

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE 2021 – 2022

14 October 2021, 10 February 2022

1. THE LOCALISM ACT 2011 – THE STANDARDS REGIME

The new standards regime came into effect on 1 July 2012. The Council, at its meeting on 4 July 2012, agreed the membership of eight Councillors and three Town and Parish Council non-voting co-optees. The Standards Committee is chaired by an independent chair. There is also an Independent Person who is not a member of the Committee but does attend its meetings and hearings.

The Standards Committee has met on two occasions since May 2021.

2. APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT CHAIR AND INDEPENDENT PERSON

The appointments of the Independent Chair and Independent Person were reviewed by Council on 5 January 2022 and the continued appointment of both for the remainder of their four year appointments was endorsed.

Many Local Authorities have more than one Independent Person and because of Northumberland's size and the number of cases it was recommended that Northumberland appoint two further Independent Persons. This was endorsed by Council at its meeting on 5 January 2022. The Standards Committee set up an interview panel and the appointment process is underway.

3. APPOINTMENT OF PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES

The composition of the Standards Committee includes three non-voting Parish Council representatives. An advert was placed with the assistance of the Northumberland Association of Local Councils and two applications were received within and one outside the timeframe for applications. The Committee agreed to accept the late application. An interview panel has been set up to interview the applications and make a recommendation.

4. MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT

Members were presented with the new Model Code of Conduction as prepared by the Local Government Association. It was noted that the Model Code provided more details of particular types of behaviour than the previous version. The Chair will be working with the Monitoring Officer's Team to provide additional guidance

on the use of social media. The Standards Committee recommended that the Model Code of Conduct be adopted in full, however, as the Model Code of Conduct was linked to the Council's Constitution, any changes must also be considered by the Constitution Working Group. This was done on 18 March 2022.

The main points covered in the Model Code are as follows:-

- The Code explicitly states that it applies to Councillors who are claiming to act as a Councillor or who give the impression that they are doing so as well as where a Councillor refers publicly to their role or uses knowledge they could only obtain in their role as a Councillor.
- The Code gives examples of what amounts to treating others with respect but also how to deal with disrespectful behaviour from others.
- Definitions of bullying and harassment are included and there is an express requirement to promote equalities and to not discriminate unlawfully.
- Councillors must not bring their role or local authority into disrepute.
- Councillors must agree to undertake any Code of Conduct training provided, co-operate with a Code of Conduct investigation, not intimidate any person involved in any investigation and comply with any sanctions imposed.
- There is an obligation not to accept any gifts or hospitality regardless of value which could give rise to real or substantive personal gain but if such a refusal may be difficult if it could be seen as rudeness there is provision for the gift to be accepted but it must be publicly registered.
- Gifts or hospitality of £50.00 or more in value must be registered as must any that have been refused.
- In addition to the statutory Disclosable Pecuniary Interests, there is a requirement to register membership of any body exercising functions of a public nature, directed to charitable purposes or one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion.
- There is also a new requirement to register unpaid directorships.

4. INVESTIGATIONS INTO CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

Members were informed of the conclusions of the Investigating Officer into Members Code of Conduct complaints against Councillors J. Riddle and R. Wearmouth, and the subsequent disposal of those complaints. Details of the allegations made in both cases were outlined to Members along with the findings

of the Investigating Officer. Under the procedure, the Monitoring Officer was satisfied with investigation and that no further action be taken.

5. CODE OF CONDUCT HEARING PROCEDURE

Members received an updated hearing procedure which would be used for forthcoming hearings into Member Code of Conduct investigations. There were few major changes and the new procedure aimed to streamline the process as much as possible.

6. CASELOAD

The Monitoring Officer, in conjunction with the Independent Person, has dealt with 33 complaints since May 2021, 16 of which were related to Parish and Town Councils, and 17 concerning members of the County Council.

No action required	5
Investigation	0
Ongoing	27
Withdrawn	1

There are also ongoing matters which pre-date May 2021. These involve some investigations which will be determined by hearings.

Mr. J. Jackson
Independent Chair