

Handling of Sexual Harassment Complaints Involving Current or Former Ministers

Background

1. The Scottish Government's commitment, as an employer, to provide a workplace free from discrimination and to ensure the fair treatment of staff is covered by our policies on Fairness at Work and expectations of conduct. These policies and associated procedures are being reviewed to ensure that they provide the necessary assurance to staff that complaints of any sort, including complaints of sexual harassment, will be given full and fair consideration. This review sits alongside the longer term action we are taking to ensure we have consistently positive and inclusive cultures and are able to take early action to prevent negative behaviours before they escalate.

2. These policies flow from the actions that the SG can take as an employer (including applying sanctions such as dismissal) and, in the case of complaints about current Ministers, the First Minister's responsibility for the behaviours and actions of Ministers as set out in the Scottish Ministerial Code.

3. This note sets out how complaints about serving, as well as former, Ministers will be handled. It recognises that the existing arrangements do not deal directly with the handling of complaints raised by staff in relation to former Ministers. This note addresses that position by setting out an approach for how such complaints will be handled. In doing so, it acknowledges that these complaints are likely to be historical; that the nature of the relationship between the civil service and the former Minister will have changed (for example, former Ministers are no longer covered by the terms of the Scottish Ministerial Code); and the sanctions open to the First Minister (such as removal from office) would be no longer applicable. These factors place significant limitations on how a complaint of this nature may be considered and resolved. However, it remains important that any concerns of this type that are raised receive equal consideration and that all necessary support is provided to the staff member.

Initial contact

4. An individual may choose to raise an issue involving a serving or former Minister through a number of mechanisms. These may include a trusted senior manager, direct to HR or a Trade Union representative. If the approach is made through these routes it should be escalated to the Director of People for consideration and so that sources of support can be offered to the individual.

Sexual Harassment Complaints Against Serving Scottish Government Ministers

5. The Scottish Ministerial Code sets out the general principle that Scottish Ministers are expected to behave in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety. Ministers are personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct themselves in the light of the Code and for justifying their actions to Parliament and the public. The First Minister is, however, the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister and of the appropriate consequences of a breach

of those standards. Ministers can only remain in office for so long as they retain the First Minister's confidence.

6. Where a complaint is made against a serving Minister, the Permanent Secretary will advise the First Minister that a complaint has been received and inform her of its terms. In line with her responsibilities under the Ministerial Code, the First Minister will then determine how to address the complaint against the serving Minister. The First Minister has the option of asking the Permanent Secretary to carry out an investigation along the lines set out at paragraph 14, and to provide a report of the facts as provided by those concerned. However, no matter which type of process is followed, it will be for the First Minister to decide the appropriate response to any complaint about a Minister.

7. Where a complaint concerns the conduct of the First Minister, the First Minister may refer the matter to the independent advisers on the Ministerial Code. It is the role of the advisers to provide advice to the First Minister on which to base a judgement about any action required in respect of Ministerial conduct.

8. In situations relating to complaints against a serving Minister, the Permanent Secretary will take appropriate steps to (1) ensure that the member of staff making such a complaint receives the necessary support throughout the process and (2) put in train any further action that might be required as a result of the issues raised by any complaint.

Sexual Harassment Complaints Against Former Scottish Government Ministers

9. When a concern is raised involving a former Minister, the Director of People will designate a senior civil servant as the senior officer to deal with the issue. We will ensure that that person has had no prior involvement with any aspect of the matter being raised. The role of the senior officer will include the following:

- Ensuring that the member of staff can access any necessary support;
- Ensuring the staff member understands the process and the choices available to them;
- Determining from the staff member how far in the process they wish to proceed;
- Preparing, as required, a record of the complaint raised by the staff member;
- Undertaking, as necessary, an impartial collection of facts from the parties involved;
- Providing reports to the Permanent Secretary and First Minister as required.

10. A key early role of the senior officer will be to support the individual to consider the outcome they are seeking. At this point the staff member's choices include:

- 10.1 Asking that their complaint is recorded without further action, in order to recognise their experience and to assist our organisational commitment to help prevent the circumstances arising again; or

- 10.2 Indicating that they wish the complaint to be put to the former Minister and for that person, and any witnesses, to be interviewed.

Making a Complaint

11. Where the staff member wishes to pursue a formal complaint against a former Minister they should provide the senior officer, in writing, with as much information as possible about the matter, including details of potential witnesses.

[Option A

12. *The Permanent Secretary will be advised at that point about the nature of the complaint and that the matter is being taken up with the former Minister in question, as described in paragraph 14 below. If the former Minister is a member of the Party of the current Administration the First Minister will also be advised.*

OR

Option B

12. *The Permanent Secretary will be advised at that point about the nature of the complaint. If the former Minister is a member of the Party of the current Administration the First Minister will be informed and will decide how to address the complaint against the former Minister.]*

13. Where the former Minister was a member of an Administration formed by a different Party, the Permanent Secretary will advise the relevant Scottish Party Leader about the nature of the complaint and the process being undertaken (as described in paragraph 14 below).

Investigation, Reporting and Follow Up

14. The former Minister will be approached by the senior officer and provided with details of the complaint. If the former Minister agrees to cooperate:

- 14.1 They will be interviewed by the senior officer;
- 14.2 Any witnesses identified by the staff member and the former Minister will also be invited to be interviewed at this time;
- 14.3 A report will then be prepared for the Permanent Secretary setting out the information that has been obtained during the above process. The Permanent Secretary will consider the report and will take appropriate action, including ensuring the welfare and support arrangements for the staff member;
- 14.4 If the former Minister is a member of the Party of the current Administration the First Minister will consider the report from the perspective of the actions of the former Minister;
- 14.5 Where former Minister was a member of an Administration formed by a different Party, the Permanent Secretary will inform the relevant Scottish Party leader of the outcome of the investigation and any action taken;
- 14.6 The report will be shared with the staff member and the former Minister.

15. If the former Minister declines to engage with the process the matter will be investigated as far as possible without their involvement. They will be advised that a complaint against them in the terms set out by the complainant and the outcome of any investigation undertaken will be recorded within the SG.

16. The Permanent Secretary will be informed of this outcome and will consider appropriate action, including the steps necessary to ensure the welfare and support arrangements for the staff member.

17. Where the former Minister is a member of the Party of the current Administration the First Minister will be informed that the former Minister has declined to cooperate and will consider the matter from the perspective of the actions of the former Minister.

18. Where the former Minister was a member of an Administration formed by a different Party, the Permanent Secretary will inform the relevant Scottish Party Leader of the outcome of the investigation, any action taken and that the former Minister has declined to cooperate.

NOTE:

(i) At all times the staff member is free to make a complaint directly to the Police. Any Police investigation or criminal proceedings will take priority over any internal SG process, although we will continue to offer support to the staff member.

(ii) Throughout the process we will take all available steps to support the staff member and ensure they are protected from any harmful behaviour. However, if at any point it becomes apparent to the SG that criminal behaviour might have occurred the SG will bring the matter directly to the attention of the Police. Also, if it becomes apparent that the matter being raised is part of a wider pattern of behaviour it may be necessary for the SG to consider taking appropriate action in light of the information provided. Should either of these steps be necessary the staff member will be advised.

Scottish Government
November 2017