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Town and Parish Councils' Standards Sub-Committee

12 February 2026

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS'
STANDARDS SUB-COMMITTEE,
HELD ON THURSDAY, 12TH FEBRUARY, 2026 AT 2.00 PM
IN THE COMMITTEE ROOM, TOWN HALL, STATION ROAD, CLACTON-ON-SEA,
CO15 1SE**

Present:	Councillors Alexander (TDC), F Belgrove (Alresford PC), Botterell (Little Clacton and Weeley PCs), Casey (TDC) and Codling (TDC)
Also Present:	Councillors Talbot (Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee) and Wiggins
In Attendance:	Lisa Hastings (Corporate Director (Law & Governance) & Monitoring Officer), Karen Hayes (Corporate Governance, Performance & Procurement Manager), Ian Ford (Democratic Services Manager), Bethany Jones (Democratic Services Officer), Katie Koppenaal (Democratic Services Officer), James Dwan (Communications Officer) and Alex Brewer (Support Assistant (Governance))
Also in Attendance:	Sue Gallone, David Irvine and Jane Watts (three of the Council's four Independent Persons)

1. ELECTION OF A CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING

It was moved by Councillor Alexander, seconded by Councillor Codling and:-

RESOLVED that Councillor Casey be elected as Chairman for the meeting.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor L Belgrove (Alresford Parish Council) and Shelia Murphy (one of Tendring District Council's Independent Persons).

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

4. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER - A.1 - RECOMMENDATIONS TO PARISH & TOWN COUNCILS: IMPROVING STANDARDS OR ACTIONS

The Sub-Committee considered a report of the Monitoring Officer (A.1) which made Members aware that a complaint had been received in November 2024, regarding the alleged behaviour of a Councillor ("the Subject Member"), under the local council's Members' Code of Conduct.

The Complaint referred to the behaviours of the Subject Member in relation to social media posts that as a result were alleged to have contravened the Members' Code of Conduct.

Members were told that complaints received relating to the Code of Conduct must be dealt with in accordance with the Council's formally adopted Complaints Procedure, as

set out in Part 6 of the Council's Constitution (Part 6.19 to 6.34), which had been adopted by the District Council on 26 November 2013 and recently updated in August 2025.

It was reported that the Monitoring Officer had decided that it was reasonable and appropriate that the Complaint merited further investigation. The parties had been informed of this decision and that an internal investigator would be appointed. The Council's Complaint Procedure set out how an investigation was conducted and that the Investigation Report must contain a conclusion as to whether the evidence supported a finding of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct.

The Sub-Committee was informed that, following a thorough investigation, it had been concluded that there was sufficient evidence to show that the Subject Member, based on a balance of probabilities and the evidence available, through the use of social media had breached Paragraphs 1.1 (respect), 5.1 (disrepute) and 6.1 (use of position) of the Members' Code of Conduct. The investigation had also concluded that Paragraph 2.2 had not been breached.

All parties had had the opportunity to comment on the Investigation Report and the findings contained therein. The report had been finalised on 6 October 2025.

Members were also made aware that, if an investigation concluded that there was evidence of a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, then the Council's Complaints Procedure at Section 7.1 provided the Monitoring Officer with the authority to obtain an informal resolution, in consultation with the Independent Person (IP), where it could reasonably be resolved without the need for a hearing by the Town and Parish Councils' Standards Sub-Committee ("the Standards Sub-Committee").

Although the procedure did not require consultation with the IP if the Monitoring Officer considered informal resolution was not an appropriate course of action, and that the matter should be referred for a hearing before the Town and Parish Councils' Standards Sub-Committee, it was considered that seeking their view was still beneficial prior to making such a decision.

The Sub-Committee was also notified that, in accordance with 7.1.2 of the Council's Complaints Procedure, the Investigator's Report was kept confidential until the day of the hearing in order to protect the parties. The Standards Sub-Committee had been scheduled to hold a hearing on 12 February 2026.

However, the Monitoring Officer had recently been made aware the Subject Member had resigned from their position as a Councillor, and therefore consequently, they were no longer bound by the Members' Code of Conduct, and consequently, a hearing was no longer necessary. It was noted that, by resigning prior to the hearing, there was no determination that the Subject Member had failed to comply with the Code of Conduct. Only the Standards Sub-Committee could make that decision and that was not the purpose of this Officer report (A.1).

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA & GUIDANCE:

As previously stated, the case had related to the use of social media, and the Subject Member in response to the Complaint had not disputed their use, however they believed

that their actions had been correct and that guidance on the use of social media by Councillors was outdated. The Local Government Association (LGA) – Guide to the role of Councillors on social media, was contained within the Officer's report for Members' reference.

The Monitoring Officer informed Members that the use of social media raised difficult issues and that there were differences of opinion on its use. On the one hand there were concerns that certain comments went against the grain of promoting civility in public life and amounted to no more than 'mere abuse' or personal attacks. On the other hand, the right to freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, was rightly seen as vital and that the Code of Conduct should not be used to 'police' unpopular opinions.

In recent 'Debate Not Hate Surveys', over a quarter of all comments had mentioned social media, making it the most frequently mentioned factor in levels of abuse. Respondents had explained that Councillors were easily accessible by social media and that the anonymity of social media platforms enabled users to abuse Councillors or spread disinformation without consequences. Some respondents had reported that they had come off, or reduced their use of, social media and that it had naturally led to a decrease of abuse online.

Members learned that each case would be dependent upon its own merits and individual circumstances, but that Councillors should take note of their Council's own guidance and protocols which should raise awareness of a number of tools available to assist Councillors in their use of social media.

This case had highlighted that not all Town and Parish Councils were reviewing their own guidance or raising awareness on the use of social media by Councillors but were relying solely on the District Council's previous Social Media Guidance. Although, the principles still aligned with the guidance published by the LGA, the latter was more recent and directly applied to the model Code of Conduct adopted by the vast majority of Town and Parish Councils. The Sub-Committee was therefore requested to give consideration as to whether any recommendations to Town and Parish Councils should be made in that regard.

The Monitoring Officer also made Members aware of the LGA guidance for use of social media by Councillors which was as follows:

- *Having a measured response to online opinions;*
- *Engaging in healthy debate and tackling misinformation;*
- *Abide by the golden rule;*
- *Encouraging positive, polite and constructive debate;*
- *Remember – your behaviour influences others;*
- *Use your voice to tackle misinformation and inaccuracy;*
- *Consider the Code of Conduct while being active on social media;*
- *Is information already in the public domain?;*
- *Be aware of what you share;*
- *The Councillor Code of Conduct still applies;*
- *Keeping your personal and family life private;*
- *Your responsibilities as a Councillor – the Golden Rule to follow; and*
- *How to deal with negativity and abuse online.*

Following the introduction of the Officer report (A.1), the Sub-Committee Members and IPs had an opportunity to discuss, question and debate the Officer report and debate. The outcome of the discussion and questions was:-

Councillor F. Belgrove supported the Officer's report, stating that it covered all necessary points. He stressed the importance of Town and Parish Councils having strong social media policies, noting that the Local Government Association's Code of Conduct (section 3.7 on "compliance with law") required Councillors to follow such policies and that Councils should ensure they had adequate social media policies in place.

Councillor Botterell highlighted the need for Town and Parish Councillors to fully understand the social media policy. He suggested that additional training might be required to ensure Councillors recognised the implications of using social media. He also proposed that Councillors could be asked to sign a document confirming they had read and acknowledged the policy.

Councillor Alexander questioned what social media training had been given to the Town and Parish Councils.

Councillor Alexander then noted that District Councillors themselves relied heavily on the protection offered by the Code of Conduct, which helped ensure accountability. He emphasised that the Code of Conduct made clear that Councillors must follow its rules.

Councillor F. Belgrove reassured Members that the Essex Association of Local Councils offered tutors and a range of media and social media training courses, with participants receiving a certificate upon completion. He emphasised that having clear policies was important, as they required Councillors to collectively adhere to the agreed standards.

Councillor Alexander noted that, with Tendring District Council moving towards Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and a Unitary Authority, there was uncertainty among Members and Officers about what responsibilities or requirements might be placed on Town and Parish Councils in the future and that the need of training on the Code of Conduct would be more important.

IP Jane Watts emphasised how important it was that all Local Councils took ownership and responsibility for policies.

IP Sue Gallone also stressed the importance that the guidance was kept up through training sessions and having a regular review of it.

IP David Irvine asked if all of the Town and Parish Councils had not adopted a Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer at this juncture read out to Members for the public record, an email that had been sent to her by the IP Shelia Murphy that stated:-

"I have read the paper attached to the agenda and would comment that my view would be that if there is any learning that can be taken from this matter that would assist the Town and Parish Councils it should be shared with them. Therefore, I think a reminder of the importance of their responsibility in having and implementing a policy that reflects

current guidance, recommendations and which is regularly reviewed to keep it up with social media development, would be appropriate. Perhaps along with links to relevant guidance.”

Councillor F. Belgrove sought reassurance about whether a Councillor was still able to take office if they had not signed the Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer responded to all of the questions and comments stated above, as appropriate.

The Town and Parish Council Sub-Committee, following consideration of the Officer report and its debate agreed that it wished to make the following recommendations to advise and assist Town and Parish Councils and Councillors to maintain high standards of conduct.

It was therefore moved by Councillor Codling, seconded by Councillor Alexander and unanimously:-

RESOLVED that this Sub-Committee recommends that:-

- a) Town and Parish Councils take on a more fuller education programme on the Code of Conduct and its terms of reference;
- b) Town and Parish Councils should be aware of the available social media guidance but that also they should adopt adequate policies and procedures for the use of social media in their respective Councils;
- c) the appropriate training be delivered to ensure that the requirements of the guidance and the social media policies are at the forefront of Councillors' minds to ensure that they understand and acknowledge its requirements; and
- d) Town and Parish Councils should take ownership of introducing the right policies for their own Town and Parish Council.

The Monitoring Officer thanked the Sub-Committee members and Independent Persons for their time and patience during the lengthy delays and 'false starts' whilst this meeting had been arranged.

The meeting was declared closed at 2.46 pm

Chairman

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