



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot  
Neath Port Talbot Council



**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2023-2024**

### The Ten General Principles of Public Life

<p><b>Selflessness</b> – members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.</p>	<p><b>Personal judgement</b> – members may take account of the views of others, including their political groups, but should reach their own conclusions on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.</p>
<p><b>Honesty and integrity</b> – members should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned, should not behave improperly, and should on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.</p>	<p><b>Respect for others</b> – members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority’s statutory officers and its other employees.</p>
<p><b>Objectivity</b> – members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefit.</p>	<p><b>Duty to uphold the law</b> – members should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them.</p>
<p><b>Accountability</b> – members should be accountable to the public for their actions and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities, and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office.</p>	<p><b>Stewardship</b> – members should do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authorities use their resources prudently, and in accordance with the law.</p>
<p><b>Openness</b> – members should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority, and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions.</p>	<p><b>Leadership</b> – members should promote and support these principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence.</p>
<p><b><i>Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life</i></b></p>	

## **Annual Report**

There is now a legal requirement (pursuant to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 for Standards Committees to make an annual report to Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council on the standards regime within Neath Port Talbot and with its town and community councils.

The report must:

- describe how the Standards Committee has discharged its functions during the preceding financial year;
- include a summary of reports and recommendations made or referred to the Standards Committee by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales relating to the investigation of alleged breaches of the member code of conduct, and any subsequent action taken by the committee;
- include a summary of notices given to the Standards Committee by the Adjudication Panel for Wales, relating to the Panel's decisions on possible breaches of the member code of conduct; and
- include the Standards Committee's assessment of how political group leaders have complied with their new duty to promote high standards of conduct.

The requirement to make an annual report is intended to ensure there is a regular and consistent approach to the reporting and consideration of standards of conduct by elected members.

This is intended to promote local ownership and collective responsibility by members for ensuring high standards of conduct within their authority.

Neath Port Talbot Council must consider the report and any recommendations made by its standards committee within three months of its receipt. The consideration of a report will be a matter of public record through the published minutes of the meeting.

A copy of this report will be shared with the following:

- All elected members of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
- All Town and Community Councils
- Public Service Ombudsman for Wales
- Audit Wales

## Chair's Foreword

Standards in public life have been under the spotlight for many years. The Nolan Principles were published in 1995 in response to the conduct of some members of the Commons during John Major's tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Those principles still stand and are included at the front of this annual report

In the six years that I have been a member of the Standards Committee, the concept of standards in public life and in society at large has been the subject of fierce debate from time to time and recently they are back in the news.

In a recent publication, the UK Government's Committee on Standards in Public Life said while a "robust ethical culture" should be integral to the way organisations operate, too often it takes a crisis for leaders to act. In a report highlighting best practice in the public sector, the committee said there should be "zero tolerance" for conduct that falls short of the required standards, with clear consequences when they are not met. Doing things in the right way and in the public interest is critical for public confidence in the bodies that operate on the public's behalf and supports the delivery of public services. The report commented that a robust ethical culture supports effective risk management – if people see thinking about ethical issues as part of their job and feel safe to speak up, this can pick up potential concerns before they escalate. Evidence shows that an ethical culture does not emerge by accident - it requires discussion and action. I echo those views. To this end the role of the Standards Committee is to promote, maintain and protect standards of conduct of members within the Council and propriety in all Council proceedings. Fortunately, examples of misconduct in Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council itself are rare - long may that be the case.

The Standards Committee have welcomed the powers conferred on us by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 regarding group leaders taking steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct of their members. The duty recognises those in positions of leadership and influence within a principal council should have responsibility for combating bullying and harassment amongst elected members and council staff, and must act as a positive role model. I have welcomed the opportunity for the Standards Committee to meet with the group leaders to discuss how this important function can be discharged and more information on this can be found in this annual report.

With the Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Standards Committee being the nominated standards committee for the South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee, I welcome the role and look forward to contributing to this important programme of work that aims to improve the overall South West Wales region.

I would like to thank all my fellow Standards Committee members, who have all contributed fully and diligently to the work of the Standards Committee; and must also thank the Monitoring Officer and his staff who have continued, to provide us with efficient and effective support and advice.

As the Council faces the many challenges presented to it in the year ahead, we would urge Members to remain mindful of the fundamental importance of high standards of conduct in order for members of the public to maintain their trust and confidence in local democracy.

**Mrs Louise Fleet CStJ, JP**

## **Members of the Standards Committee**

**2023-2024**

Mrs Louise Fleet CStJ, JP	Chair
Mr Tom Ward	Vice Chair
Professor Duncan Lewis	Independent Member
Mrs Alison Davies JP	Independent Member
Councillor Carolyn Edwards	Community Council Representative
Councillor Wayne Carpenter	County Borough Councillor
Councillor Sarah Thomas	County Borough Councillor

The Standards Committee operates on the clear understanding that elected members that sit on the Committee are independent of political allegiance and that all discussions and decisions are taken with ethical principles at the forefront. The Standards Committee is mindful that not all political groups are represented on the Standards Committee, and welcomes attendance by all members at its meetings and is happy to receive contributions from those groups not so represented.

### **The remit of the Standards Committee**

To discharge with delegated authority the following functions:-

1. To promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the Members and co-opted Members of the Authority.
2. To assist members and co-opted Members of the Authority to observe the Members Code of Conduct.
3. To advise the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members Code of Conduct (and relevant protocols relating to Member/Officer relationships).
4. To monitor the operation of the Council's adopted Members Code of Conduct throughout the Authority.
5. To advise, train, or arrange to train Members and co-opted Members on matters relating to the Members Code of Conduct.
6. Where statutes so permit, to arrange dispensation to speak and/or vote where a Member or co-opted Member has an interest in any matters.
7. To receive Local Commissioner Reports following investigations, or part investigations, in relation to allegations of breach of the Members Code of Conduct and/or
  - (a) To receive and consider reports and recommendations made with regard to same, from the Monitoring Officer (when such matters are referred to that Officer) including provision with respect to the procedure to be followed by the Standards Committee; and
  - (b) Following its consideration of any such reports or recommendations, to take any action prescribed by statute or regulations made thereunder (including action against any Member or co-opted Member (or former Member or co-opted Member) of the Authority who is the subject of any such report or recommendation) and to give publicity to such report, recommendation or action.
8. To receive, consider and implement general advice from the Local Commissioner and the Council's Monitoring Officer.
9. \*To receive from the Adjudication Panel, Interim Case Tribunals or Case Tribunals:-
  - (a) Notices issued by them to Council;
  - (b) Recommendations about matters relating to the exercise of the Authority's function, the Code of Conduct and the Standards Committee and make such recommendations as it thinks fit to Council relating thereto.

10. To be responsible for liaison between the Council and external agencies, in particular the National Assembly for Wales, the District Auditor and the local Ombudsman in connection with any matter within the Committee's terms of reference, under the provisions of the 2000 Act and Regulations made thereafter.
11. To make representations to the National Assembly and the Welsh Local Government Association about any matter relating to the General Principles of Conduct for Members of the Council.
12. To consider and recommend procedures for complaints to be dealt with by the Standards Committee and to propose amendments as may be appropriate from time to time in accordance with statute etc.
13. To oversee the whistle-blowing regime in particular in this respect to consider and recommend procedures in respect of the following:
  - Whistle-blowing arrangements;
  - Anti-Fraud/Corruption or malpractice strategy.
14. To examine any Code(s) of Conduct for Employees of the Authority and to make recommendations as may be considered appropriate.
15. To receive progress reports from the Monitoring Officer from time to time on such matters within the purview of the Standards Committee, and to make such recommendations to Council as may be deemed appropriate.
16. To exercise such powers or duties as may be given to or imposed on Standards Committees from time to time by legislation.
17. To exercise in relation to Community Councils and their Members within the County Borough area such of the foregoing matters as are referred to in Section 56 of the Local Government Act 2000.
18. To monitor compliance of the leaders of political groups on the Council with their duties under Section 52A(1) of the Local Government Act 2000 that they are taking steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the members of their group and are cooperating with the Standards Committee's functions.
19. To produce an annual report to the Council as to how the Standards Committee has operated, including:
  - (a) what has been done to discharge the general and specific powers conferred on it by statute and these requirements;
  - (b) reports and recommendations made or referred to it by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
  - (c) action taken by the Standards Committee follows is consideration of reports and recommendations



(d) notices given to the Standards Committee

20. It should be noted that members of local authorities who are Members of the Standards Committee will have a term of office until the next ordinary local government election following their appointment. They may be reappointed for one further consecutive term.

## **The work of the Standards Committee in 2023-2024**

### **Observation of Town and Community Council Meetings**

Members of the Standards Committee have attended meetings of Town and Community Councils as observers, and discussed their observations. Such observation is helpful to inform the Standard Committee's work and understand the work of Town and Community Council

Town/Community Councillors and Clerks have indicated that the presence of Standards & Ethics Committee members was a helpful influence on Members' behaviour.

The Standards Committee were pleased to observe positive conduct at Council meetings, with meetings being business focussed and less fractious.

This work will continue throughout 2024-2025, with continued observation of both Town and Community Council meetings and County Borough Council meetings. Standards Committee members are encouraged to continue attending different Council and Committee meetings for observation and feedback to the Standards Committee.

### **Community Councils**

The Standards Committee has the same statutory functions in relation to Community Councils and their Councillors as it has in relation to Neath Port Talbot Council and its Members.

The Standards Committee has considered the ways in which it discharges its functions, and what else it may do, within available resources, to promote and maintain high standards of conduct within Community Councils and build good working relationships with them.

The Standards Committee have highlighted the number of Town and Community Councillors who do not undergo formal code of conduct training or have a local resolution process. The Standards Committee has noted and approved a programme of actions, which includes: offering training on the Code of Conduct; quarterly meetings between the Community Council Clerks and the Monitoring Officer to discuss issues relating to Member conduct; provision of advice and support to Clerks in relation to local resolution processes and observation of Community Council meetings by Standards Committee members.

### **Procedure for conducting Disciplinary Hearings**

Whilst the Standards Committee strive to resolve matters proactively without having to hold a formal hearing, it is recognised that sometimes hearings will be necessary following referrals from the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales. Part 3 Local Government Act 2000 enables the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales to require Standards Committees to determine whether a councillor or co-opted member has breached the code of conduct, where the Ombudsman considers that the facts of the alleged breach do not warrant an immediate reference to the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

The Standards Committee were pleased to review the procedures for such hearings and undertaken an update to modernise the same.

This update was to ensure it reflects principles such as hearings being conducted in Welsh, should the Councillor choose and to further expand on the possibility that a hearing could be conducted by written representations and to enable the possibility of a hearing being conducted virtually via Microsoft TEAMS. Similar procedures adopted by other Councils and the procedures adopted by the Adjudication Panel for Wales and aims to set out clearly to the committee, officers, and councillors and their representatives, the process that will be followed in the event that a disciplinary breach is referred to the committee for consideration.

### **Member Officer Protocol**

The Standards Committee considered one of the key protocols that exists within the local authority, that of the Member Officer Protocol.

The purpose of this protocol is to guide Members and officers of the Council in their relations with one another. The strength of the relationship between Members and officers is vital in ensuring that the Council practices the highest ethical standards in both its private and public dealings.

This Protocol also seeks to reflect the principles underlying the respective rules of conduct which apply to Members and officers. The purpose of the rules and this protocol is to enhance and maintain the integrity (real and perceived) of local government by demanding very high standards of personal conduct.

Members and paid officers each have their own separate Codes of Conduct. This protocol underpins those documents and focuses particularly on the interaction between Members and officers; deals primarily with Members' and officers' own separate responsibilities; and refers to the working relationship between Members and senior officers who formally advise the Council

An effective working relationship between Members and officers is crucial to the successful operation of the Council's business. This relationship within Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council is characterised by mutual trust, respect and understanding between politicians and paid officers – this is one of the keys to achieving effective local government.

The Standards Committee was content that the protocol was operating satisfactorily and that there were no ethical concerns arising.

### **National Standards Forum**

The Standards Committee received a report on the creation of a national standards forum and the Chair attended the two meetings that have taken place this year..

In March 2021 the then Minister for Housing and Local Government announced her intention to commission an independent review of the Ethical Standards Framework for

Local Government (ESF) in Wales that was established by the Local Government Act 2000. The review sought to ensure that it remained fit for purpose, was open and transparent, and that it commanded the confidence of all involved with the framework. Richard Penn, an Independent Consultant was commissioned to undertake the review with the aim to report to Welsh Government Ministers by the end of June 2021 with the intention that any agreed changes to be made ahead of the Local Government elections in May 2022. Mr. Penn is a former Chief Executive of two major local authorities in England and was the first NAW Commissioner for Standards from 2000 - 2012.

The first phase of the Independent Consultant's Review was brought before members of the Standards Committee in January 2022. In the first phase review Richard Penn suggested that an all Wales - Forum for Chairs of Standards Committees be established and that the Annual Conference for Independent Chairs and Independent Members of Standards Committees across Wales be re-established.

The Forum is a body for the sharing of good practice and the coordination of activity. The Forum is not a formal decision making body and will not have delegated powers to act on behalf of the Standards Committees in Wales. The purpose of the Forum is to share good practice and training and knowledge across the 22 principal councils, 3 fire and rescue authorities, and 3 national park authorities in relation to the work of Standards Committees. At the Forum, authorities can share good practice and discuss solutions to problems they are experiencing.

The Standards Committee look forward to playing a role in this Forum and identifying any measures of best practice that can be adopted in Neath Port Talbot.

### **Local Resolution Process**

The Standards Committee welcomed the opportunity to consider the Local Resolution Protocol.

This protocol recognises that the freedom of expression enjoyed by Members is not absolute and the exercise of the freedom incurs responsibilities and may be subject to restrictions, notably the protection of the reputation and other rights of other Members and preventing unauthorised disclosure of information. The freedom to express their political opinions is not restricted by agreeing to this Protocol.

It is designed to consider low level complaints about Members, including:

- Minor complaints from Members about Members
- Minor complaints from Officers about Members
- Members alleged to have not shown respect and consideration for others – either verbally or in writing.

The Standards Committee were pleased to note that there had been no occasions in the last 12 months where the protocol was required to be invoked but would continue to publicise its requirements to elected members and ensure they consider the same, to negate any

complaints to bodies such as the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales. The Standards Committee will continue to promote the use of this protocol to Group Leaders.

### **Whistleblowing**

The Standards Committee's terms of reference include responsibility for monitoring and overseeing the Council's Whistleblowing Policy and considering any ethical issues arising from complaints made under the Policy. T

The Committee received a report on the Council's Whistleblowing Policy

The Committee was informed about work undertaken with Management teams to raise awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy and Procedure and the information leaflets produced for employees and managers with some amendments being suggested to how the Whistleblowing Policy could be improved and clarified in some areas to provide greater ease of understanding for officers and members of the public.

The Standards Committee was content that the Council's whistleblowing arrangements were operating satisfactorily and that there were no ethical concerns arising.

### **Employee Code of Conduct**

The Standards Committee welcomed the opportunity to review and comment on the Council's Employee Code of Conduct

The purpose of the Employee Code of Conduct is to provide a clear framework for all Council employees, as the service the officers provide make a difference to the lives of individuals, families, and our local communities. As a public service worker, they have additional responsibilities due to public accountability and statutory obligations. The public expects and deserves a high standard of conduct from all local government employees.

It is noted that the Council has high aspirations for our communities and relies on our employees to deliver the best possible services and value for money. Our local communities expect them to be committed and dedicated; to be creative and innovative in service design and delivery; to embrace new ways of working and work collaboratively with others to achieve common goals.

The Employee Code of Conduct encourages officers to work in this way and sets out clear and helpful advice on the standards expected. To support the code, there is a framework of policies, procedures, standards, and guidance on a range of topics which provides information on rights, responsibilities and values and behaviour at work.

The Committee was informed about work undertaken with promote the Code of Conduct and identified some areas which could be improved and clarified to provide greater ease of understanding for officers and members of the public. These will now be considered by the Council's Personnel Committee as part of their review

The Standards Committee was content that the Council's Employee Code of Conduct is operating satisfactorily and that there were no ethical concerns arising and were pleased to note that their previous recommendations were taken on board by the Council's Personnel Committee.

### **Dispensations**

The Standards Committee has statutory power to grant dispensations to Members with a personal and prejudicial interest in a matter, to allow them to participate in a decision regarding that matter, in appropriate circumstances, which are set out in statutory regulations.

During the course of the year a number of dispensations were granted to allow Members to actively participate in decision making to ensure their voice and the voice of their constituents is not lost as a result of prejudicial interests. These covered matters such as where members may have family members employed by the Council, whether they have children who attend a neighbouring school or perhaps they serve on a community organisation or school governing body.

The Standards Committee continues to approach each application with a presumption in favour of granting a dispensation wherever practicable, particularly in relation to granting a dispensation to speak. The Committee may also delegate authority to the Monitoring Officer to grant similar dispensations in relation to that business. However no such delegation was utilised during the period of this report.

Details of the applications that have been dealt with can be viewed as part of the minutes of the meetings of the Committee which are accessible on Neath Port Talbot Council's website ([www.npt.gov.uk](http://www.npt.gov.uk))

### **Gifts and Hospitality**

The statutory principles which are to govern Member conduct say that Members "must not put themselves in a position where their integrity is called into question by any financial or other obligation to individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their duties. Members must on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour". Also the same principles state Members "must act solely in the public interest – they must never use their position as Members to improperly confer advantage on themselves or to improperly confer advantage on others.

As part of this requirement, the Standards Committee were pleased to review the Member Gifts and Hospitality Protocol and agreed to propose a change to the threshold of such gifts from £50 to £25 in line with all other local authorities in Wales.

### **Local Government and Ethical Standards Framework in Wales**

In March 2021, the then Minister for Housing and Local Government commissioned an independent Review of the Ethical Standards Framework for local government in Wales

established by the Local Government Act 2000 and the Standards Committee welcome this commitment to ongoing review.

The Framework has remained largely unchanged over the last 20 years, so an independent review was felt important to maintain confidence in the system and ensure developments in the way councillors and their public lives are reflected in its operation. An effective ethical framework is essential to ensure people and councillors from all backgrounds have confidence to engage with local democracy or stand for elected office. It is part of making Wales a diverse and inclusive nation and its review is an action in our Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.

The Standards Committee welcomed the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government Consultation and a copy of our response can be found on the Council's Website from our April 2023 meeting. It was pleasing to note that all local authorities made a response similar to our own and we look forward to receiving further updates on the process of the review as it continues.

### **Social Media**

The increase use of social media means the accountability and conduct of members is of the utmost importance. The Standards Committee proposed a piece of work to look at social media training and what more can be done to guide and support members in their use of social media platforms and to ensure conducts and behaviour are being considered in usage.

That work is reaching its conclusion and a guidance document will shortly be issued to all elected members on some issues to consider as part of social media usage.

### **Other Activities**

In addition to the above activities the Standards Committee also:

- Received and considered the Annual Report of the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales;
- Received and considered case decisions of the Adjudication Panel for Wales;
- Received and considered case decisions made by other Standards Committees in Wales;
- Received and considered the Code of Conduct casebook published by the Ombudsman.
- Received guidance on the role of the Adjudication Panel for Wales and its remit in promoting and upholding the standards regime
- Received guidance on the role of the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales on how they approach determinations whether to investigate complaints against elected members. Members resolved here to write to the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales to express concern over the use of terminology such as "thicker skin" and whilst acknowledging it derives from case law, whether the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales could address the use of such phrases in its guidance.

- Promoted the Town and Community Councils, Civility and Respect Pledge <https://www.slcc.co.uk/news-publications/civility-respect-pledge/> as an initiative introduced by a partnership of organisations working on behalf of Town and Community Councils, the SLCC (Society of Local Council Clerks), NALC (National Association of Local Councils) and OVW (One Voice Wales), inviting Community Councils to sign the Pledge to publicly commit that it will treat councillors, clerks, employees, members of the public, and representatives of partner organisations and volunteers with civility and respect in their roles, with a number of specific supporting commitments

Where appropriate the Standards Committee have identified points of learning and best practice and have taken them into account in their own decision making and included them in any training provided



## Group Leader Duties

### Background

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 addresses some new obligations for Standards Committees. The Act imposes specific duties on political leaders to promote and maintain standards of conduct within members of their group, and to cooperate with the Standards Committee in the exercise of its functions. This requires leaders of political groups to take steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members of their groups.

The duty does not make leaders of a political group accountable for the behaviour of their members as conduct must be a matter of individual responsibility. However, they do have a role in taking reasonable steps in maintaining standards, setting an example, using their influence to promote a positive culture, being proactive in promoting high standards of conduct in their group and addressing issues as soon as they arise.

Reasonable steps the group leader *may* undertake include:

- demonstrating personal commitment to and attending relevant development or training around equalities and standards;
- encouraging group members to attend relevant development or training around equalities and standards;
- ensuring nominees to a committee have received the recommended training for that committee;
- promoting civility and respect within group communications and meetings and in formal council meetings;
- promoting informal resolution procedures in the council, and working with the standards committee and monitoring officers to achieve local resolution;
- promoting a culture within the group which supports high standards of conduct and integrity;
- attend a meeting of the council's standards committee if requested to discuss Code of Conduct issues;
- work to implement any recommendations from the Standards Committee about improving standards;
- work together with other Group Leaders, within reason, to collectively support high standards of conduct within the council.

The purpose of the new duties is to build on and support a culture which is proactive, acts on and does not tolerate inappropriate behaviour.

A standards committee must also provide advice and training, or arrange to train Group Leaders on the new duty. At the start of each administration this should take place within six months of the election and be reviewed at least annually.

### Group Leaders in Neath Port Talbot

At its meeting in April 2024, Standards Committee were pleased to receive the reports from the four Group Leaders which clearly demonstrated their commitment to fulfilling their new duties.

The Standards Committee were pleased to note the approach that Group Leaders take in promoting standards and the personal commitment they have to encourage members within their groups to embed ethical processes in their day to day activities. Of interest particularly to the Standards Committee was how Group Leaders deal with the “thick skin” ideology that the Public Service Ombudsman and other regulatory bodies adopt and the views that all Group Leaders have that often this is an inappropriate test and it is not something that any elected member should have to have if they face abuse from members of the public, particularly in a social media setting.

The Standards Committee are required to conduct an assessment of how political group leaders have complied with their new duty to promote high standards of conduct and the Standards Committee are able to confirm that throughout 2023-2024, Group Leaders have discharged their duty, in the views of the Standards Committee, and that there were no ethical concerns arising.

Further work will be undertaken throughout 2024-2025 to further refine how Group Leaders can discharge their duties and how the Standards Committee can further assist Group Leaders.

## Complaints

The Standards Committee has oversight of the complaints and any themes or patterns emerging (but only considers specific details of individual cases if a complaint is formally referred to the Standards Committee by the Monitoring Officer or the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales).

During the period 1st April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the Monitoring Officer was notified of a total of 7 complaints made against Members of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct.

All bar one of these complaints were dismissed by the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales with one being considered by the Standards Committee with a determination reached in Summer 2024.

During the period 1st April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the Monitoring Officer was notified of 5 complaints made against Town and Community Councillors alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct. All bar one were dismissed by the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales as not being appropriate for investigation. It is understood that the Public Service Ombudsman Wales continues to investigate the other.

In respect of its role as the Standards Committee for the South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee, the Standards Committee received no complaints or referrals to it in respect of the members to that regional organisation. During the municipal year 1st April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the Standards Committee received no referrals from the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.

### **Local Resolution Process**

The Standards Committee notes that the Local Resolution Protocol adopted by Neath Port Talbot Council continues to provide a helpful process for resolving relatively 'low-level' behavioural complaints made by Neath Port Talbot Members about other Members, in a timely and proportionate way.

The Standards Committee is pleased to note that no cases have been referred to the Hearings Panel during 1st April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.

The Standards Committee has encouraged Community Councils to adopt their own local resolution protocols, using the model developed by One Voice Wales in consultation with the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.

## Future Priorities

The Standards Committee regularly reviews its forward work programme and has identified the following priority areas for consideration in 2024-2025

- **Code of Conduct, Member Training and Development** – the Standards Committee will consider the need for any further training on the Members' Code of Conduct focussing on Town and Community Councils and facilitate training opportunities for Councillors, as part of this a survey and review of Community Council training plans so far as they relate to standards and ethical governance will be undertaken. Further engagement work will also be undertaken, to include presentations, meetings and guidance.
- **Declarations of Interest** – a review of interests being declared in Council meetings by both Town and Community Councillors and County Borough Councillors.
- **Candidates for Council Elections** – the Standards Committee will look to develop an easy read guide for proposed candidates on the ethical obligations they will be required to meet if elected which can be placed on the Council's website.
- **Observation of Council and Committee Meetings, including Town and Community Councils** – the Standards Committee will continue to observe proceedings at Council and Committee meetings to give feedback on observations and inform its work priorities.
- **Annual Meeting with Group Leaders** - To facilitate ongoing engagement with representatives from all political groups and discharge legal duties pursuant to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and develop ways to ensure regular reporting from Group Leaders to comply with the duty under the aforementioned legislation.
- **Case Studies** – A set of case studies and examples will be prepared by the Standards Committee to address practical scenarios for elected members to consider on ethical behaviour, declaration of interests and general conduct matters.
- **Engagement with Members** – in order to dispel myths about the work of the Standards Committee, it was felt arranging a meeting with a sample of elected members would be beneficial for members to understand more about their work programme.
- **Adjudication Panel for Wales** – the Standards Committee propose to seek out opportunities to attend adjudication panel meetings where opportunity presents itself and to observe and bring back to the Standards Committee evidence of good practice

- **Member and Officer Relationship** – the Standards Committee recognise that this is the lynchpin of local government and propose to look at ways to further develop the Member Officer protocol to ensure ethical standards remain at the forefront of the relationship.
- **Governance and Audit** – the Standards Committee will look to develop a relationship with the Governance and Audit Committee and identify ways to work collaboratively on matters to enable assurances to be provided of ethical decision making and appropriate arrangements being in place.
- **Engagement with National Standards Regime** – with proposals to changes in the Standards regime throughout Wales, the Standards Committee will continue to work and look at ways for such proposals to be implemented in Neath Port Talbot.
- **Social Media and Conduct** – the increase use of social media means the accountability and conduct of members is of the utmost importance. The Standards Committee will continue its piece of work to look at social media training and what more can be done to guide and support members in their use of social media platforms and to ensure conducts and behaviour are being considered in usage.
- **Local Resolution** – the Standards Committee will look to do more to promote the Local Resolution Process and how it can incorporate Town and Community Councils
- **Conflict Resolution** – it is important that members are able to resolve conflicts or give alternative views without feeling they at risk of breaching their code of conduct. Accordingly, the Standards Committee will look at possible learning and development opportunities to support members in this area.

## Recommendations

As part of consideration of the annual report, the Standards Committee would make the following recommendations to Neath Port Talbot Council:

- (1) All members ensure they attend annual refreshers in respect of the Members Code of Conduct undertaken by the Monitoring Officer;
- (2) All Group Leader make Standards and Ethics a standing item on their political group meeting agendas;
- (3) All members ensure they are completing their declarations of gifts and hospitality, including where such gifts and hospitality are declined;
- (4) Group Leaders consider bi annual meetings with the Monitoring Officer to discuss standards and ethics and how they can work together to promote standards within their political groups;
- (5) Steps be taken to promote the Member Officer Protocol to all elected members and officers of the Council, with training provided as appropriate;
- (6) Consideration be given to inserting a guidance note on the website for those individuals wishing to stand for County Borough Council or Town/Community Councils highlighting the key ethical principles that if elected they will have to comply with;
- (7) A series of guidance documents be circulated to all members in respect of key conduct matters such as declarations of interest, predetermination, conduct case studies and key information for members to supplement the existing guidance available from the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.