finding of whether there is a breach of the code but action other than investigation is appropriate

If on the facts it is not possible to determine whether there has been or may have been a breach of the code, the alleged conduct does not merit an investigation, having regard to [the public interest](#), but the allegation and any response from the subject member disclose an underlying issue that action such as mediation or training on the code or council procedures might assist with, this is the appropriate finding to make. The other action information below needs to be considered in these circumstances.

3. Finding of no breach of the code

If the facts available demonstrate on the balance of probabilities that there has been no breach of the code, this is the appropriate finding to make.

If there is no breach of the code a sanction cannot be imposed but other action such as mediation, conciliation, training or some other form of local settlement might still be considered.

4. Finding of a breach of the code without an investigation

A finding that the code of conduct has been breached without the need for an investigation will usually be appropriate in the following circumstances where:

- it can clearly be shown that from the information that has been provided by the subject member and the complainant that a breach of the code has occurred without the need for an investigation
- the subject member has admitted to the breach of the code, whether or not they have offered to remedy the breach
- it can be shown that an investigation is unlikely to be able to establish any further independent relevant evidence regarding the complaint or that the cost of obtaining any further evidence would not be justified having regard to [the public interest](#) and that on the evidence supplied a breach of the code can be shown

A breach of the code without investigation may be found if the complaint satisfies the circumstances outlined above and that it can be clearly shown, on the balance of probabilities, that a breach of the code of conduct has occurred.

(a) No further action

If a breach of the code is found but it is trivial, a technical breach or otherwise of limited effect, it may be appropriate to take no further action.

(b) Referral for other action

A complaint may be referred for other action in the circumstances listed below. However, in general, other action may be used where the complaint discloses a widespread problem rather than a specific one concerning the member's conduct.

Referring a matter for other action effectively closes the door on a review of the decision as the matter cannot subsequently be referred for investigation if the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the other action. As such, other action should be exercised only where appropriate.

If necessary the assessment of a complaint can be deferred while further information is obtained and other action is being considered.

In addition, the subject member and the complainant can be contacted to see if they will accept other action as a way of resolving the complaint, such as by way of an apology.

The following should be considered in determining whether it is appropriate to refer a complaint for other action:

- Does taking further action provide an opportunity to resolve the issue and to prevent any similar issues arising in the future and promote good governance?
- Does the complaint present a potentially less serious breach of the code than would require the matter to be referred for investigation and is any benefit to be gained from referring the matter for investigation?
- Is the subject member a member of an authority which appears to have a poor understanding of the code and relevant procedures?
- Is the Council suffering from a widespread breakdown in internal relationships and trust where a course of action other than an investigation of a complaint may be more appropriate?

5. Refer the complaint to a Standards Subgroup to determine whether or not the complaint should be formally investigated

The Standards Subgroup will comprise five or six elected members of the Standards Committee and at least two co-opted members to determine whether or not the allegation appears to disclose a failure to observe the code of conduct and then, if it judges such a failure, whether the matter merits investigation.

6. Referral for investigation

A complaint should usually be referred for investigation if:

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- the complaint has passed the initial tests
- the subject member has denied the allegations but the information presented indicates that there may be a breach of the code
- based on the information provided the potential breach of the code of conduct is sufficiently serious that an investigation should be undertaken to discount or substantiate the complaint and to determine what action, if any, is appropriate

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