

STANDARDS COMMITTEE REPORT

REPORT TO:	Standards Committee		
DATE:	05 October 2025		
MEETING DATE	14 October 2026		
TITLE:	Summary of 2025-2026 Code of Conduct Complaints		
REPORT AUTHOR:	Deputy Monitoring Officer		
OPEN/EXEMPT		WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT:	No

REPORT SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF REPORT/SUMMARY:
To place before Members (i) a summary and analysis of the Code of Conduct complaints received in the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 against Borough Councillors and Parish Councillors, identifying issues for consideration.
KEY ISSUES:
Code of Conduct Complaints Forty-six complaints were received, of which 15 were directed at Borough Councillors and 31 were against Parish or Town Councillors. While this is a substantial increase from 21 complaints received the previous year, there were substantial clusters around specific events, and the overall figure is consistent with the previous 3 year average. Members are directed to Appendix A for the breakdown of the complaints made in 2025-2026 and to note the trends within the numbers. No complaints made during the year were subject to formal investigation. As per previous years, disrespectful conduct or perceived bullying, by Councillors was a common theme within many complaints. A small range of other issues also arose. Around half of complaints came from fellow members. This is a change from previous years where most complaints came from members of the public rather than fellow Councillors. Again, however, a number of the councillor complainants were grouped around specific events. A significant cluster of complaints was at Downham Market Town Council, in response to which the Monitoring Officer wrote to all Councillors.
RECOMMENDATIONS:
To note the contents of this report together with Appendix A, in the interests of promoting high standards of conduct by Councillors and co-opted members.
REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:
To fulfil the Standard Committee's functions to monitor the implementation and operation of the Councillor Code of Conduct.

SUMMARY OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED IN 2025-2026

1. Background – the Code of Conduct Guidance

- 1.1. The Borough Council is responsible for assessing Code of Conduct complaints in relation to its own Borough Councillors but also Code of Conduct complaints made against any Parish Councillor from a Parish within the Borough.
- 1.2. The relevant sections of the Borough Council's "*Guidance on Member Code of Conduct Complaints Handling*", approved by Standards Committee on 25 March 2025, are set out in the annex to this Report.

2. Parish and Borough Councillor Complaints Received

- 2.1. Twenty-one complaints were received during the period 2024-2025, of which fifteen were made against Parish Councillors and six were against Borough Councillors. This compares as follows with previous years:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Complaints</u>	<u>Against Parish Cllrs</u>	<u>Against Borough Cllrs</u>
2025/26	46	31	15
2024/25	21	14	7
2023/24	49	36	13
2022/23	30	18	12

This is a significant increase against the previous year, but not exceptional against the previous three-year average.

- 2.2. Members are directed to Appendix A for a further breakdown of the complaints.

3. Complaints against Borough Councillors

- 3.1. Fifteen complaints were made against Borough Councillors. However, this overstates the incidences of alleged misconduct:

3.1.1. six complaints were originated by two complainants each claiming against the same three councillors, in respect of the same events.

3.1.2. A further four complaints were brought by Parish/Town Councillors against a single councillor, again for the same conduct.

- 3.2. Taking this into account, there were only nine alleged instances of misconduct.

Nature of Alleged Breach and Underlying Subject Matter

- 3.3. Consistent with previous years, the most common allegation concerned disrespect; allegations of sex discrimination were raised in three cases, but were found to be without

any merit; allegations were also raised around failure to make reasonable adjustments, but were also not accepted.

- 3.4. No other patterns of breach occurred.

Councillor-on-Councillor and Employee complaints

- 3.5. Three of the complaints were made by a fellow Borough Councillor.

Vexatious/malicious/political motive of complainant

- 3.6. There was some evidence to support a conclusion of vexation/malice/political motivation in the grouped cases against the Borough Councillor regarding alleged disrepute, but not sufficient to make a positive finding.

Informal/Other Resolution

- 3.7. In one complaint, an apology was given voluntarily by the subject councillor.

4. Complaints against Parish Councillors

- 4.1. The 31 parish complaints are also comprised of substantial clusters, so there was a lower the number of individual instances of alleged misconduct.

- 4.2. The four complaints against Hockwold Parish Councillors were likewise all related, as were the complaints at Clenchwarton and Bircham, which involved different parties but the same Parish council business.

- 4.3. Strikingly, 13 complaints originated at Downham Market Town Council. Several were made on a grouped basis; subsequently another seven were raised by fellow councillors against a single councillor regarding a single event, in what was clearly a coordinated attack. In May 2026 the Monitoring Officer wrote to the Town Councillors instructing them that they should arrange some form of mediation.

Nature of Alleged Breach and Underlying Subject Matter

- 4.4. As per previous years, many of the complaints concern allegations of disrespect. In the cases where no further action was taken, the noticeable themes were either that the behaviour did not in fact appear disrespectful or was within the bounds of freedom of political speech.

- 4.5. A broad range of other issues arose with no clear pattern or subject matter.

Councillor-on-Councillor complaints

- 4.6. Aside from Downham Market, four of the Parish Councillor complaints were made by a fellow Parish Councillor. Based on the information available to the Monitoring Officer, it was not possible to conclude that any of these was “politically” rather than objectively motivated.

Vexatious/malicious/political motive of complainant

- 4.7. As above, six of the Downham Market complaints were identified as potentially vexatious, malicious and politically motivated (against none in 2024/25, and 7 of 49 in 2023/2024).

Investigation

- 4.8. None of the Parish Councillor complaints were referred to investigation.

Informal/Other resolution

- 4.9. One complaints was discontinued as it fell outside the remit of the Code of Conduct.
- 4.10. Informal advice was given regarding conflicts and declarations of interest.
- 4.11. In three other cases, apologies had been given voluntarily by the subject councillor.

GENERAL

5. Policy Implications

- 5.1. An effective standards regime forms part of the Council's Code of Corporate Governance. The Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government has recognised the 'Culture' of a local authority as one of the seven themes of good practice for running an authority that meets and delivers best value. The culture of a local authority is determined by its shared values, ethics and beliefs, how decisions are made, as well as how elected members and officers behave, interact and carry out their roles. The standards regime supports the process of monitoring the culture of the Borough Council and its Parishes, enabling all respective authorities to take action to address any relevant Councillor behaviour and thereby improve the culture of the organisation.

6. Financial Implications

There are no specific financial implications arising out of this report.

7. Legal Implications

None arising from this report. The Code of Conduct implements various statutory requirements on the Council.

8. Environmental Considerations

None arising out of this report.

9. Equality Impact Assessment

N/A as this is an informative report.

10. Risk Management Implications

None

11. Background Papers

Guidance on Member Code of Conduct Complaints Handling

Annex - Relevant sections of the Borough Council's "Guidance on Member Code of Conduct Complaints Handling"

2.8 First-Step Criteria

The first step is to assess your complaint against the following jurisdictional criteria:

- a. the complaint is against one or more named Councillors of the Borough Council or of a Parish Council;*
- b. the named Councillor was a Councillor at the time of the alleged conduct, and is still a serving Councillor;*
- c. the complaint relates to matters where the Councillor was acting as a Councillor or representative of the Council and it is not a private matter (i.e. the Subject Member must have been acting in their official capacity);*
- d. the complaint is, in substance, about the conduct of the named Councillor(s) and not dissatisfaction with a decision of the Borough Council or Parish Council*
- e. the complaint, if proven, could be a breach of the Code under which the Subject Member was operating.*

In relation to the final bullet point above, the Monitoring Officer will not only consider the parts of the Code of Conduct identified by you but will consider whether any other parts are engaged.

If the complaint fails one or more of the First-Step Criteria above, the complaint will not move onto the next stage of the process. You will be informed that no further action will be taken in respect of the complaint and the Subject Member will be informed that a complaint has been made about them, along with details of the complaint and confirmation that it has been rejected as it did not pass the First-Step Criteria. Unless the anonymity and confidentiality provisions above apply, your name as the Complainant will also be disclosed.

If there is any doubt about whether the First-Step Criteria have been met the complaint should proceed to the next stage. For example, if it is unclear whether the Councillor was acting in an official capacity or not then the complaint should proceed to the next stage.

...

2.11 Second-Step Criteria

We will then assess your complaints against the following Second-Step Criteria:

- a) Does the complaint contain sufficient evidence to demonstrate a reasonable prospect of a breach of the Code, even where further information is sought from the Complainant?*
- b) Is the matter serious enough and sufficiently in the public interest to warrant the public resource and expense of an investigation?*
- c) Are there alternative, more appropriate, remedies that should be explored first?*
- d) Does the complaint, in the view of the Monitoring Officer, appear malicious, politically motivated, or 'tit for tat'?*
- e) Whether, even if proven, the complaint would not be serious enough to warrant any sanction (see section 5.1 on sanctions);*
- f) Whether a substantially similar complaint has previously been considered and no new material evidence has been submitted within the current administration;*
- g) Whether a substantially similar complaint has been submitted and accepted;*

- h) Does the complaint relate to conduct in the distant past? This would include consideration or any reason why there had been a delay in making the complaint;*
- i) Has the behaviour that is the subject of the complaint already dealt with? For example, through an apology at the relevant meeting;*
- j) Is it about someone who is seriously ill, thus impeding their ability to engage in the complaint process?*
- k) Had the Subject Member acted on the advice of an officer or the Independent Person in relation to the conduct complained of?*
- l) Did the conduct arise from lack of experience or training?*
- m) Is the subject matter of the complaint being dealt with through any other complaints, legal or regulatory process.*

The above criteria are intended to be indicative rather than prescriptive, and the underlying public interest will always be considered when deciding on whether to take action on a complaint.

2.12 Decision

2.12.1 Initial assessment decisions

The Monitoring Officer will aim to complete their initial assessment of your complaint within 20 working days of receiving the complaint, subject to any extension of time provided to a Subject Member to provide their comments and any further clarifications sought from you.

Where the Subject Member has not commented and they have not provided a reasonable excuse for the delay, attempts will be made to ascertain that the Subject Member has received the correspondence. If after reasonable checks have been made and a response is still not received in a reasonable time, then the initial assessment will be undertaken, accounting for the lack of response and engagement of the Subject Member.

The Independent Person will be invited to give their views as part of the initial assessment, to be confirmed in writing, unless extraordinary circumstances exist, in the view of the Monitoring Officer, that the initial assessment should be undertaken without the views of the Independent Person.

One of the three following decisions will be reached on an allegation:

- no further action should be taken on the allegation;*
- the matter should be dealt with through a process of informal resolution in the first instance (see section on informal resolution) or;*
- the matter should be referred for a formal investigation (see section on investigations).*

3.3 Examples of informal resolution

- An apology;*
- Training by the subject member;*
- Policy/protocol change or adoption by the Council;*
- Provision of advice from the Monitoring Officer to the Subject Member; or*
- Mediation*