

Members of the public quite rightly expect those people they elect to represent them to behave to a decent standard. This article looks to explain the rules relating to conduct which all councillors must comply with. It will concentrate on district and parish councillors within the District of Bolsover, however similar rules will apply to all councillors across the country.

The starting point when looking at conduct standards are the Nolan Principles, known as the Seven Principles of Public Life. These are rules recommended by the Government's Committee on Public Life in 1995 as chaired by Sir Anthony Nolan. They state that everyone involved in public life should act in accordance with the following principles.

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

In addition to these rules, a council is required to adopt a code of conduct which each of its councillors must comply with. Bolsover District Council's code was adopted in 2021 and many of the local parish or town councils have adopted a code on similar lines. The code deals with a number of different conduct strands which align with the Seven Principles. These include:

- A duty to be respectful to other councillors, council employees and members of the public;
- Not to bully or harass people;
- To declare certain interests when making decisions;
- To not compromise the impartiality of council employees;
- To not use their position as councillor to further their own interests;
- To not bring the Council into disrepute.

The code only relates to things said and done whilst a councillor is acting as a councillor. Anything said or done by a councillor in a private capacity is not covered by the code, no matter how offensive that behaviour may be.

One of the areas that causes most issues is use of social media. Councillors when commenting on council business should ensure that what they are saying remains respectful and should avoid abusive or offensive language. However anything that they say on their personal media accounts that does not relate to councillor business is not subject to the code no matter how offensive that may be to other people. Councillors are nevertheless encouraged to recognise their standing in the community and to carefully consider what they say or do in their personal lives as well as in the Council arena.

So how is the behaviour of councillors policed? The body responsible for ensuring that standards are maintained is Bolsover District Council's appropriately named Standards Committee. The Committee is made up of councillors across the political spectrum and is chaired by an independent co-opted member. Its roles include promoting and maintain high standards of conduct by councillors and assisting them to observe the Members' Code of Conduct. The Committee is supported by the Council's Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer and two members of the public known as "Independent Person".

The Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer provide training on the standards required of councillors and most councillors across the District abide by the rules. Occasionally however a councillor will overstep the mark and this will require investigation. Quite often breaches of the code are relatively minor and the councillor concerned accepts they have done wrong. These breaches of the code can be resolved by for example an apology or the councillor agreeing to additional training. More serious matters may need to be dealt with by a hearing of the Standards Committee where a panel of Members will consider evidence submitted to it and decide whether there has been a breach of the code of conduct. If the Standards Committee find that there has been a breach they can recommend sanction to the relevant council. These include reprimanding the councillor at a meeting of the council, requiring the councillor to undertake training and removing the councillor from a position of responsibility. Under current legislation there is no power to suspend a councillor for breach of the code of conduct.

It is vital that you remain confident in the conduct of your elected representatives. This article has hopefully explained what is expected of councillors and the processes in place to deal with anyone who fails to meet these expectations. If anyone has any questions regarding standards they can contact the Council's Monitoring Officer - jim.fieldsend@bolsover.gov.uk.