

Minutes of a Meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, the Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Thursday, 18 July 2024 at 11.00 am

Attendance:

Councillor John Bailey (Chair), Hugh Davies, Francis Nicholson,
Councillors Martin Dimery (online), Brian Smedley (online).
Co-opted Members David Stripp, Robin Horton, Sally Foster, Alan Hemsley
Officers David Clark, Scott Wooldridge, Claire Dicken

Opening remarks: The Chair said thanked Steve Taylor for supporting the Standards Committee on behalf of Democratic Services and wished him the best for his future plans.

50 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies were received from Co-opted Member Paul Hooper.

51 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

None.

52 Minutes from the Previous Meeting and Action Sheet - Agenda Item 3

Members noted a number of actions had been carried out since the last meeting including the recruitment of Sally Foster as a Co-opted Member of the Standards Committee. Sally was welcomed to the Committee.

A number of actions were to be carried forward and these are set out below in the minutes.

RESOLVED

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 27 March 2024 were approved as a correct record.

53 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

None.

54 Code of Conduct Complaints - 2023/2024 Annual Review - Agenda Item 5

The Monitoring Officer reported the Council had dealt with 88 complaints which alleged breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct. These were made up of 59 separate incidents. May 2023 had seen a particularly high number of complaints. However, the overall number of complaints was in line with the volumes that had been predicted ahead of Vesting Day.

During the discussion that followed members said the report had been helpful. Members noted some of the complaints were from Councillors complaining about each other, rather than complaints from members of the public. The Monitoring Officer said that it would be possible for further analysis of these in order to know whether anything could be done to prevent them.

Members further said they would be interested to see more detail on the 11 complaints that were upheld. Members were also interested to have analysis done to show any patterns, such as multiple complaints about the same incident.

In response to queries the Monitoring Officer confirmed that if a Somerset Councillor refused to carry out training which had been recommended by the Standards Committee then the issue could be referred back to the Committee. However, if a Parish Councillor refused to carry out such training then the Parish Council, as the sovereign council in that instance would need to consider other sanctions in accordance with their own Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

55 Code of Conduct Complaints 2024/2025 - Quarterly Update - Q1 - Agenda Item 6

The Monitoring Officer reported on the complaints which alleged breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct within Quarter 1 2024-25. Members noted a spike in June 2024 which had been caused by multiple complaints about the same incident.

During the discussion that followed members queried if there was a better way for members of staff/clerks to be supported before they made a formal complaint

against a Councillor.

With regard to formal hearings of the standards Complaint Sub Committee Members said they all wished to be kept informed with the details of the hearing. It was noted that such a hearing would be held in public.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

56 Standards Committee Objectives, Work Programme and Priority Group - Agenda Item 7

The Chair explained there had been a workshop session to look at actions/priorities for the Standards Committee over the next year.

Previously, the Standards Committee had agreed the following 6 objectives:

- 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 Appendix 1 considering or determining member complaints as this role falls to the Monitoring Officer.

The Priority Groups were made up as follows:

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

Priority Group Two: Councillor Frances Nicholson (chair), Robin Horton and
Alan Hemsley.

Priority Group Three: Councillor Hugh Davies, Councillor Martin Dimery (chair)

and Sally Foster.

Co-opted Member David Stripp said he had been part of the Group who had been tasked with researching the complaint process. The Group had devised a questionnaire to get feedback from those who had lodged complaints. The Group hoped the questionnaire would help the Council to improve the service.

During the discussion that followed the Committee welcomed the questionnaire including the suggested changes that had been made to the draft which was circulated at the meeting.

Further suggestions included:

- The question about how straight forward the complaints form had been should be graded 1 – 5, rather than yes/no
- The question about response times should be changed to read something like did you get a response within 5 days, and if not, how long did it take?
- The column referring to complaints against an officer of Somerset Council should be removed

The Monitoring Officer offered to help the Group work on the detail of the questionnaire.

RESOLVED

1. That the actions/priorities for the Standards Committee be:

Action	By whom	By when
1. Review the Officer's Code of Conduct	Monitoring Officer	January 2025
2. Complaints Report: 2.1 Ongoing Review 2.2 Refresh Code of Conduct Training 2.3 SALC to be involved with Standards Committee	Priority Group 1 Priority Group 2 Scott Wooldridge	The next meeting

2.4 Support Package for Parish Councils 2.5 Cross Reference analysis of complaints 2.6 Detail to be recorded of upheld complaints	Scott Wooldridge Monitoring Officer Monitoring Officer	
3. To consider whether to include Co-opted Members on Complaints hearings	Priority Group 2	Next meeting
4. Petition for review of structure (national)	Scott Wooldridge	Next meeting
5. Hearing Sub Committee – information to be sent to all Standard Committee Members	Monitoring Officer	Ongoing
6. Date of next meeting	Scott Wooldridge	ASAP

2. That the Monitoring Officer work with Co-opted Member David Stripp to amend the draft questionnaire as discussed.

(The meeting ended at 11.55 am)

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CHAIR