

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Update on Standards Matters – July 2025	
REPORT OF Borough Solicitor	
FOR SUBMISSION TO Standards Committee	DATE 7 July 2025
SUMMARY OF REPORT <p>This report brings to Members' attention recent standards news items for information and updates on actions from the previous Standards Committee meeting.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</p> <p>No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Cheryl Hardman Principal Democratic Services Officer Camden Town Hall Judd Street London WC1H 9JE 020 7974 1619 cheryl.hardman@camden.gov.uk </p>	
RECOMMENDATIONS <p>That Standards Committee notes and comment on the contents of the report.</p>	

Signed: 

Borough Solicitor

Date: 25 June 2025

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. This report highlights recent matters concerning standards, which will be of interest to the Committee. Following the cancellation of previous meetings of Standards Committee, a newsletter updating the Members on various issues was circulated and the updates have been included in this report for transparency and discussion.

2. Updates since the previous meeting

- 1.2. At its meeting on 21 October 2024, the Committee agreed to renew a general dispensation for four years and authorise the Borough Solicitor to grant the dispensation upon application by Members. All Members and relevant co-opted Members have now applied for and been granted the dispensation.
- 1.3. At the same meeting, the Committee agreed to revise the Register of Interests form and accompanying guidance to explicitly draw a distinction in the form between the interests of the councillor and relevant others through the use of separate columns. This change was intended to enhance openness and provide a reminder to councillors of their obligations. Since the meeting, all councillors and co-opted Members have been advised of the reformatting and all existing forms published on the Camden Council website have been updated. Reactions to the change are being monitored and will be fed back to the Committee later in 2025.

3. Committee on Standards in Public Life Update

The Nolan Principles: Public Standards, the Public Interest and Public Service

- 1.4. In October 2024, Professor Mark Philp, Chair of the Research Advisory Board, published a report on the continuing relevance of the Nolan Principles thirty years on from their initial formulation¹. The ‘Seven Principles of Public Life’ (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership²) were established as the standards of conduct that underpin public life and continue to have widespread support from the public. Professor Philp argues that the principles underline the responsibility of those in public office, both elected and appointed, to serve the public rather than personal interest. The Nolan Principles establishes values and a relationship of trust between the government and public that “is central to our collective well-being”. This requires politicians, public officials and the public to share an understanding of and commitment to the principles within a context of valuing public service.

Codes of conduct, independent scrutiny and education - Nolan’s golden threads

- 1.5. On 5th November 2024, Doug Chalmers, Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), published a blog discussing the three ‘golden threads’

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/30th-anniversary-of-the-nolan-principles> [accessed 17 February 2025]

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2> [accessed: 19 February 2025]

required to maintain high standards in the public sector as identified in the first CSPL report in 1995³.

- 1) Codes of Conduct – well-established across public life, with regulation and high compliance levels overall but low public perception of standards.
- 2) Independent scrutiny of standards – while transparency is essential for independent scrutiny, conduct that is within the rules but not seen as in line with the Nolan Principles can result in a loss of trust. Strong independent regulators (including the position of Independent Persons in local government) are essential to maintain public confidence.
- 3) Education on standards of conduct – making space for the regular discussion of ethics and standards would nurture organisational values based on the Seven Principles of Public Life.

Recognising and responding to early warning signs

- 1.6. The CSPL published its report *Recognising and Responding to Early Warning Signs in Public Sector Bodies*⁴ on 25th March 2025. The report identifies that a common theme from reports of public inquiries and independent reviews of public sector failures is an unwillingness to listen to or act on concerns raised by employees and/or the public, not learning lessons from past mistakes or identifying emerging themes that contribute to risk of harm. Failing public sector bodies often have a defensive organisational culture, poor internal relationships, groupthink and a failure of scrutiny. The CSPL report discusses the importance of processes that enable early warning signs to be recognised and the need to facilitate a speak-up culture.

4. Standards Cases

Spelthorne Borough Council

- 1.7. In October 2024, a Standards Sub-Committee at Spelthorne Borough Council found that Councillor Joanne Sexton, leader of the council, had breached the Council's code of conduct by not treating an employee with respect although it was concluded that she had not committed bullying⁵. Councillor Sexton was sanctioned to issue a private apology to the complainant.
- 1.8. Councillor Sexton made a written apology and reported on this to the media. However, the Standards Sub-Committee found at its meeting in December 2024 that the officer had not received an apology. Councillor Sexton has disputed this, suggesting that the written apology had addressed the sanction.

³ <https://cspl.blog.gov.uk/2024/11/05/codes-of-conduct-independent-scrutiny-and-education-nolans-golden-threads/> [accessed 17 February 2025]

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recognising-and-responding-to-early-warning-signs-in-public-sector-bodies-report> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

⁵ <https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/59372-standards-sub-committee-raps-council-leader-over-failure-to-comply-with-sanction> [accessed: 19 February 2025]

- 1.9. At the Standards Committee meeting on 12 February 2025⁶, concerns were expressed about the procedures followed at the October hearing. Claims⁷ were reportedly made at the Committee meeting that the investigating officer had told councillors if they did not find Councillor Sexton guilty, the officers involved would lose their jobs. Concerns were reportedly expressed that Panel members had felt pressured to make a speedy decision without the opportunity to invite or question witnesses. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that an independent investigation of the hearing process would be undertaken⁸.

Borough Solicitor's Comment

- 1.10. Where a Member has been found to have breached the Code of Conduct, the Standards Committee can issue a range of sanctions, from issuing a formal letter to the councillor detailing the findings, formal censure, reporting to Council, arranging training and making recommendations to the Group Leader or Leader of the Council that the councillor be removed from committees, including Cabinet. As noted by the CSPL⁹, sanctions that require positive action such as an apology or attending training cannot be enforced by the Standards Committee.
- 1.11. The process set out in the procedure *Dealing with Misconduct Complaints Against Councillors* provides for reports to be circulated at least 14 day prior to the hearing date. The subject Member will also be invited, 14 days before the hearing, to indicate if any parts of the report are factually incorrect, submit any documents they wish the Panel to see, confirm if they will attend and if they would bring representation, and indicate if they wish for any witnesses to attend. Witnesses would be invited, subject to agreement by the Chair of the Panel. The process at the meeting would be a matter for the Committee to decide depending on the facts but was likely to include:
- The Chair setting the scene
 - The Borough Solicitor explaining the process
 - Making findings of fact should there be any dispute, with representations from the investigating officer, subject Member, and any witnesses
 - Questions on the findings of the investigation
 - Consultation with the Independent Person/Borough Solicitor
 - Determination of whether there had been a breach of the Code of Conduct
 - Decision to be set out
 - Where a breach has been found, representations to be received from the subject Member on potential sanctions

⁶ <https://democracy.spelthorne.gov.uk/documents/g4553/Printed%20minutes%20Wednesday%2012-Feb-2025%2019.00%20Standards%20Committee.pdf?T=1> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

⁷ <https://guildford-dragon.com/councillor-shocked-by-revelations-at-spelthorne-council/> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

⁸ <https://democracy.spelthorne.gov.uk/documents/g4553/Printed%20minutes%20Wednesday%2012-Feb-2025%2019.00%20Standards%20Committee.pdf?T=1> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

⁹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF [accessed 19 February 2025]

- Consultation with the Independent Person/Borough Solicitor
- Decision on sanctions to be set out

Torridge District Council

- 1.12. Councillor Leonard Ford of Torridge District Council has been found guilty of harassment of the local authority's Head of Legal and Governance, Staci Dorey¹⁰. Councillor Ford had sent almost daily emails over eight months repeatedly calling the officer "corrupt and dishonest" and "a disgrace to the human race". District Judge Stuart Smith noted a previous caution for harassment and similar emails to the Chief Executive. Councillor Ford has been sentenced to 18 weeks imprisonment, ordered to pay costs of £685 and a victim surcharge and also been made subject to a four-year restraining order.
- 1.13. Steve Hearse, the Council's Chief Executive Officer, reported that the Standards Committee had sought to deal with Councillor Ford's behaviour but were limited by the sanctions that could be imposed. This resulted in the need to take action through the legal system.

Borough Solicitor's Comment

- 1.14. The ability to suspend councillors was removed by the Localism Act 2011, resulting in a limited sanctions framework¹¹. A separate paper on the agenda reports on the Government consultation *Strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities in England* which proposes the reintroduction of suspension for serious breaches of the Code of Conduct.
- 1.15. A sentence of imprisonment for three months or more on conviction of a criminal offence disqualifies a person from standing as a candidate or being a member of a local authority, in accordance with Section 80 of the Local Government Act 1972¹².

Torbay Council

- 1.16. Councillor Katya Maddison has been found to have breached the Code of Conduct by bringing the Council into disrepute and failing to treat officers with courtesy and respect in remarks on Facebook¹³ in which she reportedly described the council as a "sick institution" and that "certain leading council

¹⁰ <https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/59862-councillor-jailed-after-sustained-campaign-against-head-of-legal-and-chief-executive> [accessed: 19 February 2025]

¹¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF [accessed: 19 February 2025]

¹²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5c3f68e5274a3184bac66f/6.4896_CO_CSPL_Command_Paper_on_Local_Government_Standards_v4_WEB.PDF [accessed: 19 February 2025]

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz7edn000xgo> [accessed: 21 February 2025]

officers are at the heart of it”¹⁴. She was also found to have breached the Code by reportedly saying “shame on you” to the Chief Executive Anne-Marie Bond following the Annual Council meeting in May 2024. The Standards Hearing Sub-Committee sanctioned Councillor Maddison to apologise and undertake training. It also recommended that Councillor Madison be suspended for her positions and appointments until training has been undertaken¹⁵. The councillor has refused to apologise and stated that she would be speaking to her lawyer.

- 1.17. The decision by the Standards Hearing Sub-Committee was aligned with the findings of the independent investigation¹⁶ with regard to the Facebook post. However, the independent investigator had determined that the Code was not breached as a result of comments made to the Chief Executive in person as it was considered the words were political expression about Ms Bond’s professional actions. The Sub-Committee rejected this interpretation, describing the words as “personal abuse”. It departed from the findings of the independent investigator upon learning that a number of individuals referenced in the investigation had not been interviewed and a further explanation of their experience resulted in a materially different understanding of the event¹⁷.

Borough Solicitor’s Comment

- 1.18. Where a formal investigation finds evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, a Standards Committee hearing will be required. The subject councillor will be invited to attend and may submit documents or request that witnesses be invited. The complainant may also be invited to give evidence. The Standards Committee, upon conclusion of the hearing process will determine whether the Code of Conduct has been breached on the balance of probability based on the evidence received.

Fleggburgh Parish Council

- 1.19. Dr James Miller, clerk of Fleggburgh Parish Council between 2019 and September 2021, has been awarded £20,000 in damages from ex-councillor Andrew Peake for defamation¹⁸. The claim was focussed Facebook posts by Mr Peake accusing the Clerk of being a liar. The Judge found that they would

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https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/documents/s156571/FINAL%20INVESTIGATION%20REPORT%20TORBAY%20BOND%20MADDISON%2013122024_Redacted.pdf [accessed: 9 June 2025]

¹⁵ <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=274&MId=26565&Ver=4> [accessed: 10 March 2025]

¹⁶ <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=274&MId=26565&Ver=4> [accessed: 10 March 2025]

¹⁷ <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/documents/s157266/Record%20of%20Decision.pdf> [accessed: 10 March 2025]

¹⁸ <https://www.localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/60415-high-court-awards-20-000-in-damages-to-parish-clerk-over-defamatory-facebook-posts-by-councillor#:~:text=A%20parish%20clerk%20has%20been,serious%20harm%20to%20their%20reputation.> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

adversely affect the way that people consider and treat Dr Miller. It was acknowledged that Mr Peake believed that his statements were in the public interest, but it was considered that the belief was not reasonable. Mr Peake had also ignored an order to remove the posts in September 2022, not removing them until Spring 2023.

Borough Solicitor's Comment

- 1.20. Where a councillor has stood down from their position, it would be unlikely that an investigation into a breach of the code of conduct would be proportionate or in the public interest given the limited sanctions available. However, councillors and ex-councillors should be aware that libel action can be taken against them were they to publish an untrue statement damaging to somebody's reputation. A successful libel claim would result in an award of damages against the councillor or ex-councillor personally. Further information can be found in the *Social Media Guidelines for Councillors*¹⁹, published online in the Constitution as part of the *Councillor Code of Conduct*.

Southampton City Council

- 1.21. Councillor Rob Harwood of Southampton City Council has been found to have breached the Code of Conduct by calling the interim chief executive, Andrew Travers, a "buffoon ...[with] a history of cock ups, and resignations due to bad electoral management"²⁰. The breach was in relation to treating others with respect and conduct contrary to the Council's duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members. An independent investigation had been commissioned after informal resolution had failed.
- 1.22. The Deputy Monitoring Officer's report notes that Councillor Harwood had suggested the use of the term 'buffoon' was not pejorative if having regard to the 1638 Oxford English Dictionary definition. However, the report argues that a reasonable member of the public would be given "the impression that the Council was being led by someone incapable of fulfilling their duties in a competent way"²¹. The report was not being taken to a hearing as Councillor Harwood had offered to retract the comment, apologise to Mr Travers and meet to 'clear the air'.

Borough Solicitor's Comment

- 1.23. In Camden, the Borough Solicitor is authorised at his discretion to seek to resolve a complaint informally, before taking a decision on whether the complaint merits formal investigation or referring it to the Standards

¹⁹

<https://democracy.camden.gov.uk/documents/s125609/PART%2053%20Councillor%20Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

²⁰ <https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/governance/396-governance-news/60697-councillor-breached-code-of-conduct-when-calling-interim-chief-executive-a-buffoon> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

²¹

<https://www.southampton.gov.uk/modernGov/documents/s78440/Member%252520Conduct%252520Complaint.pdf> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

Committee to decide. However, upon the finding of a breach of the Code by an investigation, the report will be submitted to a hearing unless the Borough Solicitor finds the report defective or requiring further consideration.

King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council

- 1.24. Independent councillor Terry Parish, formerly leader of King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council, has been found to have breached the Code of Conduct and Planning Code by emailing a fellow Planning Committee member during a meeting he was absent from²². The emails included the message: "No deferral. REFUSE IT". The investigation found that the emails could be perceived as attempts to influence decision-making, impacting impartiality, integrity, fairness and transparency. The Panel specified that Councillor Parish had breached the Code of Conduct by failing to respect his fellow committee member and the Planning Committee as a whole²³. The Hearing Panel recommended that the Group leader remove Councillor Parish from Planning Committee²⁴.

Borough Solicitor's Comment

- 1.25. Planning Committee members must act and be seen to act, impartially and honestly, avoiding bias and predetermination, irrespective of any pecuniary interest in the application under consideration. The Planning Protocol²⁵, published in the Constitution, has detailed guidance which sets out the standard of conduct expected from Planning Committee members.
- 1.26. The Borough Solicitor has written to Planning Committee members highlighting the case and the potential for perceived influence or pressure via electronic communications during meetings.

5. Finance Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

- 1.27. There are no financial impacts resulting from this report.

6. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

- 1.28. This is a report of the Borough Solicitor and there are no other legal comments.

²² <https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/planning/401-planning-news/60910-councillor-who-messed-fellow-planning-committee-member-during-meeting-he-could-not-attend-breached-code> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

²³ <https://democracy.west-norfolk.gov.uk/documents/s79428/Signed%20Decision%20Notice%20Standards%2013%20May%202025.pdf> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

²⁴ <https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/planning/401-planning-news/60910-councillor-who-messed-fellow-planning-committee-member-during-meeting-he-could-not-attend-breached-code> [accessed: 21 May 2025]

²⁵

<https://democracy.camden.gov.uk/documents/s125608/PART%2052%20Planning%20and%20Licensing%20Protocols.pdf> [accessed; 21 May 2025]

7. Environmental Implications

1.29. There are no environmental implications.

REPORT ENDS