

Report to: **Standards Committee**

Date: **16 April 2024**

Title of report: **Annual Report of the Standards Committee**

By: **Assistant Chief Executive**

Purpose of report: **To provide an update on Member Conduct issues, the work of the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Standards Committee is recommended to:

- 1) **note the report;**
 - 2) **agree the report for submission to the County Council for consideration; and**
 - 3) **review the Code of Conduct and consider whether to propose any amendments to the Code.**
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1. Background information

1.1 The Standards Committee is required to submit an annual report to the County Council on its work during the previous year. The Committee is therefore asked to consider the draft report for submission to the County Council.

1.2 Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 two complaints were received against Members of the County Council. A complaint received in the previous year was also determined within the same period.

1.3 It is considered that the standards of conduct among Members and co-opted members of the Council remain high and maintaining good standards is taken seriously. The table below shows the number of complaints resolved by the Assessment Sub-Committee over previous years:

Year	No. of complaints received	No. of complaints resolved
2023/24	2	3
2022/23	2	2
2021/22	3	2
2020/21	0	0
2019/20	0	0
2018/19	2	2
2017/18	0	0
2016/17	1	1
2015/16	1	1
2014/15	3	3
2013/14	1	1

2. Applications for Dispensation

2.1 In limited circumstances, Members can apply in writing for dispensations to take part in business that they would otherwise have been unable to participate in through having prejudicial interests. During 2023/24 there were no applications for dispensations.

2.2 All dispensations are entered on the register of Members' interests and remain there for the appropriate period.

3. Register of Members' Interests

3.1 The Monitoring Officer is required to establish and maintain a register of interests of Members of the Council. All Members have completed and returned their registers and are reminded every three months of the need to notify the Monitoring Officer of any changes. The registers are available for public inspection and are available on the Council's website.

3.2 During 2023/24 Members were reminded that there is provision for information considered to be sensitive not to be published on their register of interest form. Sensitive information is that which, if disclosed, could lead to the Member, or a person connected to the Member, being subject to violence or intimidation. If a Member considers that the information relating to any personal interest is sensitive, and the Monitoring Officer agrees, the register available for inspection will not include the details of that interest other than stating that the Member has an interest and that the details are withheld. Members were reminded that if they consider an interest to be sensitive, they should still declare the matter and request that it be treated as sensitive information. The fact that a Member considers the information to be sensitive is not a reason for failing to declare the interest.

3.3 A register of Gifts and Hospitality is also maintained by the Monitoring Officer. Members have to register gifts and hospitality received with an estimated value of £50 or more. Members are reminded every three months of the need to declare gifts and hospitality of such a value.

3.4 There is an ongoing requirement to keep the information on the register of interest form up to date. Members must, within 28 days of becoming aware of any new registerable personal interest or change to any registered interest, give written notification to the Monitoring Officer.

4. Code of Conduct

4.1 In April 2021, the Committee agreed to maintain the Council's Code of Conduct. The current Code works well, is understood by Members and reflects Codes of the District and Boroughs, with the exception of Rother District Council, ensuring a consistent approach with dual hatted members.

4.2 It is recommended that the Committee review the Code of Conduct again now (attached at Appendix 2) and consider whether to propose any amendments to the Code.

5 Training

5.1 Following the election on 6 May 2021, training was given to Members on the Code of Conduct including register of interests, personal interests, disclosable pecuniary interests and gifts and hospitality. Further training on the Code in relation to 'Confidentiality and the Code of Conduct' was delivered to Members in September 2022. Following the by-elections in July and August 2023 new Members undertook training on the Code of Conduct in September which included register of interests, personal interests, disclosable pecuniary interests and gifts and hospitality. The session was made available to all

Members and a number were in attendance. All Members have signed a declaration undertaking to comply with the County Council's Code of Conduct for Members. For the year 2024-25, training on the Code of Conduct will be available to Councillors which will include guidance on the use of Council resources.

6. Social Media guidance for Members

6.1 Social media is a useful communication tool which can increase access to audiences and improve the accessibility of communication. However, its use does give rise to risks and some complexities. In recent years there has been an increase across England in Code of Conduct complaints against Councillors in respect of their use of social media.

6.2 In response to these risks social media guidance has been developed to help support Members in their roles. The Governance Committee approved the newly created social media guidance at its meeting on 10 January and this is attached at Appendix 3 of the report. The guidance, whilst not changing the Code, offers advice and tips to Members on how to help ensure the public are clear on whether a Member is using social media on behalf of the Council or as a private individual. It also offers advice on how to ensure that the use of social media by Members is lawful and does not expose the council or the councillor to security risks, reputational damage or breach the current data protection legislation.

7. Conclusion

7.1 The Committee is recommended to review to note the activity of the last year, the Code of Conduct and consider whether to propose any amendments to the Code and to recommend to the County Council the Annual Report of the Standards Committee for consideration.

PHILIP BAKER
Assistant Chief Executive

Contact Officer – Georgina Seligmann, Governance and Democracy Manager (01273 823555)

Local Members: All

Background Documents: None