



Council Policy

Council Code of Conduct
Division 3 Complaint
Handling Policy



Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Complaint Handling Policy

Table of Contents

Policy scope.....	2
Policy statement.....	2
Principles.....	2
1. Making a Complaint	3
2. Withdrawing a Complaint.....	3
3. Responding to a Complaint	3
4. Mediation	4
5. Assessment of the Complaint	5
6. Complying with plan requirements.....	5
7. Publication of findings	6
8. Decision making	6
9. Roles	7
9.2 Investigator	8
10. Complaints not dealt with under this policy	9
Definitions and abbreviations	10



Policy scope

This policy establishes the procedure for dealing with complaints about alleged breaches of behaviour requirements under the City of Fremantle Elected Members, Committee Members and Candidates – Code of Conduct, in accordance with clause 15(2) of the Local Government (Model Code of Conduct) Regulations 2021.

It also gives effect to the City’s commitment to an effective, transparent, fair and accessible complaints handling process that supports high standards of behaviour of Elected Members, Committee Members and Candidates.

Policy statement

Principles

a. Procedural Fairness

The principles of procedural fairness will apply when dealing with a Complaint.

The Respondent will be afforded a reasonable opportunity to be heard prior to any findings being made; decisions are to be made in an objective and impartial manner with an absence of bias (or the perception of bias); and any findings made are to be based on proper and genuine consideration of the evidence.

b. Consistency

Each Complainant and Respondent will be dealt with according to their circumstances and each Complaint considered and determined on its merits. However, the City will ensure consistent decision making in relation to a Complaint, with similar circumstances resulting in similar decisions where appropriate.

c. Confidentiality

To protect both the Complainant and Respondent, the City will take all reasonable steps to maintain confidentiality when dealing with a Complaint. Information gained in the course of managing a Complaint is to be managed in a secure manner and must not be disclosed or used inappropriately.

d. Accessibility

Information on how to make a Complaint is available on the City’s website, or alternatively from the City’s Administration Building upon request.

Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Policy



1. Making a Complaint

- 1.1 Any person may make a Complaint alleging that an Elected Member, Committee Member or Candidate has behaved in a way that constitutes a breach of Division 3 of the Code of Conduct.
- 1.2 A Complaint must be made within one month after the alleged Breach.
- 1.3 A Complaint must be made by completing the Complaint Form in full and providing the completed forms to the Complaints Officer.
- 1.4 A Complaint must be made in accordance with the Complaint Form and specify which requirement(s) of the Code of Conduct is alleged to have been breached. It must also include the name and contact details of the Complainant.
- 1.5 Where a Complaint Form omits required details, the Complaints Officer will invite the Complainant to provide this information in order for the Complaint to be progressed.
- 1.6 The supporting information provided with the initial complaint will be the only information considered during any assessment or investigation. The Complaints Officer may seek clarification but will not seek or accept any additional supporting information.
- 1.7 A Complaint in relation to a Candidate must be made in accordance with the above process but cannot be dealt with unless the Candidate is subsequently elected as an Elected Member.

2. Withdrawing a Complaint

- 2.1 A Complainant may withdraw their Complaint, in writing, at any time before a Finding has been made in relation to the Complaint.
- 2.2 A Complainant may withdraw a Complaint by advising the Complaints Officer, in writing, that they wish to do so.
- 2.3 After receiving a withdrawal of the Complaint, the Complaints Officer will take all necessary steps to terminate the process commenced under this Policy.

3. Responding to a Complaint

- 3.1 Within 14 days after receiving a **Candidate Complaint**, the Complaints Officer will provide written notice:
 - a. To the Complainant confirming receipt and advising of the procedure for complaints; and
 - b. To the Respondent, including a summary of the complaint and advising of the procedure for complaints.

Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Policy



3.2 Within 14 days of receiving a **Complaint**, the Complaints Officer will contact the:

- a. Complainant:
 - confirming receipt of the Complaint.
 - outlining the process that will be followed and possible outcomes.
 - explaining the application of confidentiality to the complaint.
 - including a copy of this Policy; and
 - if necessary, seeking clarification.
- b. Respondent:
 - advising that a Complaint has been made and include a copy of the Complaint and supporting documents.
 - outlining the process that will be followed and the possible outcomes.

3.3 Complaints will normally be dealt with in the order in which they are received.

- a. If more than one Complaint is received that relates to the same alleged behaviour, the Complaints may be progressed concurrently where appropriate.

4. Mediation

- 4.1 It is recognised that mediation may support both parties to a Complaint to reach a mutually satisfactory outcome that resolves the issues giving rise to the complaint and the Complaints Officer will, as the first course of action upon receiving a complaint, offer and encourage the Complainant and the Respondent to participate in Mediation.
- 4.2 If both parties agree to participate in Mediation, the formal process will be paused.
- 4.3 The objective of Mediation will be to reach a resolution. For example, an offer, by the person to whom the Complaint relates, to issue a voluntary apology in response to a Complaint, even in the absence of a request from the complainant, qualifies for consideration as mediation and resolution.
- 4.4 If Mediation is commenced, both the Complainant and Respondent may decline to proceed with the process at any time. The process may also be terminated on the advice of the Mediator.
- 4.5 Successful mediation outcomes will be reported to council through the Audit and Risk Management Committee via anonymous information report.
- 4.6 If Mediation is terminated or does not achieve a resolution that results in the withdrawal or agreed closure of the Complaint, the Complaints Officer will resume the formal process required under this Policy.



5. Assessment of the Complaint

- 5.1 The Respondent is to be provided with a reasonable opportunity to be heard before any opinions or recommendations are formed.
- 5.2 If the behaviour that is the subject of the Complaint is alleged to have occurred at a Council or Committee Meeting, the Complaints Officer will determine whether or not to dismiss the Complaint.
- 5.3 If a Complaint is dismissed, the Complainant and the Respondent will be given written notice of the decision and the reasons for the decision in accordance with the Code of Conduct. This concludes the process in relation to the Complaint.
- 5.4 If the Complaint is not dismissed, the Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) will consider the Complaint and make a Finding as to whether the alleged Breach that is the subject of the Complaint has or has not occurred.
- 5.5 If it is determined that the alleged Breach did not occur, the Complainant and the Respondent will be given written notice of the Finding and the reasons for the Finding. This concludes the process for the Complaint.
- 5.6 If it is determined that the alleged breach did occur, the Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) will decide whether to recommend further action and / or to prepare a plan to address the behaviour.
- 5.7 If the Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) decides to take no further action, the Complainant and the Respondent will be given written notice of this decision and the reasons for the Finding. This concludes the process for the Complaint.
- 5.8 If the Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) decides to prepare a Plan, the Respondent is to be consulted and any submissions made by the Respondent are to be considered before preparing and implementing a plan.

6. Complying with plan requirements

- 6.1 The Complaints Officer will monitor the actions in timeframes set out in a Plan.
- 6.2 Failure to comply with a requirement included in a Plan is a minor breach under section 5.105(1) of the Act and the Code of Conduct.
- 6.3 The Complaints Officer must provide a report advising Council of any failure to comply with a requirement included in a Plan.



7. Publication of findings

- 7.1 Within 14 days of a decision by the Investigator determining the outcome of a complaint, the Complaints Officer must:
- a. give the complainant and the respondent –
 - i. a copy of the finding; and
 - ii. a copy of Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) reports, minus any attachments
 - b. publish the Complaints Officer or Investigator (as appropriate) report minus all attachments on the City’s website.
 - c. complete any further action required by Council.

8. Decision making

8.1 Finding

1. A Finding that the alleged breach has occurred must be based on evidence from which it may be concluded that it is more likely that the breach occurred than that it did not occur.
2. This may involve first considering whether the behaviour occurred, on the balance of probabilities, and then whether that behaviour constituted a breach of a requirement of the Code of Conduct.

8.2 Action

1. In deciding whether to take no further action, or prepare and implement a Plan, the following is to be considered:
 - a. the nature and seriousness of the breach(es).
 - b. the Respondent's submission in relation to the contravention.
 - c. whether the Respondent has breached the Code of Conduct knowingly or carelessly.
 - d. whether the Respondent has breached the Code of Conduct on previous occasions.
 - e. likelihood or not of the Respondent committing further breaches of the Code of Conduct.
 - f. personal circumstances at the time of conduct.
 - g. need to protect the public through general deterrence and maintain public confidence in Local Government; and
 - h. any other matters which may be regarded as contributing to or the conduct or mitigating its seriousness.



8.3 Plan Requirements

1. A proposed plan may include requirements for the Respondent to do one or more of the following:
 - a. engage in mediation.
 - b. undertake counselling.
 - c. undertake training; and/or
 - d. take other action considered appropriate (e.g., an apology).
2. The Proposed Plan may also outline:
 - a. the actions to be taken to address the behaviour(s).
 - b. who will be responsible for those actions.
 - c. any assistance the Local Government will provide to achieve the intent of the Plan; and/or
 - d. a reasonable timeframe for the Plan action(s) to be addressed by the Respondent.

9. Roles

9.1 Complaints Officer

1. A Complaint may be dealt with by the Complaints Officer in instances where:
 - a. in the view of the Complaints Officer, the nature of the Complaint is not serious nor complex in nature.
 - b. Mediation is either not appropriate given the nature of the complaint, is not agreed to by both parties, is terminated or does not achieve an agreed outcome; and
 - c. the Complaints Officer does not have a conflict of interest, either real or perceived, in relation to the Complaint.
2. The authority of the Complaints Officer includes the power to:
 - a. Accept complaints and withdrawal of complaints.
 - b. Dismiss a Complaint in accordance with the Code of Conduct,
 - c. Make a Finding as to whether an alleged Complaint has or has not occurred, based upon evidence from which it may be concluded that it is more likely that the breach occurred than it did not occur.
 - d. Where a Finding is made that a breach has occurred, determine:
 - i. To take no further action where appropriate; or
 - ii. Prepare and implement a plan to address the behaviour of the person to whom the Complaint relates.

Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Policy



3. The complaints officer must report to council:
 - a. Successfully mediated, resolved and withdrawn complaints – to be presented in an anonymous information report through the Audit and Risk Management Committee.
 - b. Complaint findings and actions prescribed – to be presented in an information report through the Audit and Risk Management Committee.
 - c. All complaint findings made by an Investigator for final determination.
4. Where the Complaints Officer appoints a suitably qualified and experienced Investigator, they will endeavour to do so within a reasonable period.

9.2 Investigator

1. The Investigator is an impartial third party, who may be appointed by the Complaints Officer where:
 - a. the Complaint is sufficiently serious or complex in nature such that it warrants the appointment of an independent party to undertake an investigation or
 - b. the Complaint is not considered serious or complex in nature, however a conflict of interest (or the perception of a conflict of interest) preclude a Complaints Officer from making a determination in relation to the complaint; and
 - c. Mediation is either not appropriate given the nature of the complaint, is not agreed to by both parties, is terminated or does not achieve an agreed outcome.
2. Where a Complaint is referred to an Investigator, the Complaints Officer is to provide to the Investigator the Complaint, any supporting documents, and appropriate response documents.
3. In undertaking their functions, the Investigator will apply the Principles of this Policy.
4. The Investigator will:
 - a. Seek any clarification through the Complaints Officer.
 - b. Make a finding as to whether an alleged Complaint has or has not occurred, based upon evidence from which it may be concluded that it is more likely that the breach occurred than it did not occur.
 - c. Where a finding is made that a breach has occurred,
 - i. recommend that no further action, taken; or
 - ii. recommend a plan to address the circumstances of or the behaviour of the person to whom the Complaint relates.
5. The details of all complaints dealt with by the Investigator will be reported direct to council for final determination.

Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Policy



10. Complaints not dealt with under this policy

A breach of the Rules of Conduct (as per Division 4 of the Code of Conduct) is a minor breach under s5.105(1) of the Local Government Act 1995 and is not the intended subject of this Policy.

Consequently, Complaints such as the following are inappropriate to be dealt with under this Policy:

- a. Complaints made with the intent of addressing personal grievances or disagreements,
- b. Complaints made to express dissatisfaction with a Council or Committee Member's lawfully made decisions or performance of their role,
- c. Minor breaches under s5.105(1) of the Local Government Act 1995,
- d. Serious breaches under s5.114 of the Local Government Act 1995; and
- e. Allegations of corruption.



Definitions and abbreviations

Act means the Local Government Act 1995.

Complaints Officer means the Chief Executive Officer, or such person authorised by the CEO to undertake the duties of a Complaints Officer.

Breach means a breach of Division 3 of the Code of Conduct.

Candidate an individual is considered a Candidate when their nomination for election is accepted by a returning officer. Any alleged behaviour breach may only be dealt with if the Candidate becomes an Elected Member.

Code of Conduct means the City of Fremantle Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates Code of Conduct.

Committee means a committee of Council, established in accordance with section 5.8 of the Act.

Committee Member includes any Elected Member, local government employee or unelected member of the community appointed by the Council to be a member of a Council committee.

Complainant means a person who has submitted a Complaint in accordance with this Policy.

Complaint means a complaint submitted under division 3 of the Code of Conduct.

Complaint Documents means the Complaint Form and any supporting information, evidence, or attachments provided by the Complainant at the time the Complaint is made.

Complaint Form means the form approved under the Code of Conduct.

Council means the Council of the City of Fremantle.

Council or Committee Meeting means a formal meeting of the Council or a Committee that is called and convened in accordance with the Act. It does not include informal meetings, workshops or briefings.

Elected Member means a person currently serving a term of office as an Elected Member of the Council in accordance with the Act.

Finding means a finding made in accordance with Code of Conduct as to whether a Breach has or has not occurred.

Investigator means an independent party appointed in accordance with section 5.8 of the Act for the purpose of dealing with a Complaint.

Plan means a Plan prepared and implemented under the Code of Conduct to address the behaviour of the person to whom the Complaint relates, if a Finding has been made that a Breach has occurred.

Response Documents means the response provided by the Respondent to the Complaint and includes any supporting information or evidence that is supplied.

Respondent means the person to whom a complaint relates.

Council Code of Conduct Division 3 Code of Conduct Complaint Handling Policy



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