

# **NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL**

## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

### **ANNUAL REPORT**

**2023/24**

This report represents the twelfth annual report of the Standards Committee under the Council's Standards regime following the Localism Act 2011 and covers the period 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024.

#### **Membership**

The Council determined that a Committee comprising seven elected members should be established to oversee its Standards arrangements. In addition, the three Independent Persons would be invited to attend each Committee. Accordingly, the following served on the Committee from May 2023 to the end of the municipal year 2024.

Councillor Neil Poole (Conservative) (Chairman)  
Councillor Mashook Ali (Labour)  
Councillor Ralph Ogg (Conservative)  
Councillor Christine O'Sullivan (Labour)  
Councillor Carol Ross (Conservative)  
Councillor Steve Swift (Labour)  
Councillor David Wells (Conservative)

#### **Role of Committee**

The main role of the Standards Committee is to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, and to set an example to other bodies it works with and to the community at large. The Standards Committee promotes, educates and supports members in following the highest standards of conduct and ensuring that those standards are fully owned locally.

The role remains not just about enforcing the Code of Conduct, but also ensuring effective working relationships between both members and staff, and externally with the public and other stakeholders.

Under the Council's Standards Arrangements, the Committee may convene sub-committees in the form of Assessment Panels to consider complaints, and Hearings Panels to determine complaints that have been investigated.

The Standards Arrangements enable the Council to retain responsibility for receiving and determining complaints against both North Lincolnshire Council members and Town and Parish Council members.

## **Terms of Reference**

### **Advisory**

- (a) Advising the Council on the amendment or revision of the Code of Conduct and the appointment or removal of the Independent Person/s.

### **Delegated**

- (a) Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members as defined under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 ('Act').
- (b) Assisting members and co-opted members to observe the Code of Conduct adopted by the Council pursuant to section 28 of the Act.
- (c) Advising the Council on the amendment or revision of the Code of Conduct and the appointment or removal of the Independent Person/s.
- (d) Monitoring the operation of the Code of Conduct and the 'Arrangements' and making appropriate revisions to the 'Arrangements' as considered necessary.
- (e) Advising, training or arranging to train members, co-opted members and Independent Person/s on matters relating to the Code of Conduct and the Arrangements.
- (f) Granting dispensations to members and co-opted members pursuant to the provisions of section 33 (b), (c) and (e) of the Act and on such other grounds as referred by the Monitoring Officer.
- (g) Dealing with any referrals as considered appropriate by the Monitoring Officer and to receive regular reports from the Monitoring Officer on the discharge of any relevant delegations afforded to that position.
- (h) To consider any complaints relating to an alleged breach of the Code of Conduct in accordance with the 'Arrangements' and to convene, as appropriate, sub-committees ('Assessment Panels') to consider such matters.
- (i) To make determinations in respect of complaints that members and co-opted members of the Council and Parish and Town Councils in the area may have breached the Code of Conduct and to convene, as appropriate, sub-committees ('Hearings Panels') to consider such matters and to impose, or recommend the imposition of, the sanctions detailed in the 'Arrangements'.

- (j) To deal with the grant of exemptions from political restriction in respect of any post holder and give directions on any post to be included in the list of politically restricted posts maintained by the authority.

### **Code of Conduct**

Under its Standards Arrangements, the Council had developed and adopted its own locally based Code of Conduct, which is compliant with the Nolan principles and incorporates the statutory requirements concerning Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. Although free to adopt their own Codes of Conduct, all of the Town and Parish Councils in the area have elected to adopt the Council's Code of Conduct (with minor amendments in two cases), which assists in encouraging uniform and consistent application across the area.

### **Complaints**

During the period covered by this report (1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024) 25 new complaints were received involving members, the same as in 2022/23. This compared to 33 in 2021/2022, 23 in 2020/21, 8 in 2019/2020, and 29 in 2018/19. This is broadly in line with the number of complaints received in previous years.

Of the above 25 complaints, 15 were assessed by an Assessment Panel and 7 complaints were determined by the Monitoring Officer, each following consultation with the Independent Person. One complaint was withdrawn, one was not accepted, and one was in the process of being assessed. There were four Assessment Panel meetings and one Hearings Panel meetings in 2023/24.

Of the 25 complaints, 21 related to members of Town or Parish Councils, with 3 complaints being made against members of North Lincolnshire Council. The remaining one named both Town and Parish Councillors and North Lincolnshire Council members in a single complaint. Four complaints that were received related to more than one individual, whereas the remaining 21 complaints received throughout 2023/24 related to an individual.

Two town or parish councils were named in more than one complaint in 2023/24 (total of 14 complaints), with 8 others being related to various individual Town or Parish Councils.

The following councils were named in more than one complaint.

<b>Council</b>	<b>Number of complaints 2023/24</b>
Epworth Town Council	12
Kirton in Lindsey Town Council	2

We would wish to acknowledge that no complaints were received against councillors in 44 of North Lincolnshire's 54 Town and Parish Council.

Of the fifteen 2023/24 complaints considered by an Assessment Panel, no further action was taken on eight, six were referred for investigation, and one was

subsequently withdrawn by the complainant. Of the complaints assessed by the Monitoring Officer in 2023/24, in consultation with the Independent Person, no further action was taken on all seven. Following consultation with the Independent Person, one complaint was not accepted.

The complaints related to a wide range of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct including failure to treat with respect and courtesy; bullying or intimidation, disrepute, using their position as a member to improperly confer an advantage, compromising the impartiality of officers, and failure to declare interests.

The number of complaints received in 2023/24 (25) was the same as the previous year (2022/23), and a moderate reduction from the 33 complaints received in 2021/22.

Twelve of the 25 complaints (48%) received in 2023/24 related to Epworth Town Council, which led to the Standards Committee making a recommendation of mediation. This recommendation was not taken up by Epworth Town Council, which led to the imposition of restrictions being placed on complaints which related to Epworth Town Council.

The number of complaints referred for investigation (six) was much higher than in 2022/23 (two), which brought the Standards Committee broadly back to the level of seven investigations initiated in 2021/22.

Encouragingly, as in recent years, there were no complaints in 2023/24 that required Humberside Police to take formal action following a referral for an alleged failure to declare Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. Despite this, both the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer maintain an excellent working relationship with Humberside Police and are able to seek informal advice and guidance.

### **Other Issues**

Last year's annual report was, once again, provided to all Town and Parish Councils and was referred to in the associated Standards Arrangements and Code of Conduct training provided for clerks, newly elected/co-opted and other town and parish councillors at sessions provided by the Monitoring Officer on 6 and 7 September 2023.

The 6 September 2023 session was delivered online for the third year running, with the 7 September session being delivered in person, with positive feedback. Online sessions are likely to continue to be an option to be incorporated into the annual training programme in the future.

Further training sessions are currently in the process of being planned, and details will be communicated to all Town and Parish Councils in due course. An online training package is also in the process of being developed.

Throughout 2023/24, the three Independent Persons (Mr Forbes, Mr Johnson, and Dr Harvie) continued to contribute in an invaluable and constructive manner to the

Committee's work, including the assessment and hearing of complaints. The appointments of the Independent Persons were recently re-approved by council at its Annual General Meeting.

Much of the Standards Committee's work throughout 2023/24 related to further strengthening the local arrangements aimed at preventing the abuse and intimidation of councillors, and supporting those who are subject to it. The Committee also agreed and implemented a protocol where abuse can be logged and reported, where appropriate, between the Standards Committee and Humberside Police. This piece of work was identified as an example of best practice within the LGA's ongoing "Debate, not Hate" campaign, and led to North Lincolnshire supporting colleagues across the country.

The Standards Committee also agreed to extend the dispensation for elected members involved in the steel industry to enable them to continue to participate in discussions involving this critical industry to North Lincolnshire.

The Monitoring Officer continued to meet regularly with the Monitoring Officer of North East Lincolnshire Council, and hold discussions with the East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire Local Councils Association (ERNLLCA). Dialogue with the three Independent Persons continues, in order to review existing practice and keep abreast of national and regional developments.

The Council also continues to be a member of the Standards Exchange; a specialist website set up by ex-Standards for England investigators as a platform to share good practice and keep updated on national standards related developments.

Howard Norris  
Monitoring Officer  
June 2024