

Report to: Standards Committee



Date of Meeting 17 July 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. This report was considered at an inquorate meeting of the Committee on 10 April and has been updated to reflect comments made. Following a discussion with the Chair, it has been agreed to bring this back for formal sign-off by the Committee.

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 Council with any subsequent additions from the meeting of the committee to be included as delegated to the Monitoring Officer in conjunction with the Chair and Vice Chair.

Reason for recommendation:

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

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

Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☐ Assets and Economy
- ☒ Communications and Democracy
- ☒ Council, Corporate and External Engagement
- ☐ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism
- ☐ Environment - Nature and Climate
- ☐ Environment - Operational
- ☐ Finance
- ☐ Place, Infrastructure and Strategic Planning
- ☐ Sustainable Homes and Communities

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

1. The Standards Committee

1.1 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.

1.2 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 (one currently vacant) Town/Parish Representatives.

1.3 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.

2. Purpose and Remit of the Committee

2.1 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.

2.2 The remit of the committee includes:

(a) Advising on the discretionary elements of the Local Code of Conduct; including monitoring and updating.

(b) Advising 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, making arrangements for Members to receive dispensations to speak on, or participate in, matters in which they have interests.

(d) Appointing such Sub Committees (including Membership thereof) as appropriate to discharge the functions.

2.3 As part of the Committees role, the training of District, Town and Parish Councillors on the Code of Conduct is an important function. A number of sessions were provided following the last elections in 2023 and further sessions will be offered between September and November this year.

3. Meetings in 2024/25

3.1 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. It is unfortunate that two meetings were inquorate this year due to insufficient attendance of District Councillor members on the Committee. Whilst those in attendance still met, decisions could not be taken and some reports have had to come back to a subsequent meeting. All Group Leaders have been reminded of the importance of their councillors giving priority to these meetings.

4. Monitoring of complaint caseload

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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.

4.4 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. This is due, in part, to a reduction in the number of complaints coming forward but also is due to the work being carried out by the Monitoring Officer and their team, in trying to resolve issues before they escalate to a formal complaint.

4.5 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 also shows a reduction in the number of investigations needing to be undertaken.

5. Resolving complaints before they escalate presentation

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

6. Response to Government consultation on changes to the Standards regime

6.1 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.

7. Re-appointment of Independent Persons, Independent Representatives and Town/Parish Representatives

7.1 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. With the exception of one Independent Representative and one Parish Representative, these appointments were made in 2021 for a period of four years. It is critical therefore that we have a process in place to ensure that these positions are re-advertised and recruited to, to ensure we maintain this critical input and are compliant with the Localism Act 2011.

7.2 The Committee are therefore in the process of re-advertising the roles. The first recruitment exercise unfortunately resulted in a lack of applications and therefore the roles are being re-advertised with those small number who applied the first time, being put forward for consideration as part of that process. We have revisited the recruitment process so that the vacancies will be more widely advertised, including in local newspaper(s). The existing representatives will remain in their highly valuable roles until either re-appointed or new representatives appointed. Shortlisted applicants will be interviewed by a Sub-Committee of the Standards Committee and appointment of the recommended candidates made by Full Council.

8. Dispensations

8.1 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.

9. Looking Ahead

9.1 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), as well as ensuring that the Committee itself remains updated on best practice in the local authority sector. 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 and which lead to improvements in councillor performance generally.

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.