



Draft Submission

Mandatory Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates

October 2019

About WALGA

The WA Local Government Association (WALGA) is working for Local Government in Western Australia. As the peak industry body, WALGA advocates on behalf of 138 Western Australian Local Governments. As the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia, WALGA is an independent, membership-based organisation representing and supporting the work and interests of Local Governments in Western Australia. WALGA provides an essential voice for 1,222 Elected Members, approximately 22,000 Local Government employees (16,500 Full Time Equivalent's) as well as over 2.5 million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia.

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Background

The *Local Government Legislation Amendment Act 2019* will introduce new requirements in relation to Mandatory Codes of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates for Local Government Elections (Part 5, Division 9 as amended by the *Local Government Legislation Amendment Act 2019*).

The Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries have released a draft document – *Mandatory Code of Conduct for Council Members, Committee Members and Candidates* – for consultation.

While WALGA and other invited parties participated in a working group to develop the document, the draft was released without WALGA's endorsement and there are a number of concerns with the draft that will be expanded upon in this submission. WALGA appreciates the opportunity afforded to participate in the working group process and to make a submission on the draft document.

The Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries is seeking feedback on the draft document by 6 December 2019. It is important that Local Governments also make submissions to the Department on this draft document to ensure the sector's views are received.

WALGA is seeking feedback on this draft submission by 25 October 2019. WALGA's submission, which will be updated following sector feedback, will then be included in the December State Council Agenda for consideration at November Zone meetings, before being considered at the 4 December meeting of State Council.

General Comments - Councillor Conduct

WALGA has long led its Member Local Government's advocacy for high standards of behaviour by those who are democratically elected to represent the people within their district, and personal responsibility for the consequences when there is a lack of it.

WALGA commenced lobbying for official conduct legislation in 2002, to enable action to be taken against individuals rather than an entire Council. The Sector held the view that Council dismissals, such as occurred at the City of Cockburn (2000), City of South Perth (2002) and City of Joondalup (2005) could possibly have been averted if powers were available to deal with individual Elected Member's behaviour.

The Sector's advocacy for official conduct legislation correlated with a shared frustration that Codes of Conduct, a compulsory requirement of Section 5.103(3) of the *Local Government Act 1995* ('the Act') were unenforceable when behaviours departed from expressed standards. This was due to the absence at that time of a disciplinary framework in the Act to deal with misbehaviour and misconduct by individual council members.

WALGA conducted extensive consultation with the Sector over a number of years, leading to promulgation of the *Local Government (Official Conduct) Amendment Act 2007*, amending the Act to introduce minor, serious and recurrent breach allegation complaint processes, and the commencement in October 2007 of the *Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations* ('the Regulations').

More recently, the Act was amended to introduce powers enabling the Minister for Local Government to suspend or dismiss individual council members failing in their duties or behaving in an egregious manner if '...seriousness or duration of that failure or conduct make it inappropriate for the council member to remain a member of the council.'¹ The amendments contained in the *Local Government (Suspension and Dismissal) Act 2018* commenced in November 2018.

The Rules of Conduct Regulations were reviewed in 2010 and 2016. WALGA acknowledges past amendments improving operational efficiency e.g. Standards Panel may refuse to deal with frivolous, trivial, vexatious etc. allegations,² and recent amendments that extend confidentiality provisions³ and providing the Standards Panel with discretion to refer parties to participate in mediation.⁴

¹ *Local Government Amendment (Suspension and Dismissal) Bill 2018* Explanatory Memorandum at Page 1.

² Section 5.110(3A) of 2016

³ Section 5.123 of 2019

⁴ Section 5.110(3B) of 2019

Bringing Codes and Rules Together; Uncoupling Codes of Conduct for Council Members and Employees

The Mandatory Code of Conduct will be a departure from the present legislative form that separates Codes of Conduct and the Rules of Conduct Regulations.

It will also depart from the present requirement to adopt one Code of Conduct that is to be observed by council members, committee members and employees.

The new section 5.51A, to commence at another time, will require the CEO to prepare and implement a Code of Conduct to be observed only by employees, aligning with the Sector's view that all matters relating to employees be separated from Council involvement and be contemplated within the CEO's functions under Section 5.41(g) of the Act.⁵

An additional significance is that the Mandatory Code of Conduct will apply to Local Government election candidates in the same way it applies to council members, and an alleged breach of the Code of Conduct by a candidate can only be referred to the Local Government Standards Panel if elected.⁶

This aligns with the Sector's advocacy that a Code of Conduct should apply to candidates⁷ and the proposal that any inappropriate behaviour during the election cycle should result in the successful candidate being held accountable under the Rules of Conduct Regulations.⁸

The Department's Draft for Consultation provides further guidance⁹ on the new Code:

- *The Act requires that local governments adopt the Code within three months of the amendments taking effect. Until the Code is adopted, the model Code applies.*
- *While local governments are not able to amend Part A or Part C, additional behaviours can be included in Part B that are not inconsistent with the Code.*
- *In considering additional behaviours, the council may give consideration to behaviours that are not currently represented in the Code that it considers are important. This may include introducing a dress standard for members or use of technology, for example.*
- *To adopt the Code, a resolution passed by an absolute majority is required. Once the Code is adopted, it must be published on the local government's official website.*

⁵ 'be responsible for the employment, management supervision, direction and dismissal of other employees'

⁶ Local Government Legislation Amendment Bill 2019 Explanatory Memorandum at Page 2.

⁷ WALGA State Council Minutes Review of 2011 Local Government Elections' Ref. Resolution 24.2/2012

⁸ WALGA State Council Minutes 'Review of 2013 Local Government Elections' Ref. Resolution 44.2/2014

⁹ See 'Guidelines' at Page 3

Specific Feedback

The following pages provide a commentary on the Draft for Consultation document ('the Draft') released by the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries. The Draft refers to a 'Mandatory' Code of Conduct whereas amendments to the Local Government Act refer to a 'Model' Code of Conduct. This paper will use the term 'Model' throughout the following commentary.

Construction of the Model Code

Codes and Rules will be brought together under Section 5.103(2) as amended by the Local Government Legislation Amendment Act 2019:

- (2) *The model code of conduct must include -*
- (a) general principles to guide behaviour;*
 - (b) requirements relating to behaviour; and*
 - (c) the rules of conduct.*

The Draft informs that the Model Code of Conduct is to be constructed in three Parts:

- **Part A** – Principles [Section 5.103(2)(a)]
- **Part B** – Behaviours [Section 5.103(2)(b)]
- **Part C** – Rules of Conduct [Section 5.103(2)(c)]

Local Governments will not be able to amend Parts A and C, but additional behavioural content may be included in Part B that is not inconsistent with the Model Code.

Part A - Principles

The Preamble to the Model states that 'the purpose of this Code is to guide the decisions, actions and behaviours of council members, committee members and candidates.'

Part A sets out the Principles to be contained in the new Model Code under the headings 'Personal Integrity', 'Relationships with others' and 'Accountability'. This expands upon the 'General principles that guide the behaviour of council members' currently found under Regulation 3 of the *Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations* and are intended to support Part B – Behaviours, and Part C – Rules of Conduct.

Part B - Behaviours

I. Application

It is noted that neither Part B nor Part C of the Model apply to the behaviours of committee members or candidates. No information is provided to clarify why only council members are subject to Parts B and C nor any rationale for the exclusion of committee members and candidates from behavioural standards and Rules of Conduct, particularly noting Section 5.103(3)(b), as amended, states:

- (3) *The model code of conduct may include provisions about how the following are to be dealt with –*
- (b) *alleged breaches of the rules of conduct by committee members*

The Minister for Local Government, Hon. David Templeman, when introducing the *Local Government Legislation Amendment Bill 2019* to Parliament in the Second Reading Speech, specified the application of the Code to candidates, in an effort to improve behaviour during an election period, stating:

“Alleged breaches of the rules of conduct during the election campaign will be progressed when the candidate is elected.”¹⁰

WALGA recommends seeking comment from the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries on the intended application of Part B – behavioural standards, and Part C – Rules of Conduct to committee members and candidates.

II. New Complaints Provision

Section 5.103(3)(a) will introduce the discretion for the Model Code of Conduct to deal with alleged breaches of requirements relating to behaviour. This is a significant amendment as the *Local Government Act 1995* has not previously mandated a complaints process relating to behavioural content of a Code of Conduct, but nor has it imposed any restriction.

Under the Model Code, an alleged breach of a Rule of Conduct will continue to be referred to the Local Government Standards Panel. Part B, Rule 2.17 of the Model sets out that Local Governments will be required to deal with allegations made by ‘any person’ of a behavioural breach.

¹⁰ Extract from Hansard, Legislative Assembly, March 2019 at p1310d to 1312a

Some Local Governments have incorporated in their current Code of Conduct a process for dealing with a behavioural breach that permits ‘any person’ to make a complaint; the majority of Local Governments have not.

The City of Joondalup¹¹ and City of South Perth¹² are examples of Local Governments that exercised discretion under general competence powers to incorporate a complaints process in their adopted Code of Conduct. No information is currently available on the frequency or management of complaints of a behavioural breach under current Codes of Conduct.

WALGA seeks comment from Members experienced in dealing with breach allegations relating to their current Code of Conduct to assist with building perspective on processes and consequences associated with managing behavioural breach allegations.

III. Complaint Management

Rules 2.17 to 2.22 set out the Complaint Management standards, with Rule 2.21 requiring development of a Council-endorsed policy to guide the process. The associated Guidelines provide additional information on tools and resources to assist with policy development, complaints management and resolution. Attachment 1 provides a matrix of possible actions where there is finding of a behavioural breach.

WALGA seeks comment on the proposed Complaint Management process.

IV. ‘Rules’

Throughout Part B, the numbered provisions are referred to as ‘Rules’. This has the potential to create confusion with the already-established terminology familiar to the Sector of ‘Rules of Conduct’, which form Part C.

WALGA recommends a separate nomenclature for numbered provisions in Part B (i.e. ‘Item’ or ‘Clause’) to avoid any potential for confusion between Part B and Part C, particularly when breach allegations arise.

¹¹ ‘City of Joondalup Code of Conduct for Employees, Elected Members and Committee Members’ at Page 21

¹² ‘City of South Perth Code of Conduct’ at Page 9

Part C – Rules of Conduct

As previously discussed, Part C of the Model Code only references council members.

It is noted there are numerous, self-evident typographical errors throughout Part C (i.e. inconsistent referencing and numbering) and it is presumed the Department is aware and will remedy where necessary.

The Rules of Conduct replicate for the most part, the existing provisions from the current Rules of Conduct Regulations. The Model Code adds commentary by including 'Elements of Rule of Conduct'. It is not known whether these Elements will have any influence on the deliberations of the Local Government Standards Panel in the event of a breach allegation under Part C.

WALGA seeks comment on whether the 'Elements of Rule of Conduct' content adds value or assists council members to understand their responsibility to observe Rules of Conduct.

Misuse of Local Government Resources - Regulation 8 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code creates a definition of the term 'resource' which does not appear in the current Rules of Conduct:

'resource is defined to mean tangible and intangible assets, services or other means of supporting the functions of local government, which are owned or paid for by the local government from public money'

It is not stated why there is a need to define 'resource' specifically, the potential impact this definition may have upon determining a breach allegation¹³ or whether the common dictionary definition is known to be ineffective - *'a stock or supply of money, materials, staff, and other assets that can be drawn on by a person or organization in order to function effectively.'*¹⁴

Securing Personal Advantage of Disadvantaging Others – Regulation 7 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code is consistent with the current Regulations.

¹³ Section 6 of the *Interpretation Act 1984* (WA) applies – 'Definitions in a written law, application of'

¹⁴ Oxford English Dictionary

Repeated Breaches of Part B – Not currently Regulated

This new provision will provide an accountability measure where a council member continually breaches the behavioural requirements of Part B of the Model Code and appears to face value to have merit.

Item (iii) of this Rule will require thoughtful consideration, as it requires the Council to make a determination by resolution before a council member, who is found to have committed three or more breaches under Part B, can be referred to the Local Government Standards Panel:

‘(and) iii. the Council to which the member is elected, decides, via resolution, to make an allegation of a rule of conduct breach under this Part.’

WALGA notes that this new provision did not appear in early drafts of the Model Code and therefore was not considered at the Working Group convened by the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Prohibition against Involvement in Administration – Regulation 9 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code is consistent with the current Regulations.

Relations with Local Government Employees - Regulation 10 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code creates a definition of the term ‘employee’ which does not appear in the current Rules of Conduct. This definition references Section 5.36 of the Act, whereas the Act defines ‘employee’ under Section 1.4.

The Model Code proposes to add a further prohibition under Item (iii) that does not currently appear in the Rules of Conduct:

‘behave in an abusive or threatening manner towards any local government employee’

Unauthorised Disclosure of Information - Regulation 6 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code proposes to add a further prohibition under Item (iii) that does not currently appear in the Rules of Conduct:

‘personal information as defined in the Freedom of Information Act 1992’

The remainder of the Model Code is consistent with the current Regulations.

Disclosure of Interest - Regulation 11 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

The Model Code amends the definition of the term 'interest'. It currently reads:

'interest means an interest that could, or could reasonably be perceived to, adversely affect the impartiality of the person having the interest and includes an interest arising from kinship, friendship or membership of an association'

It is amended to read:

'interest means a material interest that could, or could reasonably be perceived to, adversely affect the impartiality of the person having the interest'

It is unclear why it is proposed to amend this definition, given that the terms '*kinship, friendship or membership of an association*' provide useful reference points that presently help council members to understand their responsibility to declare this type of interest.

Contravention of certain Local Laws - Regulation 4 of the current Local Government (Rules of Conduct) Regulations

This provision is now included in Part B of the Model Code at 2.10 and 2.11.

WALGA seeks comment on the proposed Part C Model Code provisions.