

Minutes of a Meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Monday, 14 October 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr John Bailey (Chair)
Cllr Brian Smedley (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Martin Dimery
Cllr Frances Nicholson
Co-opted Member Sally Foster
Co-opted Member Robin Horton (Online)
Others present: Ewan Jones (SALC – Somerset Association of Local Councils)

57 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Hugh Davies
Co-opted Member Paul Hooper
Co-opted Member Alan Hemsley
Co-opted Member David Stripp

58 Minutes from the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

Resolved that the minutes of the Standards Committee held on 18 July 2024 be confirmed as a correct record.

59 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 3

None.

60 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

None.

61 Standards Committee - Action Plan - Agenda Item 5

The Chair gave the following updates:

- Ongoing Review of complaints against Councillors procedures by Priority Group 1 would be discussed at the meeting under agenda item 6.
- To consider whether to include Co-opted Members on the Complaints Hearings by Priority Group 1 would be included on the work programme for July 2025.
- To agree the questionnaire from complainants against Councillors by Priority Group 1 would be discussed at the meeting under agenda item 7.
- Review Code of Conduct Training and support package for Parish Councils by Priority Group 1 would be discussed at the meeting under agenda item 8.
- SALC to be involved with the Standards Committee: Ewan Jones was invited by Scott Wooldridge to the meeting. SALC would ensure that the training was comprehensive and complimentary.

62 Code of Conduct Complaints 2024/2025 – Quarterly Update – Q2 - Agenda Item 6

The Monitoring Officer reported the Council had dealt with 10 complaints in quarter 2 of 2024/25. Some related to the same subject matter and the same alleged breach of the Code of Conduct. Taking this into account there were 9 separate incidents complained about.

He confirmed that the amount of complaints had dropped compared to the monthly average recorded in 2023/24 but the numbers were still within the realms of the volumes predicted prior to Vesting Day based on historical trends from the legacy councils.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted that of the 10 complaints received, 5 originated from staff members, 3 were from fellow Councillors and 2 were from members of the public. He further highlighted that taking Q1 and Q2 together the totals were 6 from members of staff, 17 from members of the public and 14 from fellow Councillors.

During the discussion that followed members asked for an update on the intervention made at Chard Town Council. They were advised that the Chard Town Council Members had been sent a joint letter from Somerset Council and Chard Town Council expressing concern about the high amount of complaints received and how out of kilter this was compared to the rest of the country and offered some advice on how to deal with that. Afterwards a meeting was held with the Town Council, the Chief Executive and the Deputy Monitoring Officer. There was a new clerk in the post and Somerset Council were working closely with them and SALC (Somerset Association of Local Councils) to help them move forward in a constructive way.

The Chief Executive Officer of SALC advised that Parish, Town and City Councillors have training on the Member Code of Conduct.

The Co-opted Members thanked the Councils for the interventions they had made which seemed to have had an impact as the complaints were low.

The Chair made the following points:

- Priority Group 1 of the Standards Committee should work along with SALC to produce a package to support Parish Councils.
- A complaint had been lost in Customer Services – MO investigating if others were lost and how this could be avoided – MO report next meeting

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted the update report.

63 Code of Conduct Complaints Questionnaire - Agenda Item 7

The Monitoring Officer reported that as part of the work programme Priority Group 1, had created a questionnaire to show customer satisfaction with the complaints process. David Stripp stressed this questionnaire was not designed to address the outcome of the complaint but rather with the complaint process. For example, how easy had it been to find information on the website or to get in contact with officers.

The Group had asked the Council's digital team to enable the questionnaire to be available online as well as printable.

The Chair proposed that the questionnaire be launched to the public and observed how it was accepted and it be put on the work programme in 6 months and in twelve months' time for feedback. This was seconded by Councillor Brian Smedley.

RESOLVED:

that the questionnaire be launched to the public and observed how it was accepted and it be put on the work programme in 6 months and in twelve months' time for feedback.

64 Standards Committee Work Programme - Agenda Item 8

The Chair went through the Work Programme and agreed its contents as follows:

Work Item	By Whom	Committee Meeting
January 2025		
Previous Minutes	DS	January 2025
Action Plan (standing item)	Chair	January 2025
Code of Conduct Complaints – Quarterly Update	MO	January 2025
Review the Officer’s Code of Conduct	MO	January 2025
Priority 2 are tasked with considering Code of Conduct Training for Parishes and Somerset Councillors		January 2025
Whistle Blowing Policy	SC	January 2025
Update on National Changes in Code of Conduct	MO	January 2025
Lobbying for Changes to Code of Conduct	MO	January 2025
Annual Report to Full Council	MO	January 2025
Review Hearing Panel Terms of Reference – update to enable Co-opted Members to participate	SW	January 2025
Support Package for all Councils by SC Officers and SALC	SW/SALC	January 2025
Work Programme (standing item)	DS	January 2025
April 2025		
Previous Minutes	DS	April 2025
Action Plan (standing item)	Chair	
Code of Conduct Complaints – Quarterly Update	MO	April 2025
Bi-Annual Gifts and Hospitality Report (September – February)	DS	April 2025
Bi-Annual Report on Complaints Feedback Questionnaire	DS	April 2025
Work Programme (standing item)	DS	April 2025
July 2025		
Previous Minutes	DS	July 2025

Action Plan (standing item) a) Priority Group 1 are tasked with considering whether to include Co-opted members on the Complaints Hearings	Chair	
Code of Conduct Annual Review 2023-2024	MO	July 2025
Code of Conduct Complaints – Quarterly Update	MO	July 2025
Work Programme (standing item)	DS	July 2025
October 2025		
Previous Minutes	DS	October 2025
Action Plan (standing item)	MO	October 2025
Code of Conduct Complaints – Quarterly Update	MO	October 2025
Bi-Annual Report on Complaints Feedback Questionnaire	DS	October 2025
Bi-Annual Gifts and Hospitality Report (March – August)	DS	October 2025
Work Programme (standing item)	DS	October 2025

65 Standards Committee Gifts and Hospitality - Agenda Item 9

The Interim Head of Governance apologised for the late publication of this report.

He reported on the details of gifts and hospitality which were registered by Somerset Councillors during the period from March 2024 to August 2024.

The Chair confirmed that the committee was happy with the format of the report now including the additions of a column stating whether the gift or hospitality had been accepted/rejected and the reasons for the acceptance/rejection.

He further confirmed that this would be a 6 monthly report and for it to be added to

the work programme.

RESOLVED:

The report was noted.

At the end of the meeting Co-opted Member Robin Horton raised the issue of a survey on DS support from SC Members. The Chair agreed to discuss this with RH.

Also, at the end of the meeting the Chair thanked David Clark, Monitoring Officer for his service to the Standards Committee as he played a crucial role. The Chair said that he was grateful for his professional, timely and prompt support.

(The meeting ended at 11.00 am)

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CHAIR