



Policy 1.1A: Code of Conduct Behaviour Complaints Management

Note: Implementation of the policy is given effect through induction, ongoing training and operational procedures that in this instance evidence that Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates have been made aware of and are accountable for their obligations under an adopted Code of Conduct.

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Policy Objective

To establish, in accordance with Clause 15(2) of the *Local Government (Model Code of Conduct) Regulations 2021* and the Shire of Victoria Plains Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates (Code of Conduct) the procedure for dealing with complaints about alleged breaches of the behaviour requirements included in Division 3 of the Shire's Code of Conduct.

To give effect to the Shire of Victoria Plain's commitment to an effective, transparent, fair and accessible complaints handling process that supports high standards of behaviour of Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates.

Policy Scope

This Policy applies to complaints made in accordance with Clause 11 of the Shire of Vitoria Plains Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates.

This Policy applies to Council Members, Committee Members, Candidates and any person who submits a complaint in accordance with this Policy.

Definitions

Act means the *Local Government Act 1995*.

Behaviour Complaints Committee means the Committee established by the Council in accordance with s.5.8 of the Act for the purpose of dealing with Complaints. The role of the Behaviour Complaints Committee is outlined in Part 2.3 of this Policy.

Behaviour Complaints Officer means a person authorised in writing [*by Council resolution or by the CEO exercising delegated authority*] under clause 11(3) of the Code of Conduct to receive complaints and withdrawals of complaints. The role of the Behaviour Complaints Officer is addressed in Part 2.1 of this Policy.

Note: Appointment of Complaints Officer

Council resolved at its meeting on 24 February 2021 to appoint the Shire's CEO as the Complaints Officer for this purpose

Breach means a breach of Division 3 of the Shire of Victoria Plains Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates.

Candidate means a candidate for election as a Council Member, whose nomination has been accepted by the Returning Officer under s.4.49 of the Act, but does not include a Council Member who has nominated for re-election. A person is a Candidate from the date on which their nomination is accepted, until the Returning Officer declares the election result in accordance with s.4.77 of the Act.

Candidate Complaint means a Complaint alleging a Breach by a Candidate. Candidate Complaints are dealt with in Part 3.2 of this Policy.

Code of Conduct means the Shire of Victoria Plains Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates.

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

Committee Member means a Council Member, employee of the Shire of Victoria Plains or other person who has been appointed by the Council to be a member of a Committee, in accordance with s.5.10(1) of the Act. A person is a Committee Member from the date on which they are appointed, until their appointment expires or is terminated by Council resolution.

Complaint means a complaint submitted under Clause 11 of the Code of Conduct.

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

Complaint Assessor means a person appointed by the Behaviour Complaints Officer in accordance with Part 2.2 and Part 3.8 of this Policy.

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

Complaint Form means the form approved under clause 11(2)(a) of the Code of Conduct *[by Council resolution or by the CEO exercising delegated authority]*.

Council means the Council of the Shire of Victoria Plains.

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, such as workshops or briefings.

Council Member means a person who is 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 clause 12(1) of the Code of Conduct as to whether the alleged Breach has or has not occurred.

Plan means a Plan that may be prepared and implemented under clause 12(4)(b) of the Code of Conduct, to address the behaviour of the person to whom the complaint relates (the Respondent), 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.

Policy Statement

1. Principles

1.1. Procedural fairness

The principles of procedural fairness, or natural justice, will apply when dealing with a Complaint under this Policy. In particular:

- the Respondent will be afforded a reasonable opportunity to be heard before any findings are made, or a plan implemented;
- the decision maker should be objective and impartial, with an absence of bias or the perception of bias; and
- any findings made will be based on proper and genuine consideration of the evidence.

Further Advice on Procedural Fairness

The Shire notes that the WA Ombudsman has suitable guidelines in place: [Procedural fairness \(natural justice\)](#) for detailed commentary on these principles.

1.2. Consistency

The application of this Policy should lead to consistency in process and outcomes. While each Complainant and Respondent will be dealt with according to their circumstances, and each Complaint considered and determined on its merits, similar circumstances will result in similar decisions.

1.3. Confidentiality

The Shire of Victoria Plains will take all reasonable steps to maintain confidentiality when dealing with the Complaint, in order to protect both the Complainant and Respondent.

Council Members, Local Government employees and contractors who have a role in handling a specific complaint will be provided with sufficient information to fulfil their role. They must manage this information securely, and must not disclose or inappropriately use this information.

Complainants will be advised of the level of confidentiality they can expect, and that breaches of confidentiality on their part may prejudice the progress of their Complaint.

Matters Regarding Breaches of Confidentiality

There is no direct statutory provision for confidentiality of behaviour breach allegations under the Act or the *Local Government (Model Code of Conduct) Regulations 2021*. To afford specific protections, the following is to apply:

- In order to allow the Respondent to understand and respond to the complaint against them, the name of the Complainant will be provided to the Respondent, unless the Complainant provides reasons this should not occur.

- The Complainant's contact information will not be provided to the Respondent.
- The Complainant's name and contact information will not be included in any publicly available documents such as meeting agenda or minutes.
- The Complainant should be aware that Complaint Documents may be subject to an FOI request, noting that they must be consulted before any documents are released, and exemptions may apply.

In accordance with *Local Government (Administration) Regulations 1996*, r.11(d) the details of decisions made at Council or Committee meetings must be included in the minutes. However, with complaints under the Code of Conduct only the resolution can be included in the public record. All other content is confidential except for that information that identifies the matter under consideration.

A breach of confidentiality by Council Members or Committee Members would be a breach of the Code of Conduct clause 8(2)(b) requirement to comply with all Local Government Policies. In the case of Council Members, this may also be a breach of Rule of Conduct 18(1).

1.4. Accessibility

The Shire of Victoria Plains will ensure that information on how to make a complaint, including this Policy, is available at the Shire of Victoria Plain's Administration Building and on the Shire of Victoria Plain's website. The Shire of Victoria Plains will make information available in alternative formats if requested.

Any person wishing to make a complaint may contact the Behaviour Complaints Officer if they require assistance in completing the complaint form or otherwise navigating the complaints process.

1.5 Conflicts of Interest

DLGSCI has produced [Guidelines on the Model Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates](#). These Guidelines confirm that Council Members who have made a complaint, or are the subject of a complaint, would have an impartiality interest, however this does not require them to leave a meeting for debate or decision. It is the Shire's view, based on the sector's advocacy position through WALGA, that the presence and participation of Council Members directly involved in the complaint creates a clear apprehension of bias and is incompatible with the principles of procedural fairness. Therefore, this Framework proposes the option of establishing a Complaints Committee with delegated authority that can only be exercised in the absence of Council Members who are parties to the complaint.

2. Roles

2.1. Behaviour Complaints Officer

The Behaviour Complaints Officer is authorised in accordance with clause 11(3) of the Code of Conduct to accept complaints and withdrawal of complaints.

The Behaviour Complaints Officer is not an advocate for the complainant or the respondent. The Behaviour Complaints Officer provides procedural information and assistance to both Complainant and Respondent.

The Behaviour Complaints Officer will liaise with and provide administrative support to a Complaint Assessor appointed under this Policy.

The Behaviour Complaints Officer will liaise with the Local Government to facilitate the calling and convening of Council or Behaviour Complaints Committee meetings if required.

In undertaking their functions, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will apply the Principles of this Policy.

2.2. Complaint Assessor

The Complaint Assessor is appointed by the Behaviour Complaints Officer in accordance with Part 3.8 of this Policy.

The Complaint Assessor is an impartial third party who will undertake the functions specified in this Policy. In undertaking their functions, the Complaint Assessor will apply the Principles of this Policy.

The Complaint Assessor will liaise with the Behaviour Complaints Officer to manage the administrative requirements of dealing with the Complaint in accordance with this Policy.

Further Criteria: Investigation of Complaints

The Complaint Assessor may also undertake an investigation into a complaint. Accordingly:

1. Further to Part 3.8, if engaged, the Complaint Assessor is appointed on receipt of the complaint.
2. The Complaints Assessor may undertake the responsibilities listed in:
 - a. Part 3.4 Notice to Complainant
 - b. Part 3.5 Notice to Respondent
 - c. Part 3.6 Alternative Dispute Resolution
3. Depending on the nature of the complaint (for example minor or major or complex or other), the Complaint Assessor is to:
 - Develop the scope of the investigation (Terms of Reference), or
 - Simply request a written response from the Respondent and review all documents provided (the Complaint Documents, any Shire Records identified by the Behaviour Complaints Officer, and Response Documents);
 - Refer to Parts 3.9 Search of Local Government Records, 3.10 Assessment of the Complaint and 3.11 Complaint Report.

Appointment of the Complaints Assessor must be in accordance with the Shire's purchasing policy. The Complaints Assessor must also follow the Shire's Record Keeping requirements.

2.3. Behaviour Complaints Committee

The Behaviour Complaints Committee is a Committee of Council established in accordance with s.5.8 of the Act for the purpose of dealing with Complaints.

The Behaviour Complaints Committee is a Committee of Council Members only. The membership and purpose of the Behaviour Complaints Committee is outlined in the Policy on Behaviour Complaints Committee Terms of Reference.

3. Procedure

3.1. Making a complaint

Any person may make a Complaint alleging that a Council Member, Committee Member or Candidate has behaved in a way that constitutes a breach of Division 3 of the Code of Conduct [*clause 11(1) of the Code of Conduct*].

A Complaint must be made within one (1) month after the alleged Breach [*clause 11(2)(c) of the Code of Conduct*].

A Complaint must be made by completing the Behaviour Complaint Form in full and providing the completed forms to the Behaviour Complaints Officer.

A Complaint must be made in accordance with the Behaviour Complaint Form and specify which requirement(s) of the Code of Conduct is alleged to have been breached.

A Complaint is required to include the name and contact details of the Complainant therefore anonymous complaints cannot be accepted.

Where a Complaint Form omits required details, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will invite the Complainant to provide this information in order for the Complaint to be progressed.

Where a Complaint is made more than 1 month after the alleged breach, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will give the Complainant written notice that the Complaint cannot be made [*clause 11(2)(c) of the Code of Conduct*].

3.2. Candidate Complaints

A Complaint in relation to a Candidate must be made in accordance with 3.1, above, but cannot be dealt with unless the Candidate is subsequently declared elected as a Council Member.

Within 7 days after receiving a Candidate Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will provide written notice:

- To the Complainant confirming receipt, and advising of the procedure for candidate complaints; and
- To the Respondent, including a summary of the complaint, and advising of the procedure for candidate complaints.

No action will be taken until the results of the election are declared by the Returning Officer. If the respondent is elected, then the complaint will be dealt with in accordance with this Policy. Timeframes that would otherwise commence on the receipt of a Complaint will be taken to commence on the election date.

If the Respondent is not elected, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will provide the Complainant with notice that the Respondent has not been elected and that the Complaint cannot be dealt with *[clause 15(1) of the Code of Conduct]*.

3.3. Withdrawing a Complaint

A Complainant may withdraw their Complaint at any time before a Finding has been made in relation to the Complaint *[clause 14 of the Code of Conduct]*.

A Complainant may withdraw a Complaint by advising the Behaviour Complaints Officer in writing that they wish to do so.

After receiving a written withdrawal of the Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will take all necessary steps to terminate the process commenced under this Policy.

3.4. Notice to Complainant

Within 7 days after receiving a Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will provide written notice to the Complainant that:

- confirms receipt of the Complaint;
- outlines the process that will be followed and possible outcomes;
- explains the application of confidentiality to the complaint;
- includes a copy of this Policy; and
- if necessary, seeks clarifications or additional information.

If the Complaint Form indicates that the Complainant agrees to participate in Alternative Dispute Resolution, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will advise the Complainant of the process in accordance with Part 3.6 of this Policy.

3.5. Notice to Respondent

Within 14 days after receiving a Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will provide written notice to the Respondent that:

- advises that a Complaint has been made in accordance with the Code of Conduct and this Policy;
- includes a copy of the Complaint Documents;
- outlines the process that will be followed, the opportunities that will be afforded to the Respondent to be heard and the possible outcomes;
- includes a copy of this Policy; and
- if applicable, advises that further information has been requested from the Complainant and will be provided in due course.

If the Complainant has agreed to participate in Alternative Dispute Resolution, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will ask the Respondent if they are also willing to participate in accordance with Part 3.6 of this Policy.

3.6. Alternative Dispute Resolution

The Shire of Victoria Plains recognises that Alternative Dispute Resolution may support both parties reach a mutually satisfactory outcome that resolves the issues giving rise to the Complaint. Alternative Dispute Resolution requires the consent of both parties to the Complaint and may not be appropriate in all circumstances.

To commence the process, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will, as the first course of action upon receiving a complaint, offer the Complainant and the Respondent the option of Alternative Dispute Resolution. If both parties agree to participate in Alternative Dispute Resolution, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will pause the formal process.

The objective of Alternative Dispute Resolution will be to reach an agreed resolution that satisfies the Complainant that the formal process is no longer required, allowing them to withdraw the Complaint, in accordance with Part 3.3 of this Policy. For example, an offer by a Respondent to issue a voluntary apology in response to a Complaint, even in the absence of a request from the Complainant, qualifies for consideration as Alternative Dispute Resolution.

If Alternative Dispute Resolution 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 a third party who is providing assistance to the Local Government, such as a facilitator or mediator.

If Alternative Dispute Resolution is terminated or does not achieve an agreed outcome that results in the withdrawal of the Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will resume the formal process required under this Policy.

Options to Conduct Alternative Dispute Resolution

The available option(s) for Alternative Dispute Resolution include:

- negotiation with the assistance of the Behaviour Complaints Officer or other appropriate person as an intermediary; or
- facilitation with a contracted service provider.

When engaging a supplier:

1. The time/cost threshold must be specified. If there is no agreement between the parties within a reasonable timeframe, then the Alternative Dispute Resolution will be deemed as unsuccessful, and the formal complaints procedure resumed;
2. Apart from the criteria in Point 1, must be in accordance with the Shire's purchasing policy.

3.7. Order of Complaints

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

If more than one Complaint is received that relates to the same alleged behaviour, the Behaviour Complaints Officer may decide to progress those Complaints concurrently.

3.8. Appointment of Complaints Assessor

If Alternative Dispute Resolution is not commenced, is terminated or does not achieve an agreed outcome resulting in the withdrawal of the Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will appoint a suitably qualified and experienced Complaint Assessor, in accordance with the Shire of Victoria Plain's Purchasing Policy.

The Behaviour Complaints Officer will endeavour to appoint a Complaint Assessor within a reasonable period. The Behaviour Complaints Officer will provide written notice of the appointment to the Complainant and the Respondent.

3.9. Search of Local Government Records

The Complaint Assessor may request the Behaviour Complaints Officer to search for any relevant records in the Shire of Victoria Plain's Record Management System.

In particular, if the behaviour is alleged to have occurred at a Council or Committee Meeting, the Behaviour Complaints Officer will be requested to identify any Local Government records that provide evidence that may support a decision as to whether:

- the behaviour occurred at a Council or Committee Meeting,
- the behaviour was dealt with by the person presiding at the meeting, and/or
- the Respondent has taken remedial action in accordance with the *Shire of Victoria Plains Meeting Procedures Local Law 2018*.

The Complaints Assessor must provide the Respondent with a copy of any records that are identified. In addition, where a clarification or additional information has been sought from the Complainant by either the Behaviour Complaints Officer or the Complaint Assessor, copies must also be provided to the Respondent.

3.10. Assessment of the Complaint

The Complaint Assessor will undertake an assessment of the Complaint in accordance with the process outlined in the Notices given under Part 3.4 and Part 3.5 of this Policy.

The Complaint Assessor must ensure that the Respondent is provided with a reasonable opportunity to be heard before forming any opinions, or drafting the Complaint Report or recommendations.

3.11. Complaint Report

The Complaint Assessor will prepare a Complaint Report that will:

- outline the process followed, including how the Respondent was provided with an opportunity to be heard;
- include the Complaint Documents, the Response Documents and any relevant Local Government Records as attachments; and

- include recommendations on each decision that may be made by the Complaints Committee; and
- include reasons for each recommendation, with reference to Part 4 of this Policy.

If the Complaint Report recommends that a Plan is prepared and implemented in accordance with clause 12(4)(b) of the Code of Conduct and Part 4.4 of this Policy, the Complaint Report must include a Proposed Plan.

The Respondent is to be provided with a draft copy of the Complaint Report, and an opportunity to make submissions, before the Complaint Assessor finalises the Complaint Report. If the Complaint Report includes a Proposed Plan, this may contribute to consultation in accordance with clause 12(5) of the Code of Conduct.

The Complaint Assessor will liaise with the Behaviour Complaints Officer to include the Complaint Report in the Agenda for a meeting of the Complaints Committee. The Behaviour Complaints Officer will be responsible for preparation of an Officer Report with the Complaint Report provided as a confidential attachment. The recommendations of the Complaint Report will be provided as the Officer Recommendations.

3.12. Complaints Committee Meeting

The Agenda will be prepared on the basis that the part of the meeting that deals with the Complaint Report will be held behind closed doors in accordance with s.5.23(2) of the Act.

The Behaviour Complaints Committee will consider the Complaint Report and attachments and give due regard to the recommendations.

In accordance with Regulation 11(d)(a) of the *Local Government (Administration) Regulations 1996*, reasons for any decision that is significantly different from the Officer Recommendation must be recorded in the meeting minutes.

If the behaviour that is the subject of the Complaint is alleged to have occurred at a Council or Committee Meeting, the Behaviour Complaints Committee will determine whether or not to dismiss the Complaint in accordance with Clause 13 of the Code of Conduct and Part 4.2 of this Policy.

If the Behaviour Complaints Committee dismisses a Complaint, the Behaviour Complaints Officer must give the Complainant and the Respondent written notice of the decision and the reasons for the decision in accordance with clause 13(2) of the Code of Conduct. This concludes the process for this Complaint.

If the Complaint is not dismissed, the Behaviour Complaints Committee 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, in accordance with clause 12 of the Code of Conduct and Part 4.3 of this Policy.

If the Behaviour Complaints Committee finds that the alleged Breach **did not** occur, the Behaviour Complaints Officer must give the Complainant and the Respondent written notice of the Finding and the reasons for the Finding in accordance with clause 12(7)(a) of the Code of Conduct. This concludes the process for this Complaint.

If the Behaviour Complaints Committee finds that the alleged breach **did** occur, the Committee will decide whether to take no further action in accordance with clause 12(4)(a) of the Code of Conduct or prepare a plan to address the behaviour in accordance with clause 12(4)(b) of the Code of Conduct and Part 4.4 of this Policy.

If the Behaviour Complaints Committee decides to take no further action, the Behaviour Complaints Officer must give the Complainant and the Respondent written notice of this decision and the reasons for the Finding in accordance with clause 12(7)(a) of the Code of Conduct. This concludes the process for this Complaint.

If the Behaviour Complaints Committee decides to prepare a Plan, the Committee will first consult with the Respondent in accordance with clause 12(5)* of the Code of Conduct. The Behaviour Complaints Committee will consider any submissions made by the Respondent before preparing and implementing a Plan.

Respondent May be Invited to Make a Submission

*In actioning clause 12(5) of the Code of Conduct, the Respondent may be invited to make an oral submission or provide a written response. If the final decision to implement a Plan is referred to a subsequent meeting of the Committee, the Complaints Assessor or Behavioural Complaints Officer may provide a report attaching the written response and potentially make an associated recommendation as to the effect of a Plan.

3.13. Compliance with Plan Requirement

The Behaviour Complaints Officer will monitor the actions in timeframes set out in a Plan.

Failure to comply with a requirement included in a Plan is a minor breach under section 5.105(1) of the Act and clause 23 of the Code of Conduct.

The Behaviour Complaints Officer must provide a report advising Council of any failure to comply with a requirement included in a Plan.

4. Decision Making

4.1. Objective and Principles

All decisions made under this Policy will reflect the Policy Objectives and the Principles included in Part 1 of this Policy.

4.2. Dismissal

The Behaviour Complaints Committee must dismiss a Complaint in accordance with clause 13(1)(a) and (b) of the Code of Conduct if it is satisfied that -

- (a) the behaviour to which the Complaint relates occurred at a Council or Committee Meeting; and
- (b) either —

- (i) the behaviour was dealt with by the person presiding at the meeting;
or
- (ii) the Respondent has taken remedial action in accordance with the Shire of Victoria Plains *Meeting Procedures Local Law 2018*.

4.3. Finding

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 [*clause 12(3) of the Code of Conduct*].

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 Division 3 of the Code of Conduct.

4.4. Action

In deciding whether to take no further action, or prepare and implement a Plan, the Complaints Committee may consider:

- the nature and seriousness of the breach(es);
- the Respondent's submission in relation to the contravention;
- whether the Respondent has breached the Code of Conduct knowingly or carelessly;
- whether the Respondent has breached the Code of Conduct on previous occasions;
- likelihood or not of the Respondent committing further breaches of the Code of Conduct;
- personal circumstances at the time of conduct;
- need to protect the public through general deterrence and maintain public confidence in Local Government; and
- any other matters which may be regarded as contributing to or the conduct or mitigating its seriousness.

4.5. Plan Requirements

The Proposed Plan may include requirements for the Respondent to do one (1) or more of the following:

- engage in mediation;
- undertake counselling;
- undertake training;
- take other action the Complaints Committee considers appropriate (e.g. an apology).

The Proposed Plan should be designed to provide the Respondent with the opportunity and support to demonstrate the professional and ethical behaviour expected of elected representatives expressed in the Code of Conduct.

The Proposed Plan may also outline:

- the actions to be taken to address the behaviour(s);
- who is responsible for the actions;
- any assistance the Local Government will provide to assist achieve the intent of the Plan; and

- a reasonable timeframe for the Plan action(s) to be addressed by the Respondent.

Shire is Responsible for the Cost of the Plan

The Shire is responsible for the cost of the Plan requirements. Arrangements will be managed in accordance with appropriate policies that are in place or if no policy is in place, what is considered reasonable as set out in the Complaint Report

Document Control Box							
Document Responsibilities:							
Owner:	CEO	Owner Business Unit:	CEO				
Reviewer:	Governance Officer	Decision Maker:	Council				
Compliance Requirements:							
Legislation:	Local Government Act 1995 Local Government (Model Code of Conduct) Regulations 2021						
Other:	1.1 Code of Conduct Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates						
	Policy 1.12 : Councillor Continuing Professional Development						
	Policy 3.1: Purchasing						
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