

Adoption of new Code of Conduct for Members of Copeland Borough Council

Lead Officer: Martin Jepson
Report Author: Martin Jepson

Summary and Recommendation

It is recommended that:

- Council be recommended to adopt the Model Code of Conduct issued by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government as set out in the Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2007 (“the Code”), together with a preamble incorporating the ten general principles governing the conduct of members, in place of its existing Code;
- Parish Councils within Copeland be recommended to adopt the Code and preamble;
- All members of Copeland Borough Council be requested to attend training sessions on the new Code.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 It is a function of the Standards Committee to advise the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members’ Code of Conduct.

2. Detail

Background

- 2.1 Members last considered proposals for a revised Members Code of Conduct at the Standards Committee meeting on 16th February 2007, and agreed a response to the Consultation Paper issued at that time.
- 2.2 Following the consultation process, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made the Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2007 on 2nd April 2007. The Order contains a new Model Code, which is attached as Appendix ‘1’. Under Section 51 of the Local Government Act 2000, it is the duty of a Local Authority to adopt the new Model Code within 6 months of the making of such an Order.
- 2.3 The Standards Board for England has issued general Guidance on the Code and the current recommendation from the Standards Board is that Local Authorities should adopt the new Code in its model form without amendment. This is to give certainty to members and the public as to what standards are expected; ensure consistency throughout England, and minimise the legal risk of adopting additional provisions that are unenforceable. The Standards Board, however, do recommend that local authorities include a preamble to the Code which outlines the ten general principles governing the conduct of members. The suggested preamble is set out as Appendix ‘2’.
- 2.4 As the new Code substantially relaxes the restrictions on members making representations where they have a prejudicial interest, it is considered that there is no merit in continuing to apply such restrictions and that the new Code should be adopted by the Council at the earliest opportunity.

- 2.5 On that basis, it is intended as part of the induction process for new members to give training on the new Model Code. It is also recommended that all members be encouraged to attend the training sessions on the new Code. This is so that all members are equipped with a basic knowledge of the Code in relation to meetings.

Summary of Changes to the Code

- 2.6 The 10 Principles are derived from the original Nolan Committee's Principles of Public Law. They set out the basis for the obligations contained within the Code and may be a helpful summary for members of the ethical framework within which they should act. Compliance with the Principles is not of itself a statutory obligation but failure to act in accordance with the Principles could potentially result in breach of the Code as constituting, for example, conduct which could reasonably be regarded as bringing a member's office or authority into disrepute.

Comment:

- 2.7 **Members could decide not to include the preamble. This would not change the nature of the obligations under the Code but would remove the context and basis within which the Code has been drafted and how it is likely to be interpreted.**

Scope

- 2.8 As before, the Code is intended to apply when a member is acting in an official capacity. Although not well phrased, para 2.3 of the Code states that in some circumstances the Code will also apply to conduct in a private capacity, but only where a criminal conviction has been imposed as a result of it. The 3 instances set out in the Code where this is the case are in relation to intimidation (para 3.2.c); bringing the office or authority into disrepute (para 5); and improperly seeking an advantage (para 6.a). The last 2 instances were also included within the previous Code.
- 2.9 Until the proposed amendments to section 52 of the Local Government Act 2000, which are currently before Parliament, reinstate the situation prior to the decision in the Livingstone case, only in very limited circumstances will the Code apply to conduct outside of a member's official capacity.

Comment:

- 2.10 **As drafted, any criminal conviction is capable of being taken into account. There may well, therefore, be local variations of interpretations on the weight to be given to various criminal convictions when local filtering is introduced. Conversely, it appears that the Code will have no application where there is no conviction as, for example, where a caution is received for a violent crime.**

General Obligations

- 2.11 The positive obligation to treat others with respect remains (para 3.1 refers). Rather than being required to promote equality as under the existing Code, however, the new Code requires members not to do anything that may cause the authority to breach any of the equality enactments (para 3.2a). A new requirement not to bully any person has been inserted (para 3.2b).
- 2.12 The provisions regarded confidentiality have been changed to also allow disclosure of confidential information if it is reasonable and in the public interest to do so, and if disclosure is made in good faith and in compliance with the reasonable requirements of the authority (para 4.a.iv).
- 2.13 There is a new obligation on members to have regard to the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity (para 6.c). Members will be familiar with this as it has been the subject of previous advice issued by the Monitoring Officer, especially during the election period.
- 2.14 The obligation to have regard to any relevant advice given by the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Finance Officer has been retained and strengthened (para 7.1).
- 2.15 There is no longer any requirement on members to report any breaches of the Code to the Standards Board.

Comment

- 2.16 **There was a concern in some quarters that under the current Code the obligation to promote equality inhibited the expression of opinions and beliefs. It is clear now that members are able to express their views but the Guidance from the Standards Board is likely to stress members must be careful not to discriminate against other people when so doing.**
- 2.17 **The new bullying provision is likely to stress that members must be careful not to discriminate against other people when so doing.**
- 2.18 **So far as the new confidentiality provisions are concerned, detailed Guidance has been issued by Standards Board as to the nature of the ‘public interest’ test that should be satisfied before disclosure together with an emphasis on the need to raise concerns through the proper channels before disclosure. So far as Copeland is concerned, it is suggested that members be asked to contact the Monitoring Officer for advice before they release any confidential information.**
- 2.19 Declarations of Interest – Personal Interests
The new list of personal interests required to be registered in the Register of Members Interests (para 8.1a) is a very similar to the current list. To the current list, however, has been added a new personal interest; namely, where it relates to or is likely to affect the interests of any person from whom at least £25 worth of gift or hospitality has been received (para 8.a.viii). Although such gifts or hospitality did need to be registered under the Code, receipt did not constitute a personal interest and did not need to be declared at meetings.

- 2.20 A personal interest should be declared at a meeting if it is registered in the Register of Members' Interests. A personal interest should also be declared where the matter under discussion might reasonably be regarded as affecting the well-being or financial position of the member, or 'a relevant person', to a greater extent than the majority of other council tax payers, ratepayers or inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision.
- 2.21 The list of relevant people includes family or 'any person with whom you have a close personal association' as well as employers of those people. A member is, however, only liable to declare the interest if aware or ought reasonably to be aware of its existence.
- 2.22 Personal Interests as listed in para 8.1.a should be registered in the Register of Members' Interests, which is maintained by the Monitoring Officer, and changes notified within 28 days, as now (para 13). If a Personal Interest arises at a meeting, then the existence and nature of the interest should generally be declared at the outset whether or not the member intends to speak (para 9.1).
- 2.23 Where the personal interest relates to a body to which the member has been nominated or appointed by the Council, or relates to a body exercising functions of a public nature, then the new Code proposes that the personal interest need only be declared at meetings where the member actually speaks on the relevant issue (para 9.2). Despite this we recommend that for clarity for the public members notify the Chairman of the meeting prior to that although they may have a personal interest, they do not propose to speak on this item.
- 2.24 As now, if a Personal Interest is declared which is not prejudicial, the member may stay, speak and vote.
- 2.25 There are some detailed provisions with regard to disclosure of particular interests that members will need to acquaint themselves with in case any apply to their own circumstances. Details of 'sensitive information' that could create a serious risk of violence or intimidation need not be disclosed (para 9.5) or registered (para 14) provided the Monitoring Officer agrees.

Comment

- 2.26 **The Personal Interest test under the current Code refers to a member having such an interest if a decision upon it might reasonably be regarded as affecting the well being or financial position of the member, a relative or a friend to a greater extent than other council tax payers, ratepayers or inhabitants of the authority's area.**
- 2.27 **The new Code has removed the reference to 'friend' and has used a wider term covering any person with whom the member has a 'close association'. Conversely, the number of declarable personal interests could be argued as likely to be reduced by restricting declarations to those matters affecting the majority of the inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision. The term 'family' is no longer defined. Personal Interest on Gifts and Hospitality will mean that members need to be aware that they need to include gifts and hospitality on their registration**

of interests as well as declare it in meetings, and that we will have to ask members to complete fresh registrations after the new Code is adopted at Borough and Parish levels.

Prejudicial Interests

The basic prejudicial interest test is the same as now; namely, that where there is a personal interest, then the interest is also prejudicial where it is one which a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the members judgement of the public interest (para 10.1)

- 2.29 The new Code, however, provides (para 10.2) that a member does not have a prejudicial interest where:
- The matter under discussion does not affect the financial position of the member, or any person or body described in para 8 in relation to whom a member may have a personal interest;
 - The matter does not relate to the determining of any approval, consent, licence, permission or registration in relation to the member, or any person or body described in para 8 in relation to whom a member may have a personal interest;
 - The matter relates to specific exceptions such as housing; school meals, school transport and travel expenses; statutory sick pay; members allowances, payments or indemnities; ceremonial honours; or setting the council tax.
- 2.30 The exceptions set out above do need to be carefully studied as a number of them are different than the current position and Members need to ensure that they are familiar with them.

Effect of Prejudicial Interests on participation

- 2.31 The basic rule is as now; namely that unless a dispensation has been obtained from the Standards Committee, a member with a prejudicial interest must withdraw from the room or chamber. Prior to withdrawing, however, under the new Code a member with a prejudicial interest may make representations, answer questions or give evidence at a meeting open to the public, provided that the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose, whether under a statutory right or otherwise. After speaking, the member must then immediately withdraw from the room or chamber.
- 2.32 The intention is to ensure that a member has the same right as an ordinary member of the public to speak at a meeting open to the public despite having a prejudicial interest.
- 2.33 The current requirements not to exercise executive functions where there is a prejudicial interest, or to improperly influence a decision are repeated in the new Code.

Comment:

- 2.34** There are two important changes to the section of the Code dealing with prejudicial interests. The first change is that a member will have the same right as any member has a prejudicial interest where rights for the public to speak exist. After speaking, however, the member will then need to immediately withdraw from the room. This will, for example, allow members who belong to special interest groups or who were elected on a particular issue to make representations at a meeting open to the public, where the public have a right to speak.
- 2.35** The second significant change concerning the list of exemptions relates to the way the Code is worded. Currently, if one of the exemptions applies a member may regard him or herself as not having a prejudicial interest. This means that a member has to make a conscious decision whether or not to take advantage of one of the exemptions or whether to declare a prejudicial interest. In the new Code, it is clearly stated that a member does not have a prejudicial interest in one of the matters in the list of exemptions so there is no discretion in the matter any longer.
- 2.36** Perhaps the most significant exemption is where the matter under discussion does not affect the financial position of the member or any person or body in whom the member has a financial interest. This, in effect, is reviving the old ‘pecuniary interest’ test so that if there is no pecuniary or financial interest, then the member does not have a prejudicial interest to declare unless the matter relates to a licensing or regulatory matter affecting the member, or person or body in which the member may have a personal interest.
- 2.37** It was hoped by a number of Monitoring Officers that the new Code would include a specific section on ‘bias and predetermination’ but this has not been done, so members will still need to separately consider whether they are approaching an issue with an open mind and able to take part in the discussion even if they do not have a prejudicial interest because the outcome would have no effect on their financial position.
- 2.38** Summary
There have been a number of significant changes from the current Code and, indeed, from the Code issued for consultation earlier this year. The delicate balance between the freedom of members to act as local advocates, and the need to ensure that decisions are made without the improper influence of personal interests has been re-examined in the new Code and greater participation by members with prejudicial interests has been allowed.

Alternative Options

- **It is a statutory duty to adopt a Code. If not adopted within 6 months, it will automatically be applied. Although it is possible to make amendments, the advice from the Standards Board for England is that this is not done for the reasons set out earlier.**

Financial and Human Resources

- Some training for members and Parish Councillors will be necessary. These would be carried out by in-house staff.

Consultees

- Corporate Team

Appendices

- Appendix '1' – The New Model Code
- Appendix '2' – Preamble setting out the 10 Principles

Background Papers

None – Since the Code of Conduct and Standards Board Guidance are already documents.