
Standards Committee: Annual Report 2021/22

Introduction

- 1** This report outlines the activities of the Committee from April 2021 to March 2022 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 for members. Following the County Council elections in May 2021, the induction programme included sessions on standards and the code of conduct by the Monitoring Officer. This was delivered virtually and was recorded, so any member unable to attend was asked to observe the recording. All members have confirmed that they have done this, meaning a 100% compliance, in line with the Council's expectations.
- 3** All members newly elected in May 2021 submitted their register of interests forms by June 2021. 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 to assist members with their entries. The most recent reminder to all members was issued in June 2022.

Independent Persons

- 4** 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 council business, through upholding the Member Code of Conduct and the constitutional arrangements supporting it. They also advise the Standards Committee's sub-committees in casework.
- 5** 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

- 6** In the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 four complaints against councillors were received. All failed to meet the criteria for presentation to an assessment sub-committee for review, the Monitoring Officer making this judgment with the assistance of the independent persons. The main reason for rejecting complaints at this initial stage continues to be that the behaviour complained of is clearly not connected with the member acting or appearing to act on Council business.
- 7** 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 lack of valid complaints 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

- 8** 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. There is nothing to suggest, by reference to concerns raised through other routes such as grievances, internal audit, or formal complaints that there is any cause for concern about awareness of or use of the whistleblowing procedures.
- 9** The Committee also receives regular reports about complaints handling across the authority. Generally, there is a positive culture within the organisation about complaints. The Committee has monitored levels of complaints and discussed the reasons for increases in some areas during 2021.
- 10** The Committee also noted a Public Interest Report issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman about a children's services matter. The ombudsman had found faults with the Council's handling of the matter and had set out its findings and proposed remedies. The Committee supported the Council's approach in accepting the findings and implementing the remedies and recommendations made by the Ombudsman.

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.

Pete Bradbury

Chairman of the Standards Committee

Contact Officer: Charles Gauntlett, Senior Advisor, Democratic Services, 033022 22524, charles.gauntlett@westsussex.gov.uk

Background papers

None