Standards Committee: Annual Report 2020/21

Introduction

1 This report outlines the activities of the Committee from May 2020 to April 2021 and records issues the Committee considers important for the future. In summary, the work of the Standards Committee is:

- Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct.

- Casework conducted through Sub-Committees

- Ensuring that appropriate training is organised for members.

- Overseeing Council policies on complaints handling and whistle blowing.

Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct

2 The promotion of high standards of conduct was principally demonstrated through the comprehensive training provided for members and the casework undertaken. Following the County Council elections in May 2017, a comprehensive induction programme included sessions on standards and the code of conduct, including an initial introduction for new members on 16 May 2017, then workshop training for all members during June 2017, undertaken by the Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer. Only one member was unable to attend a workshop and this member attended a meeting with the Monitoring Officer to undergo the training.

3 All members newly elected in May 2017 submitted their register of interests forms by 24 May 2017. All members have been reminded to keep their register of interests up to date and many updates have been recorded over the last year. Advice was given by the Monitoring Officer and Democratic Services staff to assist members in making complete and correct entries. The most recent reminder to all members was issued in October 2020.

4 Plans were put in place ahead of the May 2021 elections to ensure that members receive appropriate standards and code of conduct training from the Monitoring Officer.

Independent Persons

5 The role of the independent persons is to assist the County Council in ensuring and maintaining a high level of integrity in the conduct of the elected members of the council and in how they discharge the council's business, through the implementation of the Member Code of Conduct and the constitutional arrangements supporting it. A major part of the role is to advise the Standards Committee's sub-committees in casework.

6 Mr John Donaldson and Mr Steve Cooper have undertaken the role of Independent Person over the last year, including involvement in individual casework and commenting on Government consultations being considered by the Committee.

Casework

7 In the period 1 May 2020 – 31 April 2021 two cases were considered. An Assessment Sub-Committee took place on 12 March 2021, comprising

Cllr Barnard, Cllr R Oakley and Cllr Sparkes. The matters concerned were determined as being of not sufficient importance to warrant further investigation and the matters were closed.

8   It is clear that familiarity with the Code helps members feel more confident in their role. Early discussion with the Monitoring Officer about potentially problematic situations is both encouraged and useful. The low number of cases is an indication of the effectiveness of the training and guidance given and of members' positive approach to standards of conduct.

Ethical Governance, Whistle Blowing and Complaints Handling

9   The Committee receives reports on any cases under the County Council's Whistleblowing Policy. The reports are helpful in indicating whether any measures are needed to address underlying problems. There have been no cases in the last year.

10 The Committee also receives regular reports about complaints handling across the authority. Generally, there is a positive culture within the organisation about complaints and levels of complaints were broadly stable.

Conclusion

11 It is clear that maintaining good standards of conduct is taken seriously in the County Council. The Standards Committee believes that this can only serve to improve public confidence.

Recommended

That the report be noted.

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Chairman of the Standards Committee

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Background papers

None