



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Democracy and Standards Committee

Annual Report 2022/2023

Message from Councillor Suresh Patel, Chair, Standards Committee **Draft Version 1**

This is the second Annual Report of the Democracy and Standards Committee of West Northamptonshire Council.

It has been another very busy year for the Democracy and Standards Committee. Instead of a complete commentary of all that the Committee has achieved over the year this Annual Report provides a summary of the main points of the work of the Committee during 2022/2023.

The Democracy and Standards Committee (the Committee) promotes and maintains high standards of conduct.

The work of the Committee includes:

- Having an overall responsibility for the Council's Constitution and decision-making governance
- Making necessary decisions in relation to Elections and having responsibility for the Community Governance and Boundary Reviews on behalf of the Council
- Overseeing and developing the Council's Code of Conduct and overall standards of conduct for Council Members, co-opted Members and Parish and Town Councillors of West Northamptonshire
- Reviewing the Council's Constitution and decision-making governance, i.e., the guidance and documents that support decision making, e.g., the Forward Plan guidance and the rules on officer records, and recommending any proposed changes to the Council
- Conducting polling station reviews and other election functions which it is necessary for the Council to decide (but not the functions delegated directly by statute to the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer)
- Preparing submissions on behalf of the Council to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in relation to the governance of the area
- Preparing submissions on behalf of the Council to the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for England. Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Members and co-opted Members of the Council, Parish, and Town Councils
- Keeping the Member Code of Conduct and, where appropriate, the Planning Code of Conduct under review and make recommendations to Council on any amendment or revisions to the Codes
- Advising, training, or arranging training for Members and co-opted Members of the Council, Parish and Town Councils on matters relating to the Member Code of Conduct and the Planning Code of Conduct
- Giving general guidance and advice to Members and Co-opted Members of the Council, Parish and Town Councils on Member's interests and keeping under review the Registers of Members' Interests maintained by the Monitoring Officer and the Register of Gifts and Hospitality
- Granting dispensations to Members and co-opted Members from requirements relating to interests
- Keeping the Council's arrangements for dealing with standards complaints under review and making recommendations to Council on any amendment or revisions to the arrangements
- Assessing and/or referring for investigation allegations of misconduct on the part of Members and co-opted Members of the Council, Parish, and Town Councils, if so, requested by the Monitoring Officer Determining allegations of misconduct on the part of Members and co-opted Members of the Council, Parish, and Town Councils

I would like to thank everyone for their endeavour to uphold these standards, in particular the four Independent Persons for their input into Code of Conduct complaints. I would also like to extend my thanks to committee members, the monitoring officer for her guidance and democratic service staff members



Councillor Suresh Patel
Chairman, Democracy and Standards Committee

Introduction

West Northamptonshire Council has a duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members and the Council aims to have the highest possible ethical standards in place across the Council.

Membership of the Democracy and Standards Committee 2022/2023

The Democracy and Standards Committee comprised the following Members for 2022/2023:

Councillor Suresh Patel (Chairman)
Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Daniel Cribbin
Councillor Jonathan Harris
Councillor Cecile Irving- Swift
Councillor Andrew Kilbride
Councillor Danielle Stone
Councillor Laura Stevenson
Councillor Mike Warren

Independent Persons

Under the Localism Act 2011, the Council is required to appoint one or more Independent Persons to assist in the Standards process. The functions of the Independent Persons are:

- they must be consulted by the authority and their views taken into account before the authority makes a finding as to whether a member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct or decides on action to be taken in respect of that member. (This means that their views must be sought on a decision to take no action where the investigation finds no evidence of breach or, where the investigation finds evidence that there has been a breach, on any local resolution of the complaint, or on any finding of breach and on any decision on action as a result of that finding).
- they may be consulted by the authority in respect of a standards complaint at any other stage; and
- they may be consulted by a member or co-opted member of the Borough Council or of a Parish Council against whom a complaint has been made.

In 2021 the Council appointed the following Independent Persons:

Tom Edwards
Peter Glover
Alan Haynes
John Peachy

During 2022/2023 the Monitoring Officer consulted the Independent Persons on a number of cases.

Work of the Democracy and Standards Committee during 2022/2023 (June 2022 to May 2023)

During the year the Democracy and Standards Committee has met six times. Its work included:

- Approval of the Work Programme of the Democracy and Standards Committee
- To action items on the Work Programme of the Committee
- Undertaking a review of various sections of the Council's Constitution
- Undertake a Boundary Review, making recommendations to full Council
- Receiving statistics in relation to the number of complaints received and dealt with in respect of the Code of Conduct
- Overseeing Member Development and identify further training needs and to identify mandatory training
- Considering Elections scale of fees and charges
- Approval of the second Annual Report of the Democracy and Standards Committee

Code of Conduct

Complaints about Councillors are dealt with as part of the Council's standards process.

This Council's arrangements for dealing with complaints against Councillors also apply to complaints made about Parish Councillors within West Northamptonshire.

Each Parish Council is responsible for adopting a code of conduct for its Parish Councillors.

Code of Conduct Complaints

During 2022/2023 the Committee was appraised of the completed complaints and any outstanding complaints of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct. The Committee receives six monthly updates on the complaints at its meetings:

[Code of conduct complaints update](#)

At its meeting in July 2023, the Committee is scheduled to receive a further comprehensive update on the Code of Conduct complaints.

Councillor Training and Development

The standards responsibilities of the Committee includes advising, training, or arranging training for Members and co-opted Members of the Council, Parish and Town Councils on matters relating to the member Code of Conduct and the Planning Code of Conduct. The Democracy and Standards Committee has Member oversight of the Councillor training programme to ensure that Councillors have the skills they need to support effective decision making.

Member development is training and development opportunities, activities and programmes that offered to elected members by West Northamptonshire Council which support members to carry out their roles

effectively. During 2022/2023 training sessions were delivered to Members on Code of Conduct, Planning matters and licensing.

Monthly briefings are scheduled in the Member calendar and topics added to these as the needs arise, during 2022/23 there have been a number of key briefings which included briefings around finance, electoral review, community safety, housing, and planning.

All sessions were held remotely over an online audio and web conferencing platform with the aim to maximise attendance. All training and briefing sessions are recorded and saved into a Teams Channel for Councillors to access again at a later date. The Committee received, at its meeting in January 2023, statistics in relation to the training sessions held the number of Councillors attending each session.

The Council's Intranet comprises a Members' area which includes the links to the recordings, and a number of resources available for Members within the Council's e-learning system.

Councillor training is aimed to equip Members with the required knowledge and skills to enable them effectively to carry out their various roles. Mandatory training includes Licensing training for Members of that Committee, Planning Committee Member training and all Councillors are required to attend training on the Council's Code of Conduct and associated issues. The Democracy and Standards Committee agreed that any refresher training for these Committees would also require mandatory Councillor attendance. The Council has implemented a new structure for both Planning and Overview and Scrutiny and for 2023/2024 Member training will centre around Planning and Overview and Scrutiny Councillor development.

Constitution Review

The Committee undertook various reviews of sections of the Council's Constitution and made proposals to for onward recommendations to full Council. The Committee noted a number of minor updates to the Constitution made by the Monitoring Officer under delegated authority. Following meetings of full Council that approved the various changes to the constitution, an updated version of the Council's constitution was published on its website.

Local Government Boundary Review

The Committee established a Task and Finish Group that led on putting forward proposals for the submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England for the Local Government Boundary Review for West Northamptonshire Council. The draft submission document, as proposed by the Committee, was presented to full Council at its June 2022 meeting for consideration and approval. The submission document was then submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. The Task and Finish Group of the Democracy and Standards Committee will be continuing further work on this review, concentrating on ward boundaries.

Future Activity

The Work Plan for 2023/2024 was approved by the Democracy and Standards Committee at its January 2023 meeting. It will include standing annual items but will evolve as necessary during the year, taking into account any developing issues pertaining to democracy and standards.