

Standards Committee

21 April 2026



Reading
Borough Council
Working better with you

Title	Strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England – government response to consultation
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Jayne La Grua, Monitoring Officer
Report author	Simon Hill, Acting Democratic Services Manager
Lead Councillor	Councillor Terry, Leader of the Council
Council priority	Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future
Recommendations	That the report be noted.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. Since the previous meeting of the Standards Committee, the Government has published its response to a consultation carried out in 2024-25 on '*Strengthening the Standards and Conduct Framework for Local Authorities in England*', which indicates the proposals it intends to take forward in legislating for a whole system reform of the current standards regime as set out in the Localism Act 2011.
- 1.2. This report summarises for information the Government's announced position¹ following their consideration of responses to the consultation. Further updates and an assessment of actions required to comply with the proposed reforms will be provided as the legislation progresses.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1. The Localism Act 2011 introduced changes to the standards regime for local authorities in England. It abolished the national Standards Board for England and ended the centrally prescribed model code of conduct, replacing the national framework with a more decentralised, locally driven system of accountability and self-regulation. Councils were required to adopt their own local code of conduct, focused on the Nolan Principles of public life, and to put in place arrangements for investigating complaints, including appointing at least one Independent Person to give views on allegations.
- 2.2. The Localism Act retained a duty on local authorities to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, but removed most statutory sanctions, meaning councils could no longer suspend members; they were instead limited to local remedies such as censure or training requirements.
- 2.3. Reading Borough Council retained a local Standards Committee which has overseen our local Member Code of Conduct and arrangements for dealing with allegations of breaches of the Code. These were most recently considered at the Committee's meeting on 10

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-the-standards-and-conduct-framework-for-local-authorities-in-england/outcome/strengthening-the-standards-and-conduct-framework-for-local-authorities-in-england-consultation-results-and-government-response>

October 2022, when a new Member Code of Conduct, largely based on the Local Government Association's Model Code, was recommended for adoption by Council. The new Code and associated procedures and changes to the Constitution were agreed at the Council meeting of 18 October 2022.²

3. Standards and Conduct Framework for Local Authorities In England: summary of proposed reforms

- 3.1 The Government's response to the consultation sets out its intention to introduce a strengthened national framework for standards in local government, centred on a mandatory code of conduct and a clearer, more consistent system for handling complaints, investigations, sanctions, and appeals. The proposals aim to provide greater transparency, support for those affected by misconduct, and more robust mechanisms for upholding high standards of ethical conduct among elected and co-opted members.

Introduction of a Mandatory Code Of Conduct

- 3.2 A central element of the proposals is the introduction of a mandatory national code of conduct. This code will set out expected behavioural standards and impose an explicit requirement for elected and co-opted members to co-operate with any code-related investigation. The Government also intends to make clear that submitting repeated vexatious complaints constitutes a breach of the code itself.
- 3.3 The principle of a mandatory code will be established through primary legislation, supported by regulations that will set out its detailed content. This approach will enable further engagement with the sector during development and allow future amendments as needed. Local authorities will be permitted to produce their own supplementary protocols or guidance, but these must align with the mandatory code and will not themselves form part of the enforceable standards framework.

Standards Committees

- 3.4 Legislation will require all relevant principal authorities to establish a Standards Committee, or a sub-committee dedicated to considering code of conduct matters. The Government plans further engagement with public sector bodies before finalising any specific requirements for committee membership.
- 3.5 Authorities will be required to ensure that all code of conduct investigations are completed and that their outcomes are published. This duty will apply even in cases where the investigation finds no wrongdoing or where a member resigns before the process concludes. By mandating the publication of both findings and decisions, the Government aims to increase transparency and public confidence.
- 3.5 In addition, the Government will work with public sector organisations to develop best practice guidance covering the handling of code of conduct complaints. It will also retain the statutory duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct and consider, with sector representatives, how Standards Committees might further fulfil this responsibility.

Supporting Complainants and Respondents

- 3.6 To strengthen fairness and accountability, both complainants and the subject member will be granted a right to request a review of a Standards Committee's decision. Legislation will define appropriate grounds for exercising this right at the local level.
- 3.7 The Government also intends to provide additional support for individuals affected by councillor misconduct. Best practice guidance will contain recommended actions for supporting both complainants and respondents throughout the process. Furthermore, the government will explore the case for establishing an independent, confidential helpline for complainants to provide additional advice and support.

² <https://democracy.reading.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=8980>

Introducing the sanction of suspension

- 3.8 Authorities will be given the power to suspend elected members for up to six months where a serious breach of the code of conduct is proven. Standards Committees will be solely responsible for imposing such a sanction, and only after receiving and considering a formal investigation report and the views of the Independent Person.
- 3.9 The legislation will also allow Standards Committees, at their discretion, to withhold allowances and to restrict access to premises or facilities. These measures may be used either alongside suspension or as standalone sanctions in cases of persistent or disruptive conduct.

Interim Suspension

- 3.10 A new power for interim suspension will be introduced, but only in tightly defined circumstances. Authorities will be permitted to impose an interim suspension when a member faces serious allegations that are under external investigation by the police or other bodies in the criminal justice system, or where a court hearing or sentencing is pending. This recognises that in some situations there may be legitimate safeguarding concerns and that councils may have limited control over the pace of external investigations.
- 3.11 To justify the use of interim suspension, Standards Committees must consider two criteria:
- (1) **Seriousness of the allegations** – the matter must involve alleged criminal behaviour of a serious nature and be under active investigation; and
 - (2) **Risk of harm** – continued participation by the member could pose a risk to the public, the complainant, the member themselves, or the authority's reputation.
- 3.12 The maximum initial period of interim suspension will be three months, subject to ongoing review if the investigation remains unresolved. The Government will consult further on whether authorities should publish decisions on interim suspensions, and where appropriate, publish notices exonerating members when investigations conclude with no charges or findings of guilt.

Disqualification for multiple breaches and gross misconduct

- 3.13 Legislation will introduce a new disqualification criterion: a member will be disqualified if they receive the maximum six-month suspension twice within a five-year period. This measure is intended to address persistent or serious misconduct that undermines public trust.

Appeals and a national appeals function

- 3.14 Finally, the Government will legislate on arrangements for appeals against code of conduct decisions, following further development of the proposed local right to review and consideration of the appropriate scope of a national appeals function. This work will clarify how local and national mechanisms should interact to ensure fairness, consistency, and proportionality.

4. Contribution to Strategic Aims

- 4.1. The Council Plan has established five priorities for the years 2025/28. These priorities are:
- Promote more equal communities in Reading;
 - Secure Reading's economic and cultural success;
 - Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce our carbon footprint;
 - Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children;
 - Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.
- 4.2. In delivering these priorities, we will be guided by the following set of principles:

- Putting residents first;
 - Building on strong foundations;
 - Recognising, respecting, and nurturing all our diverse communities;
 - Involving, collaborating, and empowering residents;
 - Being proudly ambitious for Reading.
- 4.3. Full details of the Council Plan and the projects which will deliver these priorities are published on the Council's website: [Council plan - Reading Borough Council](#). These priorities and the Council Plan demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.
- 4.4. The Council's strategic aims are underpinned by the ability of members, officers and local residents to participate in democratic processes in the confidence that high standards are maintained. The Members' Code of Conduct and the Standards Committee assist in building and maintaining that confidence

5. Environmental and Climate Implications

- 5.1. The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2. There are no environmental or climate implications arising from the contents of this report.

6. Community Engagement

- 6.1. There are no Community Engagement implications arising from this report.

7. Equality Implications

- 7.1. An Equality Impact Assessment is not relevant to the contents of this report.

8. Other Relevant Considerations

- 8.1. There are none.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. Covered in the body of the report.

10. Financial Implications

- 10.1. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

11. Timetable for Implementation

- 11.1. There is no published timetable at this stage for legislation to bring forward the proposed reforms.

12. Background Papers

- 12.1. There are none.