

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE 2019 – 2021

**10 October 2019, 16 January 2020, 10 June 2020
16 July 2020, and 22 April 2021**

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 five occasions since May 2019.

2. APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT CHAIR AND INDEPENDENT PERSON

A Panel of three members of the Standards Committee was set up at the 10 October 2019 meeting to consider the appointments of the Independent Chair and Independent Person. The following recommendations of the Panel were subsequently agreed by the County Council meeting on 8 January 2020:

The Independent Chair (Mr. Joe Jackson) was re-appointed for a four year period with a review after two years.

The Independent Person (Mrs Karen Milner) was appointed for a four year period with a review after two years.

3. APPLICATION FOR DISPENSATION

Councillor J.G. Watson submitted an application to the Standards Committee asking it to consider granting a dispensation in relation to his position as Partner Fund Nominated Non-Executive Director on the Border to Coast Pensions Partnership. The meeting held on 16 January 2020 was unable to reach a decision. The request was re-submitted to the Standards Committee and agreed at the meeting held on 10 June 2020.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION CONSULTATION ON DRAFT MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT

At its meeting on 16 July 2020, the Standards Committee discussed and made comment on the draft Members' Code of Conduct. These comments were incorporated into the response to the LGA's consultation process.

Following the consultation process, the Local Government Association published a Model Code of Conduct on 23 December 2020 and Local Authorities were invited to consider whether to adopt it. The Standards Committee meeting on 22 April 2021 considered the detail in the Model Code. Members were informed that any Code of Conduct must be consistent with the following seven principles of public life; selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Nationally, there had been a mixed response from Local Authorities with some adopting it in full, others in part and others not at all. There had been a mixed response from Local Authorities nationally with some adopting it in full, in part or not at all.

The new Code set out the obligations imposed upon Councillors but also included examples of what might be considered as disrespectful behaviour and definitions of bullying and harassment. As with the current Code of Conduct, there was no provision for sanctions including the power to suspend a Member or withdraw allowances. Any such change would require a legislative change.

Members were disappointed that there was still no power to apply sanctions and that there was no timescale for the completion of investigations. Discussions would be held at a regional level in an effort to have a consistent approach regarding the adoption of the Code of Conduct. Uniformity across Northumberland with Parish and Town Councils all operating the same Code of Conduct would also be welcome.

The Standards Committee would receive a further report after officers have had the opportunity to consider the national and local picture further.

5. CASELOAD

The Monitoring Officer, in conjunction with the Independent Person, has dealt with 38 complaints since May 2019, 21 of which were related to Parish and Town Councils, 16 concerning members of the County Council and one dual hatted Member.

No action required	13
Investigation	11
Ongoing	12
Withdrawn	2

Mr. J. Jackson
Independent Chair