

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Standards Committee was held on Monday 8 July 2024.

PRESENT: Councillors I Morrish (Vice-Chair), D Davison, J Ewan and L Lewis

OFFICERS: C Cunningham, C Jones and S Lightwing

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Were submitted on behalf of Councillors A Romaine, M Saunders, M Smiles and J Thompson

24/1 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting and read out the Building Evacuation Procedure.

24/2 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no Declarations of Interest at this point in the meeting.

24/3 **MINUTES- STANDARDS COMMITTEE - 22 JANUARY AND 13 MAY 2024**

The minutes of the Standards Committee meetings held on 22 January 2024 and 13 May 2024 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

24/4 **QUARTERLY UPDATE REPORT TO COMMITTEE**

A report of the Director of Legal Services was presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, to provide a quarterly update to the Standards Committee in relation to the recent and current position concerning Code of Conduct Complaints.

It was noted that there were no outstanding complaints from 2020, 2021 and 2022. There had been 59 complaints in 2023. Of those complaints 9 were withdrawn or discontinued, 30 were rejected based on the assessment criteria, 14 were resolved informally by way of advice and guidance and 6 were being investigated.

There have been 11 complaints so far in 2024. Three complaints had been formally rejected. In relation to the remaining 8 Complaints, the Independent Person had advised 2 should be rejected and 4 should be accepted, but resolved informally and they were currently being considered by the Monitoring Officer. Two complaints were currently being assessed by the Independent Person.

Although complaints were logged separately, the statistics and information could potentially show how separate complaints might relate to the same incident or subject matter. This had caused concern to a number of Councillors and/or members of the public.

Regarding complaints received to date in 2024, the majority related to the use of social media and five of the complaints related to two members.

The information in 2023 regarding complaints that were not rejected or withdrawn (20 in total) showed some of the complaints could be grouped together. Of the 6 complaints that were being investigated, 5 related to the same subject matter involving social media. Of the 14 complaints that were resolved informally, 2 related to one incident involving social media, 4 were unrelated complaints of misuse of social media and 8 related to one set of circumstances. Taking these groups together, the information generally showed the main recurring theme of the complaints was the misuse of social media, with the remaining complaints involving conduct at meetings. The information also tended to show that those complaints that were accepted and either resolved informally or further investigated, had a higher proportion of member-on-member complaints when compared with the overall complaints received.

The statistics in 2022 showed there were 4 complaints that were not rejected or withdrawn. Two of the complaints proceeded to Standards Committee and related to the same subject matter. The remaining two complaints which were informally resolved were unrelated. In 2022

there appeared to be no pattern or common theme to those complaints.

Statistics and information for complaints not rejected or withdrawn in 2021 showed that of the 19 complaints resolved informally, 10 related to one set of circumstances involving social media, 5 referred to separate issues of misuse of social media and emails. The remaining 4 complaints involved unrelated subject matters. Overall, there appeared to be a general prevalence of complaints relating to conduct on social media. This could be addressed by arranging discussion-led workshops with members on appropriate conduct on social media in line with the Council's social media policy and code of conduct. The workshops can also address when members are reasonably considered to be acting in their capacity as a Councillor when using social media.

It was noted that of the 6 complaints currently being investigated, 5 related to the same subject matter involving social media, depicting a trend of complaints in this area. A discussion took place in respect of social media training for Councillors. It was noted that although the training cannot be made compulsory, the training would form part of the Member Development Programme.

AGREED as follows that the:

1. report was received and noted.
2. Deputy Monitoring Officer would circulate the investigations process and timeline to the Members of the Standards Committee. The investigations process and timeline would be discussed at the next meeting of 14 October 2024.

24/5

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED

A discussion took place in respect of committee training for members of the Standards Committee. It was agreed that once the Chair of the Standards Committee had been appointed at the Full Council meeting of 17 July, a date for training would be arranged. The training would focus on Standards Hearings and would take place in-person for two hours. Further training to be provided by an external body on the Councillors Code of Conduct would also be considered.