

# THE CODE OF CONDUCT

**Guide for members**  
**May 2007**



the  
**Standards Board**  
for England

Confidence in local democracy

# Deciding when the Code of Conduct applies to you

The Code of Conduct applies to you:

- 1 Whenever you act in your official capacity, including whenever you conduct the business of your authority or act, claim to act, or give the impression you are acting, in your official capacity or as a representative of your authority.
2. At any time<sup>1</sup>, where your behaviour has led to a criminal conviction. However, only paragraphs 3(2)(c), 5 and 6(a) have effect in these circumstances when you are acting in your private capacity. Otherwise, the Code of Conduct does not apply to your private life.

Where you act as a representative of your authority on another relevant authority, you must, when acting for that other authority, comply with their Code of Conduct.

You may also act as a representative of your authority on another body, for example as a school governor. When acting for that other body, you must comply with your authority's Code of Conduct, unless it conflicts with lawful obligations of the other body.

<sup>1</sup> Transitional Note: Until such time as there is Parliamentary approval for amendments to section 52 of the *Local Government Act 2000* which reinstates the situation prior to Collins J's decision in *Livingstone v Adjudication Panel for England 2006* the Code of Conduct does not apply to conduct outside of the performance of your functions as a member. Only if you have engaged in an activity which has a link with the functions of your office will any conduct in your private capacity be covered by the Code of Conduct. If the legislative amendments are passed, the Code of Conduct will also apply to criminal activity which has led to a conviction.

# Table 1 The Ten General Principles of Public Life

**Selflessness** – members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.

**Honesty and integrity** – members should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned, should not behave improperly, and should on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

**Objectivity** – members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits.

**Accountability** – members should be accountable to the public for their actions and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities, and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office

**Openness** – members should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority, and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions.

**Personal judgement** – members may take account of the views of others, including their political groups, but should reach their own conclusions on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.

**Respect for others** – members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees

**Duty to uphold the law** – members should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them.

**Stewardship** – members should do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authorities use their resources prudently, and in accordance with the law.

**Leadership** – members should promote and support these principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence

# 2.

## General obligations under the Code of Conduct

### Treating others with respect

#### See Paragraph 3(1)

You must treat others with respect.

In politics, rival groupings are common, either in formal political parties or more informal alliances. It is expected that each will campaign for their ideas, and they may also seek to discredit the policies and actions of their opponents. Criticism of ideas and opinion is part of democratic debate, and does not in itself amount to bullying or failing to treat someone with respect.

Ideas and policies may be robustly criticised, but individuals should not be subject to unreasonable or excessive personal attack. This particularly applies to dealing with the public and officers. Chairs of meetings are expected to apply the rules of debate and procedure rules or standing orders to prevent abusive or disorderly conduct.

Whilst it is acknowledged that some members of the public can make unreasonable demands on members, members should, as far as possible, treat the public courteously and with consideration. Rude and offensive behaviour lowers the public's expectations and confidence in its elected representatives.

### Complying with equality laws

#### See Paragraph 3(2)(a)

You must not do anything which may cause your authority to breach any equality laws.

Equality laws prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and age.

The provisions of these laws are complex. In summary, there are four main forms of discrimination:

- Direct discrimination: treating people differently because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation or age.
- Indirect discrimination: treatment which does not appear to differentiate between people because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation or age, but which disproportionately disadvantages them.
- Harassment: engaging in unwanted conduct on the grounds of sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation or age, which violates another person's dignity or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

- Victimisation: treating a person less favourably because they have complained of discrimination, brought proceedings for discrimination, or been involved in complaining about or bringing proceedings for discrimination.

Equality laws also impose positive duties to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment and to promote equality. They also impose specific positive duties on certain authorities.

Under equality laws, your authority may be liable for any discriminatory acts which you commit. This will apply when you do something in your official capacity in a discriminatory manner.

You must be careful not to act in a way which may amount to any of the prohibited forms of discrimination, or to do anything which hinders your authority's fulfilment of its positive duties under equality laws. Such conduct may cause your authority to break the law, and you may find yourself subject to a complaint that you have breached this paragraph of the Code of Conduct.

## Bullying and intimidation

**See Paragraphs 3(2)(b) and 3(2)(c)**

You must not bully any person including other councillors, council officers or members of the public.

Bullying may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviour. Such behaviour may happen once or be part of a pattern of behaviour directed at a weaker person or person over whom you have some actual or perceived influence. Bullying behaviour attempts to undermine an individual or a group of individuals, is detrimental to their confidence and capability, and may adversely affect their health.

This can be contrasted with the legitimate challenges which a member can make in challenging policy or scrutinising performance. An example of this would be debates in the chamber about policy, or asking officers to explain the rationale for the professional opinions they have put forward. You are entitled to challenge fellow councillors and officers as to why they hold their views.

It is important that you raise issues about poor performance in the correct way and proper forum. However, if your criticism is a personal attack or of an offensive nature, you are likely to cross the line of what is acceptable behaviour.

You must not intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person who is or is likely to be a complainant, a witness, or involved in the administration of any investigation or proceedings relating to a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct.

However much you may be concerned about allegations that you or a fellow councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, it is always wrong to bully, intimidate or attempt to intimidate any person involved in the investigation or hearing. Even though you may not have breached the Code of Conduct, you will have your say during any independent investigation or hearing, and you should let these processes follow their natural course.

If you intimidate a witness in an investigation about your conduct, for example, you may find yourself subject to another complaint that you breached this paragraph of the Code of Conduct.

## Compromising the impartiality of officers of the authority

### See Paragraph 3(2)(d)

You must not compromise, or attempt to compromise, the impartiality of anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the authority.

You should not approach or pressure anyone who works for, or on behalf of, the

authority to carry out their duties in a biased or partisan way. They must be neutral and should not be coerced or persuaded to act in a way that would undermine their neutrality. For example, you should not get officers to help you prepare party political material, or to help you with matters relating to your private business. You should not provide or offer any incentive or reward in return for acting in a particular way or reaching a particular decision.

Although you can robustly question officers in order to understand, for example, their reasons for proposing to act in a particular way, or the content of a report that they have written, you must not try and force them to act differently, change their advice, or alter the content of that report, if doing so would prejudice their professional integrity.

## Disclosing confidential information

### See Paragraph 4(a)

You must not disclose confidential information, or information which you believe to be of a confidential nature, except in any of the following circumstances:

- You have the consent of the person authorised to give it
- You are required by law to do so.



- The disclosure is made to a third party for the purposes of obtaining professional advice (for example, your lawyer or other professional adviser) provided that person agrees not to disclose the information to any other person.
  - The disclosure is in the public interest. This is only justified in limited circumstances, when all of the following four requirements are met:
    1. the disclosure must be reasonable
    2. the disclosure must be in the public interest
    3. the disclosure must be made in good faith
    4. the disclosure must be made in compliance with any reasonable requirements of your authority
- In relation to the disclosure of confidential information in the public interest, the four requirements to be met are outlined in more detail below.
- 1 The first requirement, that the disclosure must be reasonable, requires you to consider matters such as:
    - Whether you believe that the information disclosed, and any allegation contained in it, is substantially true. If you do not believe this, the disclosure is unlikely to be reasonable.
    - Whether you make the disclosure for personal gain. If you are paid to disclose the information, the disclosure is unlikely to be reasonable.
    - The identity of the person to whom the disclosure is made. It may be reasonable to disclose information to the police or to an appropriate regulator. It is less likely to be reasonable for you to disclose the information to the world at large through the media.
    - The extent of the information disclosed. The inclusion of unnecessary detail, and in particular, private matters such as addresses or telephone numbers, is likely to render the disclosure unreasonable.
    - The seriousness of the matter. The more serious the matter disclosed, the more likely it is that the disclosure will be reasonable.
    - The timing of the disclosure. If the matter to which the disclosure relates has already occurred, and is unlikely to occur again, the disclosure may be less likely to be reasonable than if the matter is continuing, or is likely to re-occur.
    - Whether the disclosure involves your authority failing in a duty of confidence owed to another person.

- 2 The second requirement, that the disclosure must be in the public interest, needs to involve one or more of the following matters or something of comparable seriousness, that has either happened in the past, is currently happening, or is likely to happen in the future:
- (a) A criminal offence is committed
  - (b) Your authority or some other person fails to comply with any legal obligation to which they are subject
  - (c) A miscarriage of justice occurs
  - (d) The health or safety of any individual is in danger.
  - (e) The environment is likely to be damaged
  - (f) That information tending to show any matter falling within (a) to (e) is deliberately concealed
3. The third requirement, that the disclosure is made in good faith, will not be met if you act with an ulterior motive, for example, to achieve a party political advantage or to settle a score with a political opponent

- 4 The fourth requirement, that you comply with the reasonable requirements of your authority, means that before making the disclosure you must comply with your authority's policies or protocols on matters such as whistle-blowing and confidential information. You must first raise your concerns through the appropriate channels set out in such policies or protocols

In summary, to decide whether the disclosure is reasonable and in the public interest, you may need to conduct a balancing exercise weighing up the public interest in maintaining confidentiality against any countervailing public interest favouring disclosure. This will require a careful focus on how confidential the information is, on any potentially harmful consequences of its disclosure, and on any factors which may justify its disclosure despite these potential consequences

In some situations, it is extremely unlikely that a disclosure can be justified in the public interest. These will include where the disclosure amounts to a criminal offence, or where the information disclosed is protected by legal professional privilege.



## Preventing access to information

### See Paragraph 4(b)

You must not prevent anyone getting information that they are entitled to by law.

You must not prevent any person from accessing information which they are entitled to by law. This includes information under the *Freedom of Information Act 2000* or those copies of minutes, agendas, reports and other documents of your authority which they have a right to access. To find out more about what types of information the public can access, contact the Information Commissioner's Office by visiting [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk) or by calling 0845 630 6060.

## Disrepute

### See Paragraph 5

You must not bring your office or authority into disrepute while acting in your official capacity, or at any time through criminal activity that leads to a criminal conviction.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Transitional Note: Until such time as there is Parliamentary approval for amendments to section 52 of the *Local Government Act 2000* which reinstates the situation prior to Collins J's decision in *Livingstone v Adjudication Panel for England 2006*, the Code of Conduct does not apply to conduct outside of the performance of your functions as a member. Only if you have engaged in an activity which has a link with the functions of your office will any conduct in your private capacity be covered by the Code of Conduct. If the legislative amendments are passed, the Code of Conduct will also apply to criminal activity which has led to a conviction.

As a member, your actions and behaviour are subject to greater scrutiny than that of ordinary members of the public. You should be aware that your actions in both your public and private life might have an adverse impact on your office or your authority. Dishonest and deceitful behaviour in your role as a member may bring your authority into disrepute, as may conduct in your private life which results in a criminal conviction, such as dishonest, threatening or violent behaviour.

## Using your position improperly

### See Paragraph 6(a)

You must not use, or attempt to use, your position improperly to the advantage or disadvantage of yourself or anyone else.

You should not use, or attempt to use, your public office either for your or anybody else's personal gain or loss. For example, your behaviour would be improper if you sought to further your own private interests through your position as a member.

In addition to paragraph 6(a), paragraph 12 is also relevant to the proper use of your position. Paragraph 12 supports your role as a community advocate, representing and speaking for the concerns of your community, even where you have a prejudicial interest. This right applies to you at meetings where you have a statutory right

to speak or you are provided with the same opportunity to speak as ordinary members of the public would be allowed. If your authority does not allow members of the public to attend the relevant meeting for the purpose of speaking to it, paragraph 12 will not apply to you unless you have a statutory right to speak on the matter.

You must leave the room or chamber immediately after you have made the representations, given your evidence, or answered questions, and make no further attempt to influence the decision. If the meeting decides that you must stop speaking to the meeting, even if you have more to say, you must stop and leave the room. If you fail to comply with the meeting's direction or paragraph 12 of the Code of Conduct, you may be found to have improperly influenced the decision.

## The authority's resources

### See Paragraph 6(b)(i)

You must only use or authorise the use of the resources of the authority in accordance with its requirements.

Where your authority provides you with resources (for example telephone, computer and other IT facilities, transport or support from council employees), you must only use

these resources or employees for carrying out your local authority business and any other activity which your authority has authorised you to use them for.

You must be familiar with the rules applying to the use of these resources made by your authority. Failure to comply with your authority's rules is likely to amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct.

If you authorise someone (for example a member of your family) to use your authority's resources, you must take care to ensure that this is allowed by your authority's rules.

## Using resources for proper purposes only

### See Paragraphs 6(b)(ii) and 6(c)

You must make sure you use the authority's resources for proper purposes only. It is not appropriate to use, or authorise others to use, the resources for political purposes, including party political purposes. When using the authority's resources, you must have regard, if applicable, to any Local Authority Code of Publicity made under the *Local Government Act 1986*.

You should never use council resources for

purely political purposes, including designing and distributing party political material produced for publicity purposes.

However, your authority may authorise you to use its resources and facilities for political purposes in connection with your authority's business. For example, holding surgeries in your ward and dealing with correspondence from your constituents. In this case, you must be aware of the limitations placed upon such use for these purposes. Using your authority's resources outside of these limitations is likely to amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct

## Considering advice provided to you and giving reasons

### See Paragraph 7

Please note: paragraph 7 is not mandatory for parish councils. However, your parish may choose to include an obligation to take account of your clerk's advice in the Code your authority adopts.

You must have regard to advice from your monitoring officer or chief finance officer where they give it under their statutory duties.

If you seek advice, or advice is offered to

you, for example, on whether or not you should register a personal interest, you should have regard to this advice before you make your mind up. Failure to do so may be a breach of the Code of Conduct

You must give reasons for all decisions in accordance with statutory requirements and any reasonable requirements imposed by your authority. Giving reasons for decisions is particularly important in relation to regulatory decisions and decisions where people's rights are affected

Where members disagree with officer recommendations in making a decision, members will need to take particular care in giving clear reasons for the decision

### **Exemption to the rule on declaring a personal interest to the meeting**

An exemption applies where your interest arises solely from your membership of, or position of control or management on:

1. any other body to which you were appointed or nominated by the authority
2. any other body exercising functions of a public nature (for example another local authority)

In these exceptional cases, provided that you do not have a prejudicial interest, you only need to declare your interest if and when you speak on the matter.

Example: if you are attending a council debate on education policy and are also a local education authority appointed governor, you would only need to declare an interest if and when you decided to speak during the debate. If you do not want to speak to the meeting on the decision, you may vote on the matter without making a declaration.

If you have sensitive employment, which you would like to withhold from the register of interests, please see page 31 for more information.

### **a) Interests you must register**

#### **Key points:**

All members have to provide a record of their interests in a public register of interests.

You must tell your monitoring officer in writing (in the case of a parish councillor, perhaps through your clerk) within 28 days of taking office, or within 28 days of any change to your register of interests, of any interests which fall within the categories set out in the Code of Conduct, outlined below.

You need to register your interests so that the public, authority staff and fellow members know which of your interests might give rise to a conflict of interest. The register is a document that can be consulted when (or before) an issue arises, and so allows others to know what interests you have, and whether they might give rise to a possible conflict of interest.

The register also protects you. You are responsible for deciding whether or not you should declare an interest in a meeting, but it can be helpful for you to know early on if others think that a potential conflict might arise. It is also important that the public

# 3.

## Personal and prejudicial interests

### Personal interests

Key points:

#### Two types of personal interest

You have a **personal interest** in any business of your authority where it relates to or is likely to affect:

- a) An interest that you must **register**
- b) An interest that is not on your register, but where the well-being or financial position of you, members of your family, or people with whom you have a close association, is likely to be affected by the business of your authority more than it would affect the majority of:
  - inhabitants of the ward or electoral division affected by the decision (in the case of authorities with electoral divisions or wards)
  - inhabitants of the Assembly constituency affected by the decision (in the case of the Greater London Authority)
  - inhabitants of the authority's area (in all other cases)

These two categories of personal interests are explained in this section. If you declare a personal interest you can remain in the meeting, speak and vote on the matter, unless your personal interest is also a **prejudicial interest**

What constitutes a prejudicial interest is outlined in the next section on page 22.

#### Effect of having a personal interest in a matter

You must declare that you have a personal interest, and the nature of that interest, before the matter is discussed or as soon as it becomes apparent to you except in limited circumstances. Even if your interest is on the register of interests, you must declare it in the meetings where matters relating to that interest are discussed, unless an exemption applies. When an exemption may be applied is explained opposite

know about any interest that might have to be declared by you or other members, so that decision making is seen by the public as open and honest. This helps to ensure that public confidence in the integrity of local governance is maintained.

As previously mentioned, you must tell your monitoring officer in writing within 28 days of taking office, or within 28 days of any change to your register of interests, of any interests which fall within the categories set out in the Code of Conduct. These categories include:

- Your membership or position of control or management in:
  - any other bodies to which you were appointed or nominated by the authority
  - any bodies **exercising functions of a public nature** (described below), or directed to charitable purposes, or whose principal purposes include the influence of public opinion or policy, including any political party or trade union
- Your job(s) or business(es)
- The name of your employer or people who have appointed you to work for them
- The name of any person who has made a payment to you in respect of your election, or expenses you have incurred in carrying out your duties.
- The name of any person, company or other body which has a place of business or land in the authority's area, and in which you have a shareholding of more than £25,000 (nominal value) or have a stake of more than 1/100th of the share capital of the company
- Any contracts between the authority and yourself, your firm (if you are a partner) or a company (if you are a paid director or if you have a shareholding as described above) including any lease, licence from the authority and any contracts for goods, services or works. Where the contract relates to use of land or a property, the land must be identified on the register
- Any gift or hospitality over the value of £25 that you receive as a member and the person you believe to be the source of the gift or hospitality
- Any land and property in the authority's area in which you have a beneficial interest (or a licence to occupy for more than 28 days) including, but not limited to, the land and house you live in and any allotments you own or use

If you have sensitive employment, which you would like to withhold from the register of interests, please see page 31 for more information

### What is “a body exercising functions of a public nature”?

The phrase “a body exercising functions of a public nature” has been subject to broad interpretation by the courts for a variety of different purposes. Although it is not possible to produce a definitive list of such bodies, here are some of the criteria to consider when deciding whether or not a body meets that definition:

- Does that body carry out a public service?
- Is the body taking the place of local or central government in carrying out the function?
- Is the body (including one outsourced in the private sector) exercising a function delegated to it by a public authority?
- Is the function exercised under legislation or according to some statutory power?
- Can the body be judicially reviewed?

Unless you answer ‘yes’ to one of the above questions, it is unlikely that the body in your case is exercising functions of a public nature

Examples of bodies included in this definition: regional and local development agencies, other government agencies, other councils, public health bodies, council-owned companies exercising public functions, arms length management organisations carrying out housing functions on behalf of your authority, school governing bodies

If you need further information or specific advice on this matter, please contact your monitoring officer.

### b) Interests that are not on your register

#### Key points:

You have a personal interest in a matter if that matter affects the **well-being or financial position** of you, members of your **family**, or people with whom you have a **close association**, more than it would affect the majority of people in the **ward or electoral division** affected by the decision, or in the authority’s area or constituency.



You must also look at how any matter would affect your interests or those of members of your family or close associates. This includes:

- your and their jobs and businesses
- your and their employers, firms you or they are a partner of, and companies you or they are a director of
- any person or body who has appointed you, members of your family or close associates, to any position
- corporate bodies in which you or they have a shareholding of more than £25,000 (nominal value)

#### **What does “affecting well-being or financial position” mean?**

The term ‘well-being’ can be described as a condition of contentment and happiness. Anything that could affect your quality of life, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect your well-being.

A personal interest can affect you, your family or close personal associates positively and negatively. So if you or they have the potential to gain or lose from a matter under consideration, a personal interest would need to be declared in both situations.

#### **Who is a member of your family or close associate?**

A member of your family should be given a very wide meaning. It includes a partner (someone you are married to, your civil partner, or someone you live with in a similar capacity), a parent, a parent-in-law, a son or daughter, a stepson or stepdaughter, the child of a partner, a brother or sister, a brother or sister of your partner, a grandparent, a grandchild, an uncle or aunt, a nephew or niece, and the partners of any of these people.

A person with whom you have a close association is someone that you are in either regular or irregular contact with over a period of time who is more than an acquaintance. It is someone a reasonable member of the public might think you would be prepared to favour or disadvantage when discussing a matter that affects them. It may be a friend, a colleague, a business associate or someone whom you know through general social contacts.

#### **What if I belong to an authority without wards?**

If you are a member of an authority that does not have wards, you will need to declare a personal interest whenever you consider a matter in a meeting of your authority if it affects the well-being or financial position of you, your family, or

people with whom you have a close association, more than it would affect other people in your authority's area.

### **What if I am not aware of my personal interest?**

Your obligation to disclose a personal interest to a meeting only applies when you are aware of or ought to be aware of the existence of the personal interest.

Clearly you cannot be expected to declare something of which you are unaware. It would be impractical to expect you to research into the employment, business interests and other activities of all your close associates and relatives. However, you should not ignore the existence of interests which, from the point of view of a reasonable and objective observer, you should have been aware

# Prejudicial interests

## 1. What is a prejudicial interest?

Key points:

Your personal interest will also be a **prejudicial interest** in a matter if all of the following conditions are met:

- a) The matter does not fall within one of the **exempt categories** of decisions
- b) The matter affects **your financial interests** or relates to a **licensing or regulatory matter**
- c) A member of the public, who knows the relevant facts, would **reasonably think your personal interest is so significant** that it is likely to prejudice your judgement of the public interest.

An explanation of each of these points follows.

### a) Exempt categories of decisions

Paragraph 10(2)(c) of the Code of Conduct states that a member will not have a prejudicial interest if the matter relates to any of the following functions of their authority:

- Housing: if you hold a tenancy or lease with the authority, as long as the matter does not relate to your particular tenancy or lease
- School meals or school transport and travelling expenses: if you are a parent or guardian of a child in full-time education or you are a parent governor, unless it relates particularly to the school your child attends
- Statutory sick pay: if you are receiving this, or are entitled to this.
- An allowance, payment or indemnity for members.
- Any ceremonial honour given to members.
- Setting council tax or a precept

**b) Financial interests and licensing or regulatory matters**

You can only have a prejudicial interest in a matter if it falls into one of the following two categories:

- a) The matter affects your financial position or the financial position of any person or body through whom you have a personal interest.

**Examples:** an application for grant-funding to a body on your register of interests; a contract for services between the authority and that body; or leasing a property to or from a close associate or member of your family. Your financial position can be affected directly or indirectly, favourably or unfavourably, substantially or marginally.

- b) The matter relates to an approval, consent, licence, permission or registration that affects you or any person or body with which you have a personal interest

**Examples:** considering a planning or licensing application made by you or a body on your register of interests; Licensing Act licences; pet shop and dog breeding licensing; petroleum licences; street trading licences; taxi

licensing; consent, approval or permission pursuant to a contractual document such as a lease or commercial contract; street collection permit; or lottery registration.

**c) What is so significant that it is likely to prejudice your judgement?**

If a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the relevant facts would think that your judgement of the public interest might be prejudiced, then you have a prejudicial interest

You must ask yourself whether a member of the public – if he or she knew all the relevant facts – would think that your personal interest was so significant that it would be likely to prejudice your judgement. In other words, the interest must be perceived as likely to harm or impair your ability to judge the public interest.

The mere existence of local knowledge, or connections within the local community, will not normally be sufficient to meet the test. There must be some factor that might positively harm your ability to judge the public interest objectively. The nature of the matter is also important, including whether a large number of people are equally affected by it or whether you or a smaller group are particularly affected

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Some general principles must be remembered when applying this test. You should clearly act in the public interest and not in the interests of family or close associates. You are a custodian of the public purse and the public interest and your behaviour and decisions should reflect this responsibility.

**Example:** you would have a prejudicial interest in a planning application proposal if a member of your family lives next to the proposed site. This is because your family member would be likely to be affected by the application to a greater extent than the majority of the inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision (or authority, if your authority does not have wards) and this gives you a personal interest in the issue. The existence of the close family tie means a reasonable member of the public might think that it would prejudice your view of the public interest when considering the planning application. It does not matter whether it actually would or not.

## 2. What to do when you have a prejudicial interest

Even where you have a prejudicial interest, the Code of Conduct supports your role as a community advocate and enables you in certain circumstances to represent your community and to speak on issues important to them and to you.

However, this right is not mandatory for certain types of authorities (including parish councils and police authorities). For such authorities it will only apply if paragraph 12(2) of the code is expressly adopted by your authority and the public are allowed to speak to meetings of your authority. Simply adopting the mandatory provisions will not incorporate this important change. See page 4 for a full list of authorities in this category.

**Key points:**

If you have a **prejudicial interest** in a matter being discussed at a meeting, you must declare that you have a prejudicial interest and the nature of that interest as soon as that interest becomes apparent to you.

You should then leave the room, **unless members of the public are allowed to make representations, give evidence or answer questions about the matter**, by statutory right or otherwise. If that is the case, you can also attend the meeting for that purpose.

However, you must immediately leave the room once you have finished or when the meeting decides that you have finished (if that is earlier). You cannot remain in the public gallery to observe the vote on the matter.

In addition, you must not seek to **improperly influence** a decision in which you have a prejudicial interest. This rule is similar to your general obligation not to use your position as a member improperly to your or someone else's advantage or disadvantage.

**Do I have a statutory right to speak to the meeting?**

The Code of Conduct does not provide you with a general right to speak to a meeting where you have a prejudicial interest. However, in limited circumstances, legislation may provide you with a right to speak (for example, licensing hearings and standards hearings) which the Code of Conduct recognises. If so, you will be allowed to exercise that right to speak. Your monitoring officer should be able to confirm whether this is relevant to your case.

**If I don't have a statutory right, will I be allowed to speak to the meeting?**

The Code of Conduct aims to provide members with the same rights as ordinary members of the public to speak on certain matters in meetings, despite having a prejudicial interest. These rights are usually governed by your authority's constitution, procedure rules or standing orders, and may be subject to conditions including time limits or the fact that representations can only be made in writing.

If an ordinary member of the public would be allowed to speak to a meeting about an item, you should be provided with the same opportunity. You will be able to make representations, answer questions or give evidence, even if you have a prejudicial

interest in the item. You may not take part in the discussion or observe the vote.

### **When must I leave the room where the meeting is held?**

You must leave immediately after you have made your representations, given evidence or answered questions, and before any debate starts.

If the meeting decides that you should finish speaking, despite your intention to say more, you must comply with the meeting's decision. Although members of the public may be allowed to observe the discussion and vote on the matter, you are not allowed to do so and must leave the room immediately. Failure to do so may be viewed as an attempt to **improperly influence** the meeting.

### **What does improperly influencing a decision mean?**

You must not use your position or attempt to use your position improperly to further your own interests in a way that is not open to ordinary members of the public. Clear examples of improper influence would be using coercion, harassment, inducement or pressure to influence a matter.

It may also be improper if you refuse to leave the meeting, or continue to speak to a

meeting, on a matter in which you have a prejudicial interest, after the meeting has decided that you must stop speaking and leave.

### **What if the public are not allowed to speak to the meeting on the matter?**

If an ordinary member of the public is not allowed to speak on the matter, you cannot do so if you have a prejudicial interest. You must leave the room where the debate is being held and not seek to influence the debate in any way.

This may be the case, for example, where your authority is discussing a confidential matter in closed session or does not have procedure rules or standing orders in place that allow members of the public to speak at a meeting of your authority. Like the public, you are not allowed to participate if you have a prejudicial interest. However, where the public may be allowed to sit in the public gallery to observe the meeting, you will be required to leave the room during the debate and vote.

### **If I have a prejudicial interest, how else can I influence the decision?**

You can still present your views to the meeting through other means and influence the decision in a way that is not improper. For example, you can:



- Make written representations in your private capacity. The Standards Board recommends that the existence and nature of the interest should be disclosed in such representations. You should not seek preferential consideration for your representations. Such written representations should be addressed to officers rather than other members of the authority
- Use a professional representative to make, for example, a planning application on your behalf.
- Arrange for another member of your authority to represent the views of your constituents on matters in which you have a prejudicial interest.

### 3. Dispensations

#### If I have a prejudicial interest, can I obtain a dispensation to allow me to take part in the meeting?

##### Key points:

You can apply in writing to your local standards committee for a dispensation on one of the following grounds:

- over 50% of the authority or committee members would be prevented from taking a full part in a meeting because of prejudicial interests
- the political balance at the meeting would be upset<sup>1</sup>

You must apply for a dispensation individually and not as a group or authority. If the standards committee approves your application, it must grant the dispensation in writing and before the meeting is held. If you need a dispensation, you should apply for one as soon as is reasonably possible.

Only the standards committee can grant the dispensation and will do so at its discretion. The standards committee will need to balance the public interest in preventing members with prejudicial interests from taking part in decisions, against the public interest in decisions being taken by a reasonably representative group of members of the authority. If failure to grant a dispensation will result in an authority or committee not achieving a quorum, this may well constitute grounds for granting a dispensation.

The Standards Board cannot grant dispensations or advise on whether or not they should be granted. For further advice on dispensations, you should contact your monitoring officer.

<sup>1</sup> Please note there is currently a problem with the drafting of the Dispensation Regulations. The political balance criterion is linked to an authority being unable to comply with its duty under section 15(4) of the *Local Government and Housing Act 1989*. This duty requires the appointment of committees that reflect the overall political balance of an authority. However, the duty does not arise in relation to individual meetings either of the authority or its committees. For this reason it is difficult to envisage circumstances in which the criterion would be met. Until such time as the appropriate amendments are made to the Regulations it is not likely that dispensations would be granted on the basis of the political balance criterion.