



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Democracy and Standards Committee

Annual Report 2023/2024

Message from Councillor Andrew Kilbride, Chair, Democracy and Standards Committee

This is the third 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 and a summary of the main points of the work of the Committee during 2023/2024 are detailed within this Annual Report.

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 was appointed Chair of the Democracy and Standards Committee in January 2024 and I would like to thank members of the Committee and the four Independent Persons for their input into Code of Conduct complaints. I would also like to thank the Officers who have supported the Democracy and Standards Committee over the past year.



Councillor Andrew Kilbride
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 2023/2024

The Democracy and Standards Committee comprised the following Members for 2023/2024:

Councillor Andrew Kilbride (Chairman) (appointed Chairman from January 2024)
Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Daniel Cribbin
Councillor Jonathan Harris
Councillor Nigel Hinch
Councillor Cecile Irving- Swift
Councillor Kevin Parker (appointed to the Committee from March 2024)
Councillor Wendy Randall
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.

At its meeting on 21 March 2024 the Council re-appointed the following Independent Persons for a period of four years:

Tom Edwards
Peter Glover
Alan Haynes
John Peachy

The Independent Persons attended training for Independent Persons early in 2024 and had the opportunity to meet each other and relevant Officers.

During 2023/2024 the Monitoring Officer consulted the Independent Persons on a number of cases.

Work of the Democracy and Standards Committee during 2023/2024 (June 2023 to May 2024)

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

- Approval of the Work Programme 2023/2024 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
- Provided comment on updates to the Member Complaints process
- Undertake a Community Governance Review, making recommendations to full Council
- Received and provided comment on the six-monthly progress report regarding the changes that had taken place regarding the Council’s Planning Committees
- 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
- Setting up a Member Development Working Group that will provide input into Member Development and inform the Committee of its recommendations
- 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 2023/2024 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 and received the following information. Where the complaints have since been closed, this is detailed in the table below:

Date received	Council	Assessment of the Monitoring Officer	Status
16/01/23 WNC01	WNC Complaint received regarding comments made by a Councillor on his personal social media account	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and decided that no action should be taken in respect of the complaint as it was deemed that the subject Member was not acting as a Councillor as this social media account related to them as an individual and not as a Councillor of WNC.	Closed
23/01/23 WNC02	Parish Council The complainant makes allegations of bullying and aggression by the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and decided that no action should be taken in respect of this complaint as it is outside the scope of the remit of the standards complaints process as it refers to a long-standing legal dispute.	Closed
27/02/23 WNC03	Parish Council The complaint relates to the subject Member signing letters for works to be undertaken	A formal complaint was not submitted therefore the complaint file was closed	Closed

07/03/23 WNC05	Parish Council The complaint relates alleged aggressive behaviour (same complaint as WNC06)	The Deputy Monitoring Officer closed the complaint as the subject Member is no longer a Parish Councillor.	Closed
07/03/23 WNC06	Parish Council The complaint relates alleged aggressive behaviour (same complaint as WNC05)	The Deputy Monitoring Officer closed the complaint as the subject Member is no longer a Parish Councillor.	Closed
27/02/23 WNC07	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged divisive and untrue information published on the Parish Council's social media site	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and decided that the complaint is outside scope as it relates to the Parish Council not the subject Member.	Closed
21/03/23 WNC08	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged disrespectful and misogynistic tones by the subject Member during a Parish Council meeting	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and further information from the complainant was requested. After four weeks this information was not received, therefore the complaint was closed.	Closed
10/03/23 WNC09	WNC The complaint relates to a lack of response from an email to the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and decided this complaint was outside scope and therefore closed.	Closed
05/04/23 WNC10	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged poor governance of the Parish Council, incorrect completion of Register of Interest and bullying	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person the complaint was closed as the Councillor has resigned from the Parish Council.	Closed
27/4/23 WNC12	WNC The complaint relates to the subject Member's alleged aggressive dog	The Deputy Monitoring assessed the complaint and decided it was outside scope as the subject Member was not acting in their capacity as a Councillor	Closed
03/05/23 WNC13	Parish Council The complaint relates to incomplete Register of Interest of the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring assessed the complaint and decided that the complaint should be closed as the subject Member had updated their Register of Interest.	Closed
04/05/23 WNC14	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged disrespectful behaviour of the subject Member	The complaint was submitted on behalf of a number of Councillors. All have been individually contacted to ascertain if they want to submit the complaint themselves. Complaint forms have not been received and the complaint is therefore closed but a new file will be opened should a complaint form(s) be received.	Closed

09/05/23 WNC15	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged bullying behaviour of the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person the complaint was closed as the Councillor has resigned from the Parish Council.	Closed
23/05/23 WNC16	Parish Council The complaint relates to alleged bullying behaviour of the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and agreed to close the complaint as it is outside scope of the Code of Conduct complaints process.	Closed
05/07/23 WNC17	WNC The complaint relates to the alleged incomplete Register of Interest forms of three Members	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint and had dialogue with the subject Members regarding the completion of their Register of Interest forms that were updated where applicable.	Closed
05/07/23 WNC18	Parish Council The complaint relates to the alleged incomplete Register of Interest forms of the subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and agreed the as the Register of Interest form was updated that the complaint is closed.	Closed
02/07/23 WNC19	WNC The complaint alleges that the subject Member has brought the Council into dispute by their actions.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and agreed that as a public apology had been given that the complaint is closed	Closed
13/07/23 WNC20	WNC The complaint refers to the subject Member's alleged lack of engagement with the community.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person and agreed this complaint is out of scope as it relates to lack of engagement by the ward Councillor. The extent to which ward Councillors engage with the local community is not within scope.	Closed
01/08/23 WNC21	Parish Council The complaint refers to the three subject Members allegedly acting outside the governance [processes] of the Parish Council	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person the complaint was closed as the Councillor has resigned from the Parish Council.	Closed
21/08/23 WNC22	Parish Council The complaint refers to financial issues of the Parish Council.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – no further action as the complaint relates to the governance of the Parish Council and is not within the scope of the Arrangements.	Closed
12/09/23 WNC23	Parish Council The complaint refers to alleged bullying and disrespectful behaviour of a Parish Councillor	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. The complainant resigned from the Parish Council and did not want to continue to pursue the complaint	Closed

26/09/23 WNC24	Parish Council The complaint refers to alleged disrespectful behaviour of a Parish Councillor	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person the complaint was closed as the Councillor has resigned from the Parish Council.	Closed
28/08/23 WNC25	Parish Council The complaint refers to alleged disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – no further action as further information was requested of the complainant which was not provided	Closed
18/08/23 WNC26	WNC The complaint refers to alleged disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – Not in the public interest to investigate as the Subject Member had done all they could to assist the complainant with their query.	Closed
29/09/23 WNC27	WNC The complaint refers alleged disrespectful comments made on social media by the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed due to the fact that future requested information of the complainant had not been received.	Closed
29/09/23 WNC28	Parish Council The complaint refers to alleged financial issued.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed due to the fact that future requested information of the complainant had not been received.	Closed
25/09/23 WNC29	PFCP The complaint refers to alleged bullying and disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. The subject Member was asked to apologise.	Closed
20/10/23 WNC30	WNC The complaint refers to alleged disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – outside the Scope of the Arrangements.	Closed
26/08/23 WNC31	WNC The complaint refers to alleged behaviour of the Subject Member.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – outside the Scope of the Arrangements. The Subject Member was not acting in the capacity of a Councillor	Closed
28/10/23 WNC32	Parish Council The complaint refers to the governance arrangements of the Parish Council.	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Closed – outside the Scope of the Arrangements.	Closed
13/11/23 WNC33	Parish Council The complaint refers to alleged bullying disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. More information is required and Councillor not acting in the capacity of Parish Councillor and	Closed

		insufficient evidence was provided.	
16/11/23 WNC34	WNC The complaint refers to the alleged incomplete ROIs of four Councillors	The Deputy Monitoring Officer instructed Officers to liaise with the four Councillors regarding the completion of their ROIs	Closed
17/11/23 WNC35	PFCP The complaint refers to alleged bullying and disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. The subject Member was asked to apologise.	Closed
17/11/23, 22/11/23 and 23/11/23 WNC36, WNC37, WNC38	WNC/Parish Council Three complaints refer to the alleged bully and disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. Further information was requested from the three complainants but this was not provided.	Closed
18/12/23 WNC39 And WNC40	WNC The complaint relates to alleged disrespectful behaviour of the Subject Member	The Deputy Monitoring Officer assessed the complaint with the Independent Person. These two complaints may be politically motivated it is not proportionate or in the public interest to investigate. The complaints are not serious enough to warrant a sanction(s) and therefore complaints have been closed on the system.	Closed

At its meeting in September 2024, the Committee is scheduled to receive a further comprehensive update on the Code of Conduct complaints. Details of which will be provided in the Committee's Annual Report 2024/25.

Councillor Training and Development

The standards responsibilities of the Committee include 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. The Council has implemented a new structure for both Planning and Overview and Scrutiny and for 2023/2024 Member training centred around mainly Planning and Overview and Scrutiny Councillor development. During 2023/2024 key training sessions were delivered to Members on:

- A comprehensive training schedule delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny on Overview and Scrutiny
- Detailed development sessions for all Members and named substitutes to the Planning Committees
- Training for Members new to the Licensing Committees

Monthly briefings are scheduled in the Member calendar and topics added to these as the needs arise, during 2023/24 there have been a number of key briefings which included briefings around finance, housing, planning, community safety, community governance review,

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 2024, 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. As reported in the Annual Report for 2022/2023, the Democracy and Standards Committee agreed that any refresher training for these Committees would also require mandatory Councillor attendance.

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 after each change to the constitution was approved. It also endorsed the proposed decision-making process to be followed at the conclusion of the first stage of the formal consultation. Further reports are scheduled to be presented to the Committee as the review progresses.

Community Governance Review

The Committee reviewed and agreed the Terms of Reference for a Community Governance review of Parish arrangements within West Northamptonshire and recommend the adoption of the terms of reference to the Council at its September 2023 meeting. The Committee was updated on progress with the Community Governance Review of Parish arrangements within West Northamptonshire and reviewed and agreed the Consultation Plan.

Future Activity

The Work Plan for 2024/2025 was approved by the Democracy and Standards Committee at its January 2024 meeting. It includes standing annual items but will evolve as necessary during the year, taking into account any developing issues pertaining to democracy and standards.