
Standards Committee: Annual Report 2022/23

Introduction

- 1** This report outlines the activities of the Committee from April 2022 to March 2023 and records issues the Committee considers important for the future. In summary, the work of the Standards Committee comprises:
 - Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct
 - Casework conducted through sub-committees
 - Ensuring that appropriate training for members takes place
 - 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 undertaken the training, meaning a 100% compliance, in line with the Council's expectations. Dedicated training is provided to members elected after May 2021.
- 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 and these show that members are dealing with updates appropriately and in a timely way. Advice was given to assist members with their entries. The most recent reminder to all members was issued in May 2023.
- 4** During the year there have been two by-elections. The newly appointed members have attended sessions on standards and the code of conduct by the Monitoring Officer and have submitted register of interest forms.

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 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 and are available to the Monitoring Officer to assist in case work and in responding to complaints related to the Code of Conduct.
- 6** Mr John Donaldson and Mr Steve Cooper have continued to discharge 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 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 two complaints against councillors were received by the Monitoring Officer. Both 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. In one instance the complaint was regarded as too trivial to meet the aims and purpose of the Code.
- 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. This particularly applies to the management of personal interests. 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 but is also a testament to the respect and seriousness which members attach to their role as elected councillors.

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 two referrals in the last year, one relating to a school and the actions of an individual governor, the other to a concern relating to the application of conditions relating to an external grant within a procurement. Both were independently investigated and relevant action taken. Learning from both the substance of the matters under investigation and the application and use of the whistleblowing policy has been identified.
- 10** The Committee also receives an annual report about complaints handling across the authority. This provides a detailed breakdown of complaints by reference to subject or service area and the nature of the Council's actions being challenged. It also shows to what extent complaints are dealt with in accordance with the Council's prescribed timescales. The report also provides an account of the complaints against the Council considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- 11** The report for the year to December 2022 did not suggest any deterioration in how complaints are handled although it was noted that action is required to meet deadlines more often and to ensure complainants are kept informed about expected response times. Overall the report did not show any significant increases in areas of complaints or in the nature of the Council's actions which prompt the complaints. The report also provides data on compliments received. Together the data appears to suggest a positive view of the Council's work with residents and customers and an appropriately constructive level of concern for the management of and response to complaints and to the need to take learning from them.

Conclusion

- 12** 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 in the work and democratic processes of the Council.

Pete Bradbury

Chairman of the Standards Committee

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Background papers

None