

Standards Committee Annual Report - 2022 to 2023

Foreword by the Chair of the Standards Committee – Councillor John Bailey

I am pleased to present the first Annual Report of the Standards Committee for 2022/2023. The Annual Report provides information to the Council about the work carried out by the committee since its formation in May 2022 and identifies the focus of priorities for the committee.

This is the first annual report of the newly formed Standards Committee. It was felt that there was a need to divide the work of the Constitution and Governance Committee across two bodies, a Constitution and Governance Committee and a new Standards Committee.

The Standards Committee as a whole has been working to clarify its role in relation to the Constitution and Governance Committee and the LGR, two other bodies working in the same area, and to add value and avoid duplication. We have focused on work up to Vesting Day on 1 April 2023. As the individual committee members were working together for the first time there was also a requirement for team building.

With this in mind a workshop was arranged and as a result three priority areas of work were identified.

Membership

At the Annual General Meeting of Full Council in May 2022 a Standards Committee was formed, comprising a representative from each political group on the Council, supported by co-opted representatives and Independent Persons. Council has agreed to waive the political proportionality requirements for appointments to the Standards Committee to enable all of the political groups on the Council to be represented.

The committee is made up as follows:

- Cllr John Bailey (Chair) – Lib Dem
- Cllr Norman Cavill - Conservative
- Cllr Brian Smedley - Labour
- Cllr Martin Dimmery – Green
- Cllr Hugh Davies – Independent

Co-optees:

- Alan Hemsley
- Paul Hooper
- Robin Horton
- David Stripp

In terms of the complaints process we currently have three vacancies for the position of Independent Persons to sit on the committee, these will be advertised and recruited before vesting day in April 2023. A further co-opted member will also be recruited.

Purpose

The Standards Committee is expected to be apolitical in carrying out its functions and its responsibilities.

The Committee promotes and maintains high standards of conduct by elected Members and Co-opted Members of Council and Council bodies.

The Committee:-

- a) Has responsibility for promoting high standards of conduct by Members, Co-opted Members and Officers and for the policies and processes which support this aim.
- b) Advises on the induction and training of Members and Co-opted Members on standards of conduct;
- c) Monitors the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct and recommends any changes considered necessary to the Code to the Council for approval.
- d) Has responsibility for overseeing the Code of Conduct for officers and recommending any changes considered necessary to the Council for approval
- e) Manages the members' and officers' registers of interests and gifts / hospitality;
- f) Monitors the Council's Whistleblowing Policy and make recommendations to the Council in respect of any proposed changes. The Committee has no role in considering or determining member complaints as this role falls to the Monitoring Officer.

The Committees work in 2022/2023

In September 2022 the committee held a workshop to identify their focus of work ahead of Vesting Day.

At the end of the workshop three key priority areas had been identified, namely:

P1- Complaints Procedure: Review and assurance on existing complaints procedures including any LGA recommendations for amendments ready for the new Council

P2 – Code of Conduct: Adoption of model Code of Conduct across the County to come before the committee. Working closely with the Somerset Association of Local Council's to deliver this.

P3 – Officer Code of Conduct: Reviewing updates on Officer CoC

The three priority groups are supported by the following members prior to making any recommendations to Full Council in February 2023.

Priority One: Councillor John Bailey, Councillor Brian Smedley, Councillor Norman Cavill, David Stripp and Paul Hooper.

Priority Two: Councillor Norman Cavill, Robin Horton and Alan Hemsley.

Priority Three: Councillor Hugh Davies, Councillor Martin Dimery and Alan Hemsley.

Other work of the committee

In November 2022 the committee received the Annual Report on Standards of Conduct for 2021/2022.

The Annual Report highlighted that for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 the Monitoring Officer had received three complaints relating to alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct by two County Councillors. Two of the complaints relate to the same elected member. Two of the complaints were not upheld as they related to the Councillor's private life and not when undertaking their official duties as a County Councillor. One of the complaints did not complete determination as the Councillor ceased to be an elected member in May 2022.

The Committee considered the recruitment of Independent Persons and the appointment of a Reserve Independent Person to cover the period up to 31 March 2023. The committee supported that three Independent Persons were recruited for the new Somerset Council.

The committee also reviewed the Register of Gifts and Hospitality declarations that have been made by councillors since May 2022.

Looking ahead 2023

In addition to delivering the outcomes of the three priority groups the committee will continue to review the role of the Standards Committee and to develop a work programme in the short, medium and long term.

The committee will continue to monitor the LGA recommendations and national lobbying to change the national framework for code of conduct and in particular sanctions available to individual local authorities

The committee will support the Council in its new role in dealing with all member complaints from the city, town and parish councils across Somerset.

The committee will seek to develop an outreach education programme for member code of conduct training and refresher training (roadshows, information etc) working closely with SALC and others.

The committee will also continue to develop a programme to encourage all Somerset city, town and parish councils to adopt one single Code of Conduct for their elected representatives and to monitor the progress at the committee, including reporting on this key performance indicator annually.

Finally, the committee will continue to ensure that there are sufficient resources allocated to support the work of the committee.