

Part I – Officer Code of Conduct

Introduction

Somerset Council's reputation, trust, and confidence in its integrity is of vital importance. It must discharge its day-to-day responsibilities with openness and honesty, this philosophy is captured in this code. These principles are presented to assist staff in carrying out their day-to-day responsibilities in accordance with legal requirements placed upon them and any policies adopted by the Council. The Council has a responsibility to take appropriate action where employees feel that they are subject to inappropriate action by a third party.

Provisions relating to the conduct expected of local government employees are also embodied in national agreements such as the 'Green Book' for Local Government Services Employees. These are further supported by the codes of ethical behaviour of various professional bodies.

This document may be supplemented by departmental or sectional practice notes, which will give more detailed guidance on particular areas. If further guidance is needed on any aspect of these Standards, it can be obtained initially by approaching a manager.

This policy does not form part of the Somerset Council Terms and Conditions and may be subject to change.

Status of these Standards of Conduct "Code of Conduct"

These Standards are based on a document drawn up by the Local Government Management Board on behalf of the local authority associations. They were adopted in 1993 after consultations with Chief Officers and employee representatives. Whilst not themselves amounting to a disciplinary code, any failure to follow the standards set in this document may, depending upon circumstances, give rise to disciplinary action.

Who are the Standards aimed at?

The Standards apply to all employees of Somerset Council, except for those employed under Teachers Terms and Conditions to which separate standards apply.

Employees must provide services or advice to the best of their ability, within the rules of their relevant professional conduct of any relevant professional or trade body. Employees should consistently offer objective professional and technical advice and always carry out their responsibilities in an impartial manner. Employees are entitled to expect that no Officer or Member of the Council will seek to pressure or persuade them to do otherwise. Where it is alleged that such action has taken place, the Council will investigate the allegation if requested to do so under the appropriate procedures.

There may be occasions when employees, carrying out their duties for the Council, find themselves at odds with national government advice or guidance. In such circumstances it is particularly important that they are seen to behave with complete objectivity and impartiality obtaining managerial and professional advice and guidance where appropriate. Employees are entitled to expect to receive the unequivocal support of senior managers in so doing.

Guiding Principles

In conducting Council business employees should act in accordance with three key guiding principles:

- Ensure that their conduct complies with this Protocol, the spirit of this Protocol, the Council's policies, and the law
- Ensure that their conduct is never influenced by personal gain
- Ensure that their conduct could not give anyone reason to question their motive

Confidentiality and Openness

In general, employees should act on the presumption that open government serves the public better than secrecy.

Wherever it might be relevant to their job, employees should be aware of and implement relevant statute and common law that provides for either confidentiality or rights of access to information for Councillors, auditors, and citizens (and in some cases regulatory bodies and government departments).

Any express or implied responsibility to keep information confidential should be respected by employees and there should be awareness that such responsibility might arise from the nature of the information itself, for example, its commercial or

personal sensitivity. It will be extremely rare that employees will be entitled to accept confidences in the course of their duties that cannot be shared with their manager.

Employees should not use information obtained in the course of their employment for personal gain or benefit nor should they pass it on to others who might use it in such a way. When employees obtain confidential information belonging to the Council then they must not disclose that information to any person not authorised to receive it. When employees receive from Councillors information not belonging to the Council or information belonging to the Council, which is confidential, then they must not disclose that information without the appropriate consent of a Senior Leadership Team Director or Strategic Manager.

In their dealings with employees, Councillors and Chief Officers should ensure that communication is as open and informative as possible within the constraints imposed by the law, by their terms and conditions of employment, by the Council's Constitution, policies, procedures, protocols, commercial considerations, and personal sensitivity.

Protection of Public Funds

Employees must use public funds entrusted to them to the best advantage of the Council and the community they serve, always trying to ensure value for money for the local taxpayer.

Political Neutrality

It is important for the proper functioning of the Council that all Members have trust and confidence in the political impartiality of employees (except in the case of political assistants/political support officers if the Council decides to have such post holder(s)).

All employees of the Council are required to be politically neutral in the completion of their duties and certain posts are politically restricted or politically sensitive. This means that employees in politically restricted or politically sensitive roles may not participate in any formal political activity. The controlling political group may change, and it is important that employees show no bias or personal preference, whatever their personal political beliefs may be.

Employees need to know whether their post is subject to the political restrictions placed on certain post holders by the Local Government and Housing Act, 1989 this can be found in the Recruitment Policy. Relevant employees should be aware of the nature of those restrictions and ensure that they abide by them.

Relationships

All employees must comply with the Member/Officer Protocol and, in this context, particularly the section relating to Personal and Family relationships. Similarly, all employees must comply with the Officer Code of Conduct. For further information or clarification in relation to this issue, please contact the Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer(s).

Elected Councillors

Employees are responsible to the Council. For many, their job is to give advice to Councillors and the Council and all are there to carry out the Council's work. Mutual respect between Councillors and staff is essential to good local government. Close personal familiarity between individual Councillors and employees should be avoided as it can damage the relationship and prove embarrassing to other Councillors and employees (National Code of Local Government Conduct paragraphs 23 to 25).

The Local Community and Service Users

Employees should remember their responsibilities to the community they serve and ensure courteous, high quality, efficient, and impartial service delivery to all groups and individuals within that community. Such courtesy and efficiency should be shown to all persons with whom employees deal remembering that all opportunities need to be taken to enhance the reputation of the Council whether locally, nationally, or internationally.

Appointments and Employee Relationships

Employees should ensure that appointments are made based on merit and in accordance with the Council's policies and procedures. Merit is determined by matching the chosen candidate with the job specification and ignoring all other extraneous considerations. Employees in the course of their duties should not be involved in the appointment, pay adjustment, approval of expenses, promotion, or discipline of partners, relatives, or close friends.

Close personal relationships between employees should not be permitted to influence the way services are provided if that is or could be detrimental to services.

Employees should not be put under pressure by work colleagues, particularly those in a position of seniority, or Councillors to act or not to act so as to breach these standards or any other national, local, or departmental rules of conduct. If such pressure is exerted, it should be reported to the relevant Chief Officer.

Contractors

Relationships with contractors or potential contractors should be made known in accordance with the legal requirements to declare financial interests (Section 117

Local Government Act 1972). Advice on this can be obtained from the Monitoring Officer.

Contracts must be awarded on merit in fair competition against other tenders and no favouritism should be shown to businesses run by friends, partners, or relatives, nor should there be improper discrimination against individuals, groups, or sections of the community. Employees who monitor the performance of contractors should behave in a fair and equitable fashion towards all contractors, including in-house contractor organisations, and should not show favouritism to, or improperly discriminate against, any contractor or breach any duty of confidentiality.

Employees who engage or supervise contractors for the Council and who wish to engage a contractor with whom they previously had or currently have a relationship in a private or a domestic capacity should declare that relationship. Employees should not use, in a private or domestic capacity, a contractor with whom they have had official dealings as employees of the Council, without declaring it to his/her Corporate Manager. Similarly, Contractors should be required to disclose private or domestic relationships with any officer or Member. The Council will seek to ensure that the attention of contractors is drawn to the requirements of the Local Government Act 1972 and these Standards.

Other Employments

Any employee considering additional employment should discuss this with their line manager to determine whether there may be a conflict of interests, consider whether the additional role is manageable, and whether this may negatively affect the employee's wellbeing. If a potential conflict of interest, working times regulations issue or wellbeing concern is found, please contact HR Advisory to discuss this further. Employees will be required to complete the Register of Officer Interests.

Equal Opportunities

All employees must comply with both the spirit and letter of the Equality Act 2010 and the Council's Equal Opportunities policy, treating all members of the public and colleagues with respect and fairness.

Health and Safety

The Council has a legal obligation to protect the health and safety at work of all its employees and others in the workplace. Equally, employees should always be aware of, and fulfil, their legal responsibility to protect their own and others health and safety at work.

Post-Employment Duties

The duty of fidelity which each employee owes to the Council, and which requires an employee to act in an honest fashion and not in a manner which will harm the Council, may in certain respects, continue following the end of that employee's employment. For example, even though the Council no longer employs them, a former employee must not disclose trade secrets or confidential information that belongs to the Council.

Certain employees may have access to intellectual property (such as copyrighted materials), which belong to the Council. An employee might even have contributed to the creation of that intellectual property during the period of employment. However, where part or whole of that property belongs to the Council it cannot be used by a former employee for any purpose without the Council's written agreement. Such intellectual property rights may sometimes be difficult to define but Council or departmental guidance will be issued to cover specific categories.

Personal Interests

An employee must declare as soon as reasonably practicable, to their line manager and Chief Officer any personal interest (whether financial or otherwise) which they have which may conflict, or may be perceived reasonably as conflicting with, the interests of the Council. The Registration of Officers Interests Form must be completed by the employee, this will then be sent to the line manager and Chief Officer to confirm the interest has been officially registered.

Personal interests may be financial, relate to property or concern any other matter; they may concern the employee themselves, family members, or close associates or they may relate to any body including, external organisations, individual persons, or the Council itself.

The obligation to disclose a personal interest only applies when the employee is aware of it or ought reasonably to have been aware of, it may, in some cases, be unreasonable to expect an employee to be aware of or to research the employment, business interests and other activities of family members and close associates. However, employees must not ignore the existence of interests, which, from the point of view of the reasonable person, they should have been aware. Employees are therefore under an obligation to make such inquiries as a reasonable person would think prudent in the circumstances.

Disclosable Interests

Employees must, in accordance with any Council arrangements, register membership of any organisation not open to the public which requires of members any form of

commitment or allegiance, and which has secrecy about rules, membership or conduct.

Gifts and Hospitality

There is a separate policy for Registering Gifts and Hospitality.

Interpretation

Several parts of this protocol refer to a reasonableness test. The Chair of the Council's Standards Committee shall be the ultimate arbiter of what is reasonable in relation to the operation of this protocol.

The "proper business and/or interests of the Council" may include but are not limited to: carrying out the proper functions of the Council and doing anything which is incidental or conducive to carrying out the proper functions of the Council.

The following meanings have been adopted which are consistent with national guidance on the Members' Code of Conduct:

- A "family member" should be given a very wide meaning. It includes a spouse, civil partner or an individual an employee lives with in a similar capacity, parents, parents-in-law, children or stepchildren, grandparents, grandchildren, nephews and nieces and the spouses or partners of these people.
- A person with whom you have a "close association", as defined above, is someone that you are in contact with, regularly or irregularly, and who is more than just an acquaintance. It is someone a reasonable member of the public might think you would be prepared to favour or disfavour. It may be a friend, colleague, business associate, or someone you know through general social contacts.

Version	1
Date	
Relevant Legislation	Local Government Act 1972 Equality Act 2010 Working Time Regulation 1998 National Code of Local Government Conduct