

Standards Committee Annual Report - 2023 to 2024

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

I am pleased to present the Annual Report of the Standards Committee for 2023/2024. The Annual Report provides information to the Council about the work carried out by the committee since April 2023 and identifies the focus of priorities for the committee.

The Standards Committee has been working to promote the Council's Code of Conduct for Members both internally and externally for adoption by Somerset's 279 city, town and parish councils. The committee has held seven meetings during 2023/24 and in addition convened three task and finish groups.

Membership

At the Annual General Meeting of Full Council in May 2023, the Council approved the membership of the Standards Committee. The Council agreed to waive the political proportionality requirements for appointments to the Standards Committee to enable all of the political groups on the Council. The Committee comprises 5 elected members of Somerset Council and 5 co-opted representatives.

Purpose

The Standards Committee operates on an 'apolitical' basis in carrying out its functions and its responsibilities.

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 2023/2024

During 2023/24 the Committee has :

- Held seven committee meetings;
- Maintained oversight of the Monitoring Officer's processing and administration of code of conduct complaints for Somerset Council councillors and councillors of the 279 city, town and parish councils;
- Reviewed the annual report on Members' Code of Conduct complaints and quarterly updates from the Monitoring Officer providing assurance that there is sufficient capacity is in place for processing these
- Reviewed the Register of Gifts and Hospitality along with ways to improve awareness and the guidance to elected members and officers
- Reviewed progress on the adoption of the Somerset Code of Conduct by the 279 city, town and parish councils across Somerset;
- Focused on reviewing and identifying potential improvements to the process and level at which Members declare any offers of gifts or hospitality, resulting in recommendations for Council to consider;
- Held a Hearing Panel sub-committee to consider a complaint about the conduct of a town councillor with the complaint being upheld and sanctions recommended;
- Recommended to Council that a Vice-Chair is appointed for the Standards Committee; and
- Worked with the Monitoring Officer on the recruitment to a co-opted member vacancy on the Committee.

In addition to the above the committee has convened three task and finish groups to support three priority areas of work:

Priority 1- Complaints Procedure: Review and assurance on existing complaints procedures including any Local Government Association recommendations for amendments ready for the new Council

Priority 2 – 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.

Priority 3 – 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 the committee:

Priority One: Councillor John Bailey, Councillor Brian Smedley, Councillor Frances Nicholson, David Stripp and Paul Hooper.

Priority Two: Councillor Frances Nicholson, Robin Horton and Alan Hemsley.

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

Looking ahead 2024

In addition to delivering the outcomes of the three priority groups the committee will continue to promote good standards of conduct for members, officers and parish & town councillors.

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 continue to support the Council in its role in dealing with councillor conduct complaints relating to Somerset Council members and also councillors from the city, town and parish councils across Somerset.

The committee will continue to encourage all Somerset city, town and parish councils to adopt one single Code of Conduct for their elected representatives.

Finally, I would like to thank the Standards Committee members and the co-opted members for their hard work in providing constructive challenge and support to delivering the committee's priorities. I would also like to thank the Council's officers for their support in the work of the committee.

Cllr John Bailey

Chair of Standards Committee

March 2024