

Report to: Standards Committee



Date of Meeting 10 April 2025

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release n/a

Annual Report of the Standards Committee

Report summary:

To review the work of the Standards Committee for the civic term 2024-2025

Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework Yes ☒ No ☐

Recommendation:

That the Annual Report, outlining the work undertaken by the Standards Committee for the civic term 2024 – 2025, be agreed to be presented to Annual Council in May 2025, with delegated authority given to the Monitoring Officer, in conjunction with the Chair, to agree and include any subsequent additions from the April meeting of the committee.

Reason for recommendation:

To inform Council of the work of the committee during the year.

Officer: Melanie Wellman, Director of Governance and Monitoring Officer, email melanie.wellman@eastdevon.gov.uk

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☐ Climate Action and Emergency Response
- ☐ Coast, Country and Environment
- ☒ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- ☒ Communications and Democracy
- ☐ Economy
- ☐ Finance and Assets
- ☐ Strategic Planning
- ☐ Sustainable Homes and Communities
- ☐ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

Equalities impact Low Impact

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk;

Links to background information n/a

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- ☐ A supported and engaged community
 - ☐ Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
 - ☐ Resilient economy that supports local business
 - ☒ Financially secure and improving quality of services
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Report in full

The Standards Committee

The Standards Committee believes that high ethical standards are crucial in the work of any public body and that robust application is important. This summary report shows how the Committee has undertaken these tasks during the last 12 months and how it continues to contribute to and offer direction to shape the governance, culture, and ethos of the organisation.

The Standards Committee comprises of 7 elected councillors (plus one reserve); Co-opted non-voting members include 2 Independent Persons; 3 Independent Representatives; and 3 Town/Parish Representatives.

Members of the Committee work together to promote the importance of high standards of behaviour and systems of governance to create a climate where complaints or problems are rare. The Chair of the Committee is held automatically by the Chair of the Council recognising the impartiality of that role. The Council has long recognised the added value brought by an independent voice on its Standards Committee, reinforced by the Co-opted Membership.

Purpose and Remit of the Committee

The Committee acts as champion of the Council's ethical standards and is responsible for promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct. The Constitution makes it clear that any member of the public may complain to the Monitoring Officer about an alleged breach of the Members' Code of Conduct. The Council has in place appropriate arrangements for dealing with complaints against Members and a mechanism to deal with allegations that Members may have breached the Code of Conduct. The Council has appointed 'Independent Persons' in line with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011. More information about the Code of Conduct and the complaints process can be found on the Council's website.

The remit of the committee includes:

- (a) Advise on the discretionary elements of the Local Code of Conduct; including monitoring and updating.
- (b) Advise on the implementation of the Local Code of Conduct, including the training of Members in matters of conduct and advice to Members on such issues as the treatment of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and personal interests and more general conduct issues.
- (c) To the extent allowed by law make arrangements for Members to receive dispensations to speak on, or participate in, matters in which they have interests.
- (d) Appoint such Sub Committees (including Membership thereof) as appropriate to discharge the functions.

Meetings in 2024/25

The Committee met twice in 2024/25, two meetings were cancelled and there were no Standards Assessment Sub-Committee meetings to assess complaints or Standards Hearings Sub-Committee meetings to hear complaints.

Monitoring of complaint caseload

The committee continued to monitor at each meeting the scale and type of complaints under the Code of Conduct, in order to identify any trend or emerging issues that warranted further action or support. This has included adaption of the reporting mechanism to the committee to provide enough detail on trend without impacting on confidential information and ensure that the Committee is open and transparent.

In 2024 the Monitoring Officer received nine Code of Conduct complaints. Five of those related to District Councillors and 4 related to Town and Parish Councillors. Three of those complaints alleged lack of courtesy and respect, three alleged use of position and 2 alleged bullying and harassment.

Following an initial assessment of the complaints and consultation with one of the Independent Persons, informal resolution occurred in two cases and no further action was taken in the remainder. No complaints were referred for investigation.

In terms of number of complaints, the 9 in 2024 compared with 12 in 2023, 32 in 2022, 27 in 2021 and 36 in 2020. This shows a clear reduction in the number of complaints being made year on year.

In terms of the number of complaints being referred for investigation, there were 8 in 2020, 4 in 2021, 5 in 2022 and none in 2023 and 2024. Again this shows a reduction in the number of investigations needing to be undertaken.

Resolving complaints before they escalate presentation

A presentation on the potential ways of resolving complaints before they escalate was presented by the Monitoring Officer. The same presentation had been shared with DALC at their conference and means of dissemination were discussed.

Response to Government consultation on changes to the Standards regime

A detailed response was compiled between the Monitoring Officer and the committee in response to the government consultation on changes to the Standards regime which included the following aspects for reform:-

- Reintroduction of suspension powers;
- Disqualification for repeat offenders;
- Right of appeal;
- National Appeals body;
- Mandatory minimum Code of Conduct;
- Interim suspension powers:-
- Empowering victims.

The outcome of the consultation is awaited.

Recruitment for Independent Representatives and Town/Parish Representatives

The Independent Representatives, Independent Persons and Town/Parish Representatives play a critical role on the Committee and their input is highly valued by the Committee. Recruitment processes are underway to fill those posts.

Dispensations

Dispensations were granted to dual-hatted County councillors and to councillors who also work for another local authority in Devon, to allow them to speak and vote on any matter before the Council and / or Committee relating to local government reorganisation in Devon. This ensures that residents are not disenfranchised and those councillors can continue to play a key role in debating what is a matter of key significance for everyone residing in East Devon.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, much of the work of the Committee is demand led. However, it will continue to monitor elected councillor's performance at meetings of the Council, Cabinet and Committees (whether remote or in person) and adherence to the Council's ethical governance framework. It will also identify and support provision of regular training and refresher events for elected councillors of the Council (particularly on the importance of the Code of Conduct and high standards of ethics and probity). Following the government consultation, it is hoped that changes will be made, in the near future, that will enhance the Standards regime and enable tougher sanctions to be imposed by Standards Committees in the more serious cases of breaches of the Code of Conduct.

Financial implications:

There are no financial implications directly arising from this annual report.

Legal implications:

There are no legal implications directly arising from this annual report.