



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot  
Neath Port Talbot Council



## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

### **ANNUAL REPORT**

**2024-2025**

### The Ten General Principles of Public Life

<b>Selflessness</b> – members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.	<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.
<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.	<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.
<b>Objectivity</b> – members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefit.	<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.
<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.	<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.
<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.	<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.
<b><i>Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life</i></b>	

## **Annual Report**

There is now a legal requirement (pursuant to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 for the Standards Committees to make an annual report to Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council on the standards regime within Neath Port Talbot and within the Town and Community Councils of the County Borough

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 by 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 seven 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 (the Committee) 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 the standards of conduct of all 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 has welcomed the powers conferred on it 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 standards of conduct across the South West Wales region.

I would like to thank all my fellow Standards Committee members, all of whom have 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 it will encounter in the year ahead, the Standards Committee urges Members to remain mindful of the fundamental importance of high standards of conduct in order that the public's trust and confidence in local democracy, and those elected to represent all in their communities, can be maintained and sustained.

**Mrs Louise Fleet CStJ, JP**

## **Members of the Standards Committee**

**2024-2025**

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 who 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 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 by the political Group Leaders of 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 following its consideration of reports and recommendations



(d) notices given to the Standards Committee

20. It should be noted that Elected Members of the local authority 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 2024-2025**

### **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 to understand the work of Town and Community Councils.

Town and Community Councillors and Clerks have indicated that the presence of Standards Committee members has been a helpful influence on their Members' behaviour. The Standards Committee was pleased to observe the positive conduct at Council meetings when its members attended, with meetings being business focussed and less fractious.

This work will continue throughout 2025-2026, 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.

### **Attendance by Elected Members at Standards Committee**

One of the forward work programme items for the Standards Committee was to dispel the often-negative myths associated with the work of the Committee and to engage with all Members as to what steps could be undertaken to promote the standards regime.

Accordingly, two meetings were held with a number of Members from different political groups to explore conduct matters in general and the challenges Members face, which has helped to set out matters that the Standards Committee could consider.

This will continue throughout 2025-2026.

### **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.

A survey was conducted with 19 Town and Community Councils to gather this information. Only four responses were received but it helped to have a greater understanding of the issues being faced at Town and Community Council levels.

The Standards Committee has highlighted the number of Town and Community Councillors who do not undergo formal Code of Conduct training or have a local resolution process. It 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.

### **Members Code of Conduct**

Standards Committee undertook a review of the training that is provided to Elected Members in respect of the Code of Conduct and whether it met all requirements. This included a review of the Code of Conduct to ensure it meets the necessary requirements.

The Standards Committee has always stressed the importance of regular Member training.

This is particularly important for those Councillors who were newly elected at the May 2022 elections, although long-serving Councillors should still undertake refresher training to ensure that they keep up to date with the requirements of the Code of Conduct and any changes in the law or procedures.

It is the responsibility of each individual Councillor to ensure that they fully understand the requirements of the Code and that they comply fully with their obligations. As always, “ignorance of the law is no excuse” and a lack of understanding or training would be no mitigation if there is any breach of the Code.

The Committee has previously recommended to the Council that it should be compulsory for all Councillors to attend training on the Code of Conduct, but this has not been adopted. The independent review of the Ethical Standards Framework in Wales, commissioned by Welsh Government and carried out by an independent consultant, Mr Richard Penn, recommended that the Member Declaration of Acceptance of Office for all Councillors should be amended to include a commitment to undertake training as well as to abide by the Code. This recommendation was fully supported and endorsed by the Standards Committee.

Unfortunately, Welsh Government did not implement these recommendations prior to the May 2022 elections and, therefore, the commitment to training is still not embodied within the Member Declaration of Acceptance of Office. However, we hope that this change will be considered and implemented in due course, to reinforce the need for compulsory training.

The Committee were pleased to note the commitment given by the political Group Leaders, as part of their new duty to promote and maintain high standards of ethical conduct within their respective groups, to encourage as many members as possible to undertake the training.

### **Internal Audit**

An audit in respect of Members ethics was undertaken in accordance with the provision made in the 2023/24 Internal Audit Plan

The ethical conduct of all Elected Members is of paramount importance to the Council as a whole. Not only must Elected Members comply with the Members' Code of Conduct and associated protocols they must be seen to be behaving with integrity to ensure that the electorate have confidence that decisions taken by them are lawful, considered, and free from any personal gain.

The role of Officers is to ensure that Members have the necessary protocols to guide them, to provide advice when required and to take robust action when inappropriate behaviour is reported to them.

Following this audit reasonable assurance can be provided that there are appropriate internal processes in place to help ensure that Members act in an ethical manner.

Standards Committee has agreed to collaborate with the Governance and Audit Committee on appropriate areas of the respective committees' work to promote ethical behaviours and practices.

### **Planning Protocol**

The Planning Protocol is intended to guide the procedures by which Members and Officers of the Council deal with planning matters and to set standards of probity and conduct expected of them. Neath Port Talbot Council will seek to adopt best practice in its administration of the planning process. It recognises that the public expects the Council to subscribe to the principles of fairness, consistency and objectivity.

The Standards Committee undertook a review of the protocol making some minor suggestions which will be factored into the next iteration of that document which will be updated by Planning Committee in 2025/2026

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

Whilst the Standards Committee strives to resolve matters proactively without having to hold a formal hearing, it recognises that sometimes hearings will be necessary following referrals from the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales. Part 3 of the Local Government Act 2000 enables the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales to require Standards Committees to determine whether a Member 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 was pleased to review the procedures for such hearings and undertook to update its own procedures to reflect principles such as hearings being conducted in Welsh, should a Member 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 have been adopted by the Standards Committees of other Councils and by the Adjudication Panel for Wales and aims to set out clearly to the Committee, Officers, and Members 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 extremely 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; 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 this 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. Mr Richard Penn, an Independent Consultant was commissioned to undertake the review with the aim of reporting to Welsh Government Ministers by the end of June 2021 with the intention that any agreed changes.

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 National Assembly for Wales Commissioner for Standards from 2000 - 2012.

The first phase of the review was brought before the Standards Committee in January 2022. In the first phase Mr 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 not a formal decision-making body and does not have delegated powers to act on behalf of Standards Committees in Wales. Its purpose is to share good practice, 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. The Committee welcomes the opportunity provided by the Forum to learn from good practice elsewhere and to identifying any measures of best practice that could 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; that it may be subject to restrictions, notably the protection of the reputation and rights of other Members and the prevention of unauthorised disclosure of information.

The freedom of Members 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; and
- members alleged to have not shown respect and consideration for others, either verbally or in writing.

The Standards Committee was pleased to note that there had been no occasions in the last twelve months where this Protocol was required to be invoked but would continue to publicise its requirements to Elected Members to ensure they take them into consideration which would 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 as part of the engagement process.

One Voice Wales has developed a similar Local Resolution Protocol for Town and Community Councils, in conjunction with the Ombudsman, and further guidance has been provided. Those Community Councils who are members of One Voice Wales have adopted this Protocol within their councils. The responsibility for resolving these minor complaints rests with the Community Council Clerk, the Chair and Vice-Chair. The Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer will continue to provide advice and assistance to Community Council Clerks in relation to the local resolution of minor complaints.

## **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.

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. It made suggestions as 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 were content that the Council's whistleblowing arrangements were operating satisfactorily and that there were no ethical concerns arising.

## **Employee Code of Conduct**

The 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 Officers provide makes 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.

The Committee 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 to 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 this 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 to promote this Code 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 its own review of this Code.

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

### **Dispensations**

The 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 relatives being employed by the Council; children attending a neighbouring school; or close connections with a community organisation or school governing body.

The 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))

### **Reviews of the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW)**

Following the discovery of the inappropriate use of social media by a former PSOW team manager in the spring of this year, concerns were raised about the impartiality and independence of the Office of the PSOW, particularly in relation to the handling of complaints about local councillors who may have breached the Code of Conduct for Members. The PSOW therefore commissioned an independent review to establish whether processes, delegations, and decisions in relation to the assessment and investigation of complaints by its Code of Conduct Team, and the former team manager, had been sound and free from political bias. Dr Melissa McCullough was appointed to lead the review.

The Standards Committee reviewed the report and welcomed the approach undertaken by the PSOW. As a consequence of the review, Standards Committees in Wales were asked to comment on a finding of the review which concerned the timing of when it would be appropriate to advise an Elected Member when a complaint about them had been received. Currently Elected Members are notified of the complaint when it is received by the PSOW, but the review recommended that Members were notified only if the PSOW determined to investigate the complaint.

This was fully debated by the Standards Committee, who considered; the impact of vexatious complaints; the importance of transparency; concern for the affected Member is a



complaint is not progressed; and the time period for an investigation. All views were represented in the response from the Committee to the consultation.

### **Corporate Joint Committee**

The Committee reviewed the request for it to become the Standards Sub-Committee for the South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee on an initial basis, until such time as the Corporate Joint Committee is fully operational and ready to establish its own Standards Sub-Committee. However, where a matter relates to a Member's conduct in general, and not specifically to CJC activities, then the Standards Committee of that Member's own council would have responsibility for dealing with the matter.

### **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 and whether to investigate complaints against Elected Members. The Committee resolved to write to the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales to express concern over the use of terminology such as "thicker skin" and, whilst acknowledging this phrase derives from case law, whether the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales could address the use of such phrases in its guidance; and
- 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 has 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 political Group Leaders 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 a 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.
- attending a meeting of the Council's Standards Committee if requested to discuss Code of Conduct issues.
- working 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 duty 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 met with Group Leaders in Autumn 2024 where the commitment to appropriate ethical behaviour and conduct was reaffirmed.

The Committee was pleased to note the approach that Group Leaders take in promoting standards and the personal commitment of each to encourage Members within their groups to embed ethical processes in their day-to-day activities. Of particular interest to the Committee was how Group Leaders deal with the “thick skin” ideology adopted by the Public Service Ombudsman and other regulatory bodies. The views of all Group Leaders are that often this is an inappropriate test and 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 Committee is required to conduct an assessment of how Group Leaders have complied with their new duty to promote high standards of conduct, and the Committee was pleased to conclude that throughout 2024-2025, Group Leaders discharged their duty and that there were no ethical concerns arising.

Further work will be undertaken throughout 2024-2025 to further refine how Group Leaders can build on their current arrangements to discharge their duties and how the Committee can further assist in this

## **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 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, the Monitoring Officer was notified of only one complaint made against a Member of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct, with a determination made not to investigate.

This complaint was referred to the Committee which met in June 2024 to consider the matter. The Committee suspended the Councillor concerned for a period of four calendar months.

During the period 1st April 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, the Monitoring Officer was notified of two complaints made against Town and Community Councillors alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct. One was 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 of that regional organisation. During the municipal year 1st April 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, the 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 Committee was pleased to note that no cases have been referred to the Hearings Panel during the period 1st April 2024 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025.

The 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 2025-2026.

- **Code of Conduct, Member Training and Development** – the 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. To inform 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. Chairs and Vice Chairs have been invited to attend Standards Committee to further explore this area of work.
- **Declarations of Interest** – the Committee will review of interests being declared in Council meetings by both Town and Community Councillors and County Borough Councillors.
- **Candidates for Council Elections** – the Committee will look to develop an easy read guide for prospective candidates on the ethical obligations they will be required to meet if elected which will be placed on the Council's website.
- **Observation of Council and Committee Meetings, including Town and Community Councils** – the 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** – the Committee will continue 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 ensure regular reporting from Group Leaders to comply with the duty under the aforementioned legislation.
- **Case Studies** – the Committee will prepare case studies and examples to address practical scenarios on ethical behaviour, declaration of interests and general conduct matters.
- **Engagement with Members** – the Committee will continue to promote its role, purpose and work programme by facilitating meetings with a cross-section of Members from all political groups.
- **Adjudication Panel for Wales** – the Committee propose to seek out opportunities for its members to attend Adjudication Panel Meetings, to observe proceedings and report back on evidence of good practice to the Standards Committee
- **Member and Officer Relationship** – the Committee recognises that this is the lynchpin of local government and propose to consider ways to further enhance the

Member Officer protocol to ensure ethical standards remain at the forefront of the relationship.

- **Governance and Audit** – the Committee will look to develop a relationship with the Governance and Audit Committee and identify ways to work collaboratively to enable assurances to be provided of ethical decision making and that appropriate arrangements are in place.
- **Engagement with National Standards Regime** – with proposals to changes in the Standards regime throughout Wales, the Committee will continue to work and look at ways for such proposals to be implemented in Neath Port Talbot.
- **Social Media and Conduct** – the increased use of social media means the accountability and conduct of Members is of the utmost importance. The Committee will continue its work on social media training to identify what more could be done to guide and support Members in their use of social media platforms to ensure conduct and behaviour are being considered at all times.
- **Local Resolution** – the Committee will look to do more to promote the Local Resolution Process and how it can be incorporated into Town and Community Councils proceedings.
- **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 Committee will consider further learning and development opportunities to support Members in this area.
- **Member Intimation and Harassment** – the Committee will consider the outcome of the recent work on harassment and intimidation experienced by Members and consider the impact on the standards' regime.
- **Corporate Joint Committee** - The Committee will continue to receive reports on the development of the governance arrangements and ethical behaviours associated with the work of the South West Wales Corporate Joint Committee.
- **2027 Induction Programme** – the Committee will begin the process of reviewing the induction programme for Members elected in the Local Government Elections in May 2027.



## **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) Continue to undertake work to promote the importance of good conduct and behaviours in Town and Community Council meetings.
- (3) All Group Leader make standards and ethics a standing item on their political group meeting agendas.
- (4) All Members ensure they are completing their declarations of gifts and hospitality, including where such gifts and hospitality are declined, utilising the new online reporting tools.
- (5) Group Leaders continue to have regular meetings with the Monitoring Officer to discuss standards and ethics and how they can work together to promote standards within their political groups.
- (6) Steps be taken to promote the Member Officer Protocol to all Elected Members and Officers of the Council, with training provided as appropriate.
- (7) 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.
- (8) 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.