

Report to: Standards Committee

Date: 22 April 2025

Title of report: Annual Report of the Standards Committee

By: Deputy 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 2024 and 31 March 2025 two complaints were received against Members of the County Council and a log of the complaints considered by the Standards Committee is attached at Appendix 1.

1.3 It is considered that the standards of conduct among Members and co-opted members of the Council remains 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
2024/25	2	2
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

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 2024/25 49 Members applied for a dispensation in relation to their membership of this Council and in a number of cases membership of a district or borough Council to be able to participate and vote in any discussions relating to the Government's proposals for either devolution and/or local government re-organisation. The dispensations were applied for under the Localism Act 2011 and the Council's Code of Conduct in relation to potential Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and/ or Prejudicial Interests. After considering all relevant factors, the Monitoring Officer granted dispensation to all Members who had applied as he was satisfied that:

- without the dispensation the number of persons prohibited from participating in any particular business would be so great a proportion of the body transacting the business as to impede the transaction of the business;
- granting the dispensation is in the interests of persons living in the authority's area; and
- it is otherwise appropriate to grant a dispensation.

There were no other applications for a dispensation made in 2024/25.

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 2024/25 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 The Committee at its last annual meeting 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 and the training resources remain available to all Members.

6. Consultation response on strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England

6.1 In December 2024 the Government opened a consultation on strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England. The consultation asked for views on introducing measures that aim to ensure consistency of approach amongst councils investigating serious breaches of their member codes of conduct, including the introduction of the power of suspension. In addition, the consultation sought views on how to empower victims affected by councillor misconduct to come forward and what additional support would be appropriate to consider.

6.2 The consultation sought the views of local authorities as well as individual members of the public. Prospective and current local authority members were also able to respond on an individual basis if they wished. The Standards Committee considered the consultation at a non-statutory meeting on 18 February 2025, with a copy of the responses submitted attached as Appendix 3. The consultation closed on 26 February 2025. The Committee will be provided with further information once the outcome of the consultation is known.

7. Conclusion

7.1 The Committee is recommended to note the activity of the last year, review 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.

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