

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Standards Committee

22 November 2024

TITLE:	Standards Committee Annual Report
EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR:	Councillor Mike Gledhill – Council Leader
CONTACT OFFICER:	Linden Vernon – Head of Democratic Services
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

Appendices Attached – Appendix A – Role of the Committee

1. Reason for the Report

1.1 To review the work of the Standards Committee during 2023/2024.

2. Recommendation

2.1 That the report be noted.

3. Executive Summary

3.1 This report provides an overview of the issues considered by the Standards Committee during 2023/24. This included the following matters:

- Code of Conduct - Dispensations
- Councillor Induction Programme
- Local Government Ombudsman Annual Letter
- Monitoring complaints received regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct

4. How this report links to Corporate Priorities

4.1 High standards of conduct are integral to the Council achieving its corporate priorities.

5. Alternative Options

5.1 There are no options to consider.

Mark Trillo
Executive Director (Governance and Regulatory Services)
and Monitoring Officer

Web Links and Background Papers

[Standards Committee Reports](#)

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6. Detail

6.1 Article 9 of the Council's Constitution defines the role of the Standards Committee and is shown in full in **Appendix A** to this report. In summary this includes:

- To promote high standards of conduct by elected and co-opted members and staff
- To advise the Council, monitor the operation and provide training/notes on local codes of conduct, protocols or other ethical guidance for Members and staff
- Granting dispensations to District Councillors
- To consider and where necessary take action regarding complaints for breaches of the Code of Conduct
- To promote Member development and training on ethics and standards generally within the District Council
- To monitor the Council's corporate complaints procedure including any references to the Local Government and Housing Ombudsman and to consider any implications for the Council's codes, protocols or ethical guidance
- To advise the Council on the adoption or revision of the Constitution

6.2 The current membership of the committee is provided below. The Council's Independent Person continues to be invited to attend and participate at Committee meetings (recruitment is underway for the vacant position).

District Councillors	Cllr Andrew Church (Chair) Cllr Ian Herdman (Vice-Chair) Cllr Ben Emery Cllr Elsie Fallows Cllr Christina Jebb Cllr Matthew Spooner Cllr Gareth Taylor Cllr Peter Wilkinson Cllr Chris Wood
Co-opted Town/Parish	Cllr Lesley Jackson

representatives (non-voting)	Cllr Wayne Rodgers
Independent Persons	Mr John Berrisford (substitute) Miss Victoria Miller (substitute) Mr Peter Turner (substitute)

Code of Conduct - Dispensations

- 6.3 Members considered the grant of dispensations to councillors. Section 33 of the Localism Act made provision for the circumstances where dispensations may be granted. The power to grant dispensations has been delegated by Council to the Standards Committee, in consultation with the Independent Person.
- 6.4 Previously, under the old Code of Conduct, general exemptions were provided to all councillors with regard to prejudicial interests in any business of the authority where that business related to certain functions of the authority.
- 6.5 The arrangements introduced by the Localism Act 2011 did not reproduce these exemptions and as a result councillors could effectively breach the Code of Conduct should they take part in a meeting where any of these matters were being discussed and they have a disclosable pecuniary interest in the matter. The Council's Standards Committee had therefore previously granted dispensations relating cases where the number of members that would be prohibited from participating/voting would be so great that it would impede any particular transaction of business in addition to matters relating to allowances, Council Tax and housing matters. It was also proposed that dispensations were approved with regards to Council Tax premiums and councillors attending meetings remotely where a formal decision is not required to be made.

Councillor Induction Programme

- 6.6 The Committee considered a report on the delivery of the Councillors' Induction Programme following the 2023 elections.
- 6.7 This was developed prior to the local elections in conjunction with the Member Development Working Group. The programme took into account the priority areas for the Council, feedback received following the Corporate Peer Challenge, the Review of Scrutiny and 2019 induction process as well as learnings from best practice.
- 6.8 The programme included a number of additional seminars for the reasons as set out below:
- Effective Overview and Scrutiny – as recommended by the review conducted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny. This focused on question techniques to encourage engagement and support for committee chairs.

- Partnership Working – added following a recommendation from the Corporate Peer Challenge.
 - The Council’s approach to tackling climate change – this was ranked as a high priority following a survey of councillors in 2022.
- 6.9 Priority areas for member training, such as training in regulatory matters (including Planning Applications Committee), were delivered to enable members to participate on those committees. Bite size briefings had also been provided at the start of each scrutiny meeting to provide information on the overview and scrutiny process within the Council’s decision making structure, together with an overview of the role and remit of each committee.
- 6.10 All town / parish councillors, clerks and Independent Persons were invited to attend the Code of Conduct Training.
- 6.11 All newly elected councillors from across the country were invited to attend the LGA National Welcome Event which was held virtually. The event provided an introduction to the LGA and the support available to newly elected members
- 6.12 Representatives of the LGA attended the Welcome Meeting and also delivered a session of Chaining Skills training together with a LGA Peer in November.
- 6.13 New councillors were invited to attend a development session for newly elected West Midlands councillors on 24 October, the aim of which was to cover a range of national and regional issues as well as further understanding their local ward role and providing networking opportunities with other newly elected and experienced councillors from across the region.
- 6.14 Information and resources were available via the Councillors’ Portal including online training and a comprehensive range of workbooks produced by the Local Government Association, and members were encouraged to access these materials independently. Updated information around ward profiles taking into account data from the 2021 Census was also available via the Councillors’ Portal.
- 6.15 The majority of sessions were organised internally and delivered by Council officers, as this method had previously proved to be the most cost effective and feedback from councillors supported the use of in-house expertise. A number of sessions were delivered via Teams to enable sessions to be recorded and made available for councillors to view at a later time. Some sessions were also delivered virtually on an Alliance wide basis, which reduced costs and contributed to the Alliance’s climate change agenda.
- 6.16 Members are requested to complete evaluation forms after each session. Scores and comments would be compiled and circulated to each course provider to be used to inform the structure and content of future courses. Sessions had been well attended and feedback received was positive, with councillors commenting that they felt motivated and informed to undertake their roles.

6.17 All new Councillors had been provided with IT equipment to enable them to fulfil their roles and training is provided on an on-going basis. There was also a rolling programme to replace returning councillors' IT equipment.

The Annual Letter received from the Local Government Ombudsman

6.18 The Annual Letter of the Local Government Ombudsman was considered by the Committee at its meeting in November 2023. The table below provides a summary of the number of complaints dealt with by the Ombudsman set against the total number of complaints received by the Authority. For comparison purposes figures for previous years are also provided together with details for the Authority's Strategic Alliance partner, High Peak Borough Council (HPBC).

Year	No. of Ombudsman Complaints			
	HPBC		SMDC	
	No. of Enquiries or Complaints	Total Number of Complaints	No. of Enquiries or Complaints	Total Number of Complaints
2012/13	10	404	14	439
2013/14	20	372	12	280
2014/15	12	413	10	284
2015/16	11	368	13	258
2016/17	8	448	10	245
2017/18	15	308	12	193
2018/19	7	223	6	119
2019/20	6	150	5	82
2020/21	5	52	5	52
2021/22	9	142	7	76
2022/23	11	153	2	92

6.19 The relatively small number of complaints that reach the Ombudsman compared to the total number of complaints received by the Authority illustrates the strength of the Council in ensuring complaints are dealt with promptly and appropriately.

Monitoring complaints received regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct

6.20 The Committee continued to receive regular complaint monitoring reports regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct. These reports updated members on the number and nature of complaints dealt with by the Monitoring Officer and explained:

- If these related to district or town/parish councillors
- If any further action should be taken
- If further investigations were considered to be appropriate

6.21 This information is then used to identify trends and consider themes for which training seminars may be planned. The table below summarises the complaints received for the previous years and compares these with HPBC.

Year	No. of Complaints					
	High Peak Parish Cllr	High Peak Borough Cllr	High Peak Total	Staffordshire Moorlands Parish Cllr	Staffordshire Moorlands District Cllr	Staffordshire Moorlands Total
2013/14	10	1	11	3	1	4
2014/15	2	1	3	5	1	6
2015/16	4	0	4	3	12	15
2016/17	4	2	6	9	16	25
2017/18	1	3	4	5	8	13
2018/19	2	1	3	2	9	11
2019/20	19	1	20	6	26	32
2020/21	19	1	20	3	5	8
2021/22	4	1	5	7	8	15
2022/23	7	0	7	2	6	8
2023/24	2	1	3	8	4	12