

Meeting of the Standards Committee

Wednesday, 11 March 2026, 10.00 am



SOUTH
KESTEVEN
DISTRICT
COUNCIL

Committee Members present

Councillor Pam Byrd (Chairman)
Councillor Sarah Trotter (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Matthew Bailey
Councillor Ashley Baxter
Councillor Tim Harrison
Councillor Nikki Manterfield
Councillor Chris Noon
Councillor Max Sawyer

Others present

Councillor Graham Jeal
Councillor Murray Turner
(virtual)

Julie Byrom &
Michael Turner (Independent
Persons – virtual)

Officers

Graham Kitchen, Director of Law and Governance
(Monitoring Officer)
James Welbourn, Democratic Services Manager

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ben Green and Penny Milnes.

2. Disclosure of interests

There were no declarations of interests.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 12 March 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

4. Councillor Code of Conduct Complaints - Overview of Cases

Members considered an overview of Code of Conduct complaints, presented by the Director of Law and Governance (and Monitoring Officer).

Since the departure of the previous full-time Monitoring Officer, there had been two interim Monitoring Officer appointments, both of a part-time nature, which had led to a backlog in processing Code of Conduct complaints.

Complaints against district councillors

During the 'relevant period' (12 March 2025 to 27 February 2026) there had been 46 Code of Conduct complaints received; 33 against district councillors, and 13 against parish or town councillors.

Of the complaints against district councillors, the following allegations were recorded:

- 9 failed to clearly identify how the Member had allegedly breached the code of conduct.
- 13 allegations in relation to 'Disrepute'
- 7 allegations in relation to 'Respect'
- 3 allegations in relation to 'Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination'
- 4 allegations in relation to 'Use of Position'
- 4 allegations in relation to 'Interests'
- 2 allegations in relation to 'Impartiality of Officers'
- 1 allegation in relation to 'Complying with the Code of Conduct'

Notably, 27% of complaints against district councillors had failed to identify which part of the Code of Conduct had been breached. 42% of complaints received had been submitted by fellow district councillors (when broken down further, these complaints had come from 7 district councillors overall, with 4 from one member alone), 6% submitted by officers and the remainder submitted by members of the public (although this 'remainder' changed slightly when relatives of Councillors were factored in).

16 complaints had not progressed past the assessment stage of the process. This was due to several factors, including (but not limited to) the complaint being withdrawn, lack of jurisdiction, lack of evidence, or not being in the public interest. That left 17 complaints still being considered; 11 were ongoing, 3 had progressed to the formal investigation stage, and 3 were paused, pending a Police investigation.

The 33 complaints related to 19 different councillors, with 6 separate incidents against 1 member.

Complaints against Parish/town councillors

During the 'Relevant Period', 13 complaints were received against Parish and Town Councillors in the South Kesteven district. 46% of complaints received failed to clearly identify which part of the Code of Conduct had allegedly been breached. The remaining 54% of complaints were in relation to alleged 'disrepute', (lack of) 'respect', or 'interests'.

69% of these complaints have been submitted by the public, 23% from town or parish council members, and 8% from the clerks of these committees.

The following points were highlighted during debate:

- There was a backlog of complaints, particularly concerning town and parish councillors. External investigators were being used in some instances.
- Failure to identify which section of the Code of Conduct ('the Code') was breached was causing a strain in the system. It was hoped that this issue could be tackled by changing the way in which complaints were submitted. The process needed to be more prescriptive so that the reasons for the complaint were clear; a great deal of officer time was being spent on communicating with complainants and asking them to identify which section of the Code had been breached.
- There had been a steady flow of Code of Conduct complaints since the new Monitoring Officer started in post on 26 January 2026.
- The Complaints Procedure included an opportunity to disregard complaints when there were several regarding the same issue. Ultimately, this power was used at the Monitoring Officer's discretion; to date there had been an inconsistent use of this power. In some instances, there had been a preference for one complaint over another, and in other instances complaints had been merged into a 'super complaint.'
- Often a complaint would allege multiple breaches of the Code. For example, the 33 complaints against district councillors alleged 43 separate breaches of the Code.
- The turnover in the Monitoring Officer position has led to inconsistency/a breakdown in how data was captured. The Monitoring Officer had worked on a new template with relevant officers; further data would be added into future reports where possible.
- A breakdown of Code of Conduct complaints by political grouping may be appealing, but Standards Committee should be above party politics. There would also be no obvious benefit to SKDC. Providing a breakdown of political grouping may also risk Officers and others feeling dissuaded or incentivised to engage the Code of Conduct.
- Police referrals – where matters were referred to the Police, council officers would protect the individual(s) concerned by not disclosing their identity(ies), thus upholding the presumption of innocence. Any publication of the name of a party under criminal investigation was a matter for the Police. Each case was considered on its own merits.
- There was an ongoing Code of Conduct investigation being carried out by a third party; there were multiple complaints from different sources, and the MO in this case had chosen to disregard one of them. The investigation had not been completed yet so it was not possible to report the total cost, but it would be reported to a future meeting of the Standards Committee.

- There was one cost that had not been included in the report to the March 2025 Standards Committee, as the costs had not been known at that point. The cost for the external investigators was £7071.
- There was a balance to be struck between dissuading complaints and incentivising them.
- For the relevant period, £5250 had been spent on external investigators.
- The highest volume of complaints was received from SKDC councillors or their close relatives about other SKDC councillors. This category also saw the highest number of withdrawn complaints.
- For breaches of the Code related to Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs), a referral would be made by the Monitoring Officer to the Police. Any internal investigation would be paused at this point.
- Of the previous complaints referred to the Police (which were all in relation to allegations concerning DPIs, or the failure to disclose them) in the relevant period, there had been no findings of wrongdoing or criminality.
- There was a responsibility for all Councillors to support one another. Before making a complaint, they needed to consider whether it absolutely needed to be submitted, or alternatively, could Councillors work together and avoid resorting to the Code of Conduct process. Could Councillors develop more resilience to allow them to better deal with conflict.
- Thanks were given to Graham Kitchen (Monitoring Officer) for speaking personally to parishes who have had a Code of Conduct issue.
- Whilst it might be desirable for the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Standards Committee to act as mediators in complaints, it could compromise them further on in the process were they to sit on a Hearing Review Panel.

The overview of Code of Conduct complaints was **NOTED**.

5. Any other Standards Committee business, which the Chairman, by reasons of special circumstances, decides is urgent

The following issues were raised under Any Other Business:

- The Chairman referred to the minutes of the Standards Committee meeting in March 2025, where it had been agreed to organise a workshop for Committee members to discuss revisions to the complaints handling process.

All members of the Standards Committee were required to undertake annual training to take part in the Committee's proceedings, so it may be worthwhile exploring a workshop at the same time as the mandatory training (which would take place in Summer 2026). The Monitoring Officer also suggested exploring/better utilising a 'pre-assessment'

stage which could more efficiently filter out incorrect or inappropriate complaints.

- The use of a mediator for complaints was suggested; this was not a role that the Monitoring Officer had encountered at previous authorities. The onus needed to be on members deciding whether they wanted to continue with their complaint. There was also a role for political groups to play; group leaders and deputy group leaders were a good point of contact to resolve complaints. The preference was always for Members to mediate disputes amongst themselves to a satisfactory conclusion (if possible and appropriate to do so) prior to engaging the Code of Conduct process.
- The backlog of complaints was raised as an issue, and whether the Monitoring Officer felt he had capacity and resource to clear this. This all depended on the volume of complaints that were received in the coming months. If there wasn't an influx of complaints, then it was hoped it would be possible to clear the backlog.
- The government had undertaken a survey of the standards and conduct framework; a report was due in November 2026 that brought together the results of the survey. The Chairman was happy to circulate the key points to the Committee.

The meeting closed at 11:44am.