

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Standards Committee was held on Monday 20 October 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors Councillor Anne Romaine (Chair), I Morrish (Vice-Chair), J Thompson, D Branson, P Gavigan and J Rostron

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Morgan McClintock, Adrian Walker

OFFICERS: Joanne McNally and Ann-Marie Wilson

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors M Saunders and J McConnell

25/7 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, introductions were made and the Fire Evacuation Procedure explained.

25/8 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point of the meeting.

25/9 **MINUTES- STANDARDS COMMITTEE - 14 JULY 2025**

The minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 14 July 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

25/10 **QUARTERLY UPDATE REPORT TO STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

The Head of Legal Services (People) presented the Quarterly Update Report. The report provided a quarterly update to the Standards Committee regarding the current position concerning Code of Conduct Complaints, and to identify any trends or patterns in regards to the type of complaints received.

Members were advised that there were currently 5 ongoing complaints as of 1 October 2025, the 5 complaints are from the current year and there was no outstanding complaints from previous years.

Of the 5 outstanding complaints, 3 were received in March 2025 and were awaiting the outcome of an investigation or other external processes before they can continue. In essence they are 'stayed' by the Local Authority.

The other 2 outstanding complaints received in August and September 2025 had been considered by the Independent Person and were being progressed in accordance with the code of conduct procedure.

Members were asked to note that 11 complaints, which related to 4 Councillors had been concluded since the last update. These complaints had been resolved by way of informal resolution, some further to an investigation, and some did not require an investigation. In some cases, informal resolution was considered the most appropriate, simplest and cost-effective way of resolving a complaint.

Members heard that the most prevalent theme of complaints continued to be inappropriate use of social media. Of the 26 complaints received to date in 2025 almost half of them had an element of alleged inappropriate social media use. The theme of complaints would continue to be monitored to consider what additional support was required.

A suggestion had been received from Councillor Morrish of including a column for those complaints that were with outside bodies, Members agreed that this would be a useful addition going forward.

Members were advised that an external training provider had completed training on standards/code of conduct in particular use of social media on 12 September 2025. The training was open to all Members and Nunthorpe Parish Council and Stainton and Thornton Parish Council. The session was completed online out of 47 Council Members only 12 attended.

In respect of the appointment of a permanent Governance Solicitor to assist and support in standards matters Members were advised that following a successful growth bid, this post was advertised though no applications were received. The post would therefore be advertised again in due course.

Members commented that the number of Councillors who attended the Standards/Code of Conduct training was disappointing.

A Member queried if the training could be made mandatory it was advised that it was difficult to mandate Members to attend training due to lack of sanctions if a Member did not attend. It was also queried if the training could be run again it was advised that due to the cost of providing external training this session would not be run again however the Head of Legal Services (People) could provide internal training to Members.

A Member suggested recording training sessions, it had been advised previously that this could cause problems with GDPR, the Head of Legal agreed to investigate this again to see if it would be an option.

A Councillor who was observing the Committee was granted permission to speak by the Chair regarding the number of complaints that are heard at Standards Committee Hearings. The Councillor highlighted instances where neither the person complaining, nor the individual on the receiving end of the complaint, were satisfied when investigations were concluded. Concerns were raised over the system by which complaints against Middlesbrough Councillors are handled.

The Member stated that across 2023, 2024 and up to the current point of 2025, a total of 106 complaints had been made against councillors, of which 11 had been withdrawn due to non-election. From a figure of 95 potentially actionable complaints, zero ended up in front of the standards committee and were dealt with by way of an informal resolution.

Members were advised that there were limited sanctions available, and that the local authority generally followed the Local Government Association model. If complaints had come before the Standards Committee, the variety of sanctions were very similar.

The Head of Legal also pointed out that only seven cases had come in front of the Standards Committee in the four years preceding 2023, which were significant cases. The Member was advised that one of the boxes, when complaint forms are completed is 'What do you want as an outcome to this?' people would often write: 'For this person to be sacked' this is not within our gift.

The committee heard that the monitoring officer had the final say at any stage of the process and there was no appeal against it, even if both the complainer and complainee were unhappy. The Head of Legal reiterated that complaints were looked at by the Independent Person in conjunction with the Monitoring Officer at each stage.

A Member stated that the system used to be more effective, but powers had been taken away, meaning that the committee could no longer implement "serious sanctions". A letter had previously been written to the minister several years ago but the letter in response was full of platitudes. It was suggested that the committee write to the current minister on the matter.

It was agreed that the committee would write to the Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting more powers to deal with Standards Complaints.

The Standards Committee agreed:

1. To note the content of the report
2. The Head of Legal would investigate if training could be recorded

3. Add column to table showing number of complaints that are with outside bodies
4. Letter to be sent to the Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government requesting more powers

25/11

DISPENSATION IN RESPECT OF A DISCLOSABLE PERSONAL INTEREST

The Standards Committee were asked to determine a request from Councillor David Coupe for a dispensation to allow him to continue to attend and participate in the Teesside Pension Fund Committee notwithstanding his Disclosable Pecuniary Interest arising from his appointment as a Non-Executive Director of Border to Coast Pensions Partnerships Ltd.

Members were advised that a dispensation in this regard had previously been granted by the Standards Committee at a meeting on 17 October 2022. This dispensation was granted for three years and therefore expired on 17 October 2025. Members were advised that due to internal processes at Border to Coast Councillor Coupe's three-year tenure between 2025-2028 was being split between a one-year and two-year term.

The Standards Committee were being asked to consider the decision as per Section 2(j) of their terms of reference which confirms that they are responsible for 'granting dispensations to Members, Co-opted members and Parish Councillors and the Mayor from the requirements relating to declarations of interest'.

The Standards Committee agreed to granting the dispensation as follows:

- This dispensation is for a period of three years, or for so long as Councillor David Coupe is a Non-Executive Director of Border to Coast Pensions Partnership Limited ('the company') whichever is the shorter.
- Councillor David Coupe should be allowed to participate, or participate further, in any discussion of any matter concerning the Company at the meetings of the Teesside Pension Fund.
- Councillor David Coupe can participate in any vote, or further vote, taken on the matter at the said meeting(s) PROVIDED THAT he shall not participate in any discussion or vote where changes to the remuneration of Directors of the Company are discussed.

25/12

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

None