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Gedling Borough Council

Civic Centre,
Arnot Hill Park,
Arnold,
Nottinghamshire,
NG5 6LU

Agenda

Standards Committee

Date: **Thursday 26 November 2026**

Time: **6.00 pm**

Place: **Council Chamber**

For any further information please contact:
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Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer
0115 901 3907

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Standards Committee

Membership

Chair Councillor David Brocklebank

Vice-Chair Councillor Paul Feeney

Councillor Michael Adams
Councillor Andrew Ellwood
Councillor Andrew Meads
Councillor Martin Smith
Councillor Clive Towsey-Hinton
Councillor Russell Whiting
Rosalie Hawks
Louise Kopyrko

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Responsibility of committee:
Within their terms of reference the Standards Committee will be responsible for:
a) promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by the members and co-opted members of the council;
b) assisting members and any co-opted members of the Council to observe the Members' Code of Conduct;
c) advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct;
d) monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct;
e) advising, training or arranging to train members and any co-opted members of the council on matters relating to the Members' Code of Conduct;
f) performing the functions set out in (a) - (e) above in respect of the parish councils in the Borough;
g) granting dispensations to members and any co-opted members from requirements relating to interests set out in the Members' Code of Conduct;
h) dealing with any reports from the Monitoring Officer on any matter;

i) advising on what should be entered into the register of interests for members and co-opted members;
j) dealing with matters relating to the recruitment of co-opted independent and parish members of the Standards Committee;
k) dealing with matters relating to the recruitment of the Independent Person and to make recommendations to Council as to the appointment of the Independent Person.
l) approving all strategies, policies, protocols and procedural documents that fall within the remit of the Committee (excluding budget and policy framework items).

AGENDA

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1	**Apologies for Absence and Substitutions**	
2	**To approve, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 25.06.26**	5 - 6
3	**Declaration of Interests**	
4	**Report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics** Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer	7 - 70
5	**Code of Conduct Complaints Update** Report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer	71 - 90
6	**Any other item which the Chair considers urgent.**	

MINUTES
STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Thursday 25 June 2026

Councillor David Brocklebank (Chair)

Councillor Paul Feeney	Councillor Andrew Meads
Councillor Michael Adams	Councillor Martin Smith
Councillor Andrew Ellwood	Councillor Russell Whiting
Councillor Paul Hughes	Rosalie Hawks

Officers in Attendance: F Whyley, N Osei and L Squires

47 TO APPROVE, AS A CORRECT RECORD, THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 19/03/2026.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the above meeting, having been circulated, be approved as a correct record.

48 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS.

None.

49 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS.

Apologies for absence were received from Louise Kopryko and Councillor Towsey-Hinton with Councillor Hughes acting as his substitute.

50 GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY ANNUAL REPORT

The Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer circulated the report prior to the meeting, to inform Standards Committee of gifts and hospitality received between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026 and identify any issues arising from the annual review of the Register of Gifts and Hospitality.

RESOLVED:

That Committee:

1) Noted the details of the annual review of gifts and hospitality.

51 UPDATE TO REGISTER OF INTERESTS REPORT

The Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer circulated the report prior to the meeting, to raise awareness of changes to the requirements to provide home addresses on registers of interest.

RESOLVED:

That Committee:

1) Noted the report.

52 UPDATE ON CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

The Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer circulated the report prior to the meeting, to inform members of the Standards Committee of complaints received between 19 March 2026 and 25 June 2026.

RESOLVED:

That Committee

1) Noted the report.

53 ANY OTHER ITEM WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT.

The meeting finished at 6.14 pm

Signed by Chair:
Date:

Report to Standards Committee

Subject: Report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Date: 26th November 2026

Author: Monitoring Officer

Purpose

To advise members of the Solace report "Enough is Enough – A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government" ("the report") and the recommendations within the report.

To seek authority to establish a working group to review the Member/Officer Protocol and consider any further recommendations in the report and how they may be implemented.

Recommendation

THAT Committee:

1) Note the contents and recommendations within the report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics
2) Agree the establishment of a cross-party Working Group to review the Protocol on Member/Officer relations within the Constitution
3) Authorise the Working group to review and recommend any further actions arising from Solace report.

1 Background

1.1 In October 2026 Solace published a report entitled "Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government". The report was produced by the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics which was established in 2025 following rising concerns across the sector over increased incivility, inappropriate behaviour and declining standards nationally.

1.2 The report provides some high-level statistics as a result of evidence gathered through survey, round table discussions and public interest

reports. The results demonstrate a high level of unacceptable behaviour experienced by senior officers across the sector including 92% of Chief Executives and Senior Officers reporting that they have experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour in the last three years. The report is focused on an officer's perspective, however acknowledges that Councillors are also facing significant challenges in their roles through poor standards systems and increased public scrutiny and unacceptable treatment.

1.3 The report was commissioned to identify the issues arising and to provide practical actions that can strengthen ethical leadership, organisational culture and governance.

1.4 The recommendations at Appendix 1 to the report are broken down into actions for different parties, there are recommendations for officers, Councillors, the Police, Combined/Strategic Authorities, partners and Government including a recommendation for Government to co-design and implement an effective, modernised standards regime for local government.

1.5 The report highlights the difficulties of social media in exacerbating standards issues as well as the need to have Social Media guidelines and policies in place to support the Code of Conduct. This Council has adopted such guidelines for Councillors.

1.6 The report also recognises the importance of training for Councillors and Officers on standards and the need for dedicated support for officers who are subjected to abuse, harassment or intimidation. Whilst training for members on standards was undertaken on induction and is available to be viewed as a recording for new councillors, refresher training for councillors is currently being developed to be shared with Senior Officers and Councillors.

1.7 There is a recommendation that Councils should have member/Officer protocols in place which are regularly reviewed. Whilst this Council has such a protocol within the Constitution it is sometime since this was last reviewed.

1.8 There are further recommendations for Senior Officers within the report. These actions will be considered by Senior Leadership team.

2 Proposal

2.1 Having reviewed the recommendations for Councils set out within the report, there is a suggestion that Member/Officer Relations protocols should be reviewed annually. This Council's Protocol on Member/Officer relations contained within the constitution has not been reviewed for some time. It is proposed that a working group is established to review and suggest amendments to the Protocol that can be recommended to this Committee

and Council for adoption.

2.2 It is also proposed that the working group review the recommendations contained in the report in full and consider whether any further recommendations can be implemented or developed with findings being brought back to this Committee.

2.3 It should be noted that many of the recommendations have already been adopted by this Council, including regular reporting of standards complaints outcomes to this Committee as well as providing guidance on Social Media and adoption of the Model Code of Conduct. It should also be noted that standards complaints remain relatively low in number at the Council.

3 Alternative Options

3.1 Committee could determine not take any further action as a result of this report and not establish a working group to review the recommendations, however, the Member/Officer Protocol is in need of review and it is recommended that at least this action be taken forward.

4 Financial Implications

4.1 There are no additional costs associated with the recommendations in this report.

5 Legal Implications

5.1 There are no direct implications arising from the recommendations. Any proposed changes to the Member/Officer Protocol would require Council approval. Any other proposals arising from a review of the report by the Working Group can be brought back to Committee for consideration.

Any recommendations that relate only to officers may be considered by the Committee but may require separate approval.

6 Equalities Implications

6.1 It is proposed that equality impacts are assessed as part of any proposed recommendations or changes subsequently made.

7 Carbon Reduction/Environmental Sustainability Implications

7.1 There are no carbon reduction/environmental sustainability implications arising from this report.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 – Enough is Enough: A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in

Local Government

9 Background papers

9.1 None identified.

10 Reasons for Recommendation

10.1 To support high standards of conduct

11 Local Government Reorganisation

10.1 As LGR progresses it will be essential to ensure that processes, procedures and policies are in place to maintain high standards of conduct across the new authorities. Having up to date protocols and trained members and officers supports high standards of conduct as we transition.

Statutory Officer approval

Approved by the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 17/11/2026

Drafted by the Monitoring Officer



Enough is Enough

A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government

Final report of the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

October 2026

Just because something is frequent does not mean it is normal and it is certainly not acceptable

Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

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Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Foreword

Local government has always been about people. It is about people who choose to serve their communities, often in difficult circumstances, and who do so because they believe in the value of public service. Throughout my career, I have seen first-hand the dedication, professionalism and resilience of those working across local government. After 43 years in local government, I remain inspired by the extraordinary colleagues I have had the privilege to work alongside – their resilience, passion and relentless commitment, and the profound difference they make every day to people, places and communities.

The overwhelming majority of those working in and with local government conduct themselves with integrity, respect and professionalism. However, it has become increasingly clear that the environment in which local government operates has changed. The demands are greater, the workload heavier and the workforce smaller. At the same time, expectations have risen, and both what we do and how we do it are under unprecedented public scrutiny. Throughout my career, and especially as a Chief Executive, I have seen unacceptable behaviour become far too common: personal criticism of officers in public, where they have no right of reply; disrespectful language; bullying; and the intimidation of officers and elected members alike. As Chair of the Commission, I heard powerful evidence from people across the sector. Together, their testimony paints a deeply troubling picture of what it means to be a public servant today – one we can no longer afford to ignore.

Across the sector, we are hearing consistent evidence of rising incivility, inappropriate behaviour and declining standards. These challenges affect elected members and officers alike, but as the professional body representing chief executives and senior officers, Solace has a particular responsibility to understand and respond to the experiences of our members, many of whom have found themselves without effective means of redress when standards and behaviours break down.

Solace's Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics was established in the summer of 2025 because we recognised that these issues could no longer be viewed as isolated incidents or simply accepted as part of modern public life.

The fact that 92% of professionals have experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour within the last three years should be a cause of real concern for us all. This should not be about tolerating the situation or building resilience. Just because something is frequent does not mean it is normal and it is certainly not acceptable.

Standards matter because they are fundamental to effective leadership, good governance and public confidence. When respect is eroded, organisations become less effective. When behaviour falls below acceptable standards, relationships deteriorate, talented people leave the sector, and ultimately our ability to deliver for the communities we serve is weakened.

The Commission has therefore sought to understand not only what is happening, but why, and how we might effectively respond. Over the past year we have heard from chief executives, monitoring officers, professional bodies, civil servants, councillors, academics, interested observers, and, above all, you – our members. Taken together the evidence has painted a clear and consistent picture of an increasingly challenging operating environment for local government, shaped by financial pressures, heightened political tensions, wider societal change, and the changing nature of public discourse. Yet alongside these challenges, we have also encountered countless examples of thoughtful leadership, professional courage and organisations committed to fostering positive workplace cultures. Those examples remind us that poor behaviour is neither inevitable nor beyond our influence.

It cannot be right that local government is the only part of the public sector with no meaningful standards system. However, this report is not simply a call for an effective standards regime with teeth, although the need for meaningful reform is clear. It is equally a call to strengthen organisational culture, reinforce ethical leadership and ensure that every council is equipped to create environments where people are treated with dignity, respect and professionalism. Formal standards processes have an important role to play, but legislation alone cannot create organisational excellence. Lasting positive change depends upon leadership, accountability and a shared commitment to the values that underpin public service.

As local government continues to navigate a period of significant, wide-ranging reform, an enhanced suite of powers in a rewired state, and increasing public expectations, there is an opportunity not simply to respond to today's challenges but to build stronger, healthier organisations for the future. I hope this report contributes to that ambition by combining evidence, practical recommendations and examples of good practice that will support chief executives, senior leaders and elected members alike.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the work of the Commission over the past twelve months. We are particularly grateful to those who shared their experiences so openly, often discussing difficult personal and professional circumstances. Their willingness to do so has ensured that this report is grounded not only in research and evidence, but in the lived experiences of those working across local government every day.

This report should not be seen as the conclusion of the conversation, but as the beginning of the next phase. There is much work still to do, both nationally and within individual authorities, to strengthen standards, support those working in public service and rebuild confidence in the systems that protect them. As leaders in local government, we carry both a moral and professional duty to set the standard: to champion respect, ethics and inclusion; to model the conduct we expect from others; and to confront poor behaviour wherever we see it – never excusing it, ignoring it or simply walking past. We must build cultures that protect our people and give them the confidence to speak up. This Commission has brought these issues into the light. Now we must turn that evidence into action. With determined leadership across the sector, reinforced by a robust new government-led standards regime, I am confident we can, and will, deliver lasting change.

Ultimately, the strength of local government rests not only on the services it delivers, but on the countless thousands of staff, managers and elected members who constitute it and the values by which they lead. By working together to promote civility, strengthen standards and foster cultures built on trust and respect, we can ensure that local government remains a place where talented people want to work, where communities have confidence in their institutions, and where public service continues to make a lasting difference to people's lives.

Kath O'Dwyer
Chair, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

What the Workforce Tells Us

92%

Nine in ten chief executives and senior officers have experienced poor standards or inappropriate behaviour in the last three years

Source: Solace 2026 standards survey of members

71%

reported incidents **between councillors and officers** – the most common kind. 63% reported incidents between councillors.

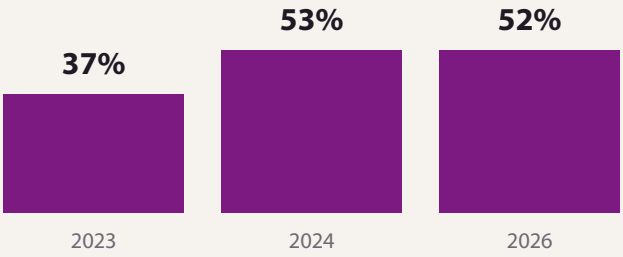
91%

said the most common issue was **respect, or a lack of it**, followed by bullying, harassment and discrimination (62%)

Abuse or intimidation experienced in the last 12 months, by source



Officers saying councillor standards are getting worse



70%

said behaviour among **members of the public** had worsened in the last three years

80%

felt some level of **risk** when fulfilling their role as an officer

45%

have **considered changing role or organisation**, or actually did, because of poor standards

23%

feel they have become **less effective** in their job as a result

23%

do not feel safe to raise concerns or challenge poor behaviour from councillors

"I have been undermined in formal meetings by the Council Leader. A Senior Member wished in writing to all other Members that I and my family would suffer from cancer and an unpleasant death

Behind every statistic presented in this report are individuals whose experiences illustrate the reality of working in local government today.

Throughout the Commission's work, chief executives, monitoring officers and other professionals described a working environment that has become increasingly challenging. Many spoke of persistent disrespect, intimidation and bullying, while others reflected on the cumulative impact of repeated low-level incivility that, over time, had damaged professional relationships, confidence and wellbeing.

Throughout this report we have included a series of quotes from individuals in the sector who have reflected, in their own words, their experiences and views around standards and civility. These have primarily been drawn from the direct evidence gathered by the Commission at its monthly sessions, as well as surveys, with a select number drawing on public interest reports. Due to the nature of the content, any quotes you see in this report have not been attributed to individuals in order to protect their identity.

The evidence gathered by the Commission is reinforced by Solace's own research, in particular repeated surveys of Solace members. The most recent of those surveys, run at the beginning of this year, found nine in ten (92%) officers reported experiencing poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour in one form or another during the previous three years. The most common sort of incident was between councillors and officers (71%) followed by incidents between councillors and councillors (63%).

And more than half (52%) of officers say standards and behaviours among councillors are getting worse. This continues a trend from 2024 when 53% said standards and behaviours among councillors was getting worse which in itself was up from 37% in 2023.

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds (70%) said behaviour among members of the public had worsened in the last three years.

Collectively these experiences range from disrespectful day-to-day interactions to sustained bullying, intimidation and harassment.

By far and away the most common issue of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour relates to respect – or a lack of – (91%), followed by incidents of bullying, harassment and discrimination (62%); trends which echo previous years' findings of 91% (2024) and 89% (2023) respectively.

Almost two-thirds (62%) said they had experienced abuse or intimidation from elected members over the last 12 months, with 44% identifying it as occurring either 'occasionally' or 'frequently'. Abuse or intimidation from members of the public was most frequently reported with 74% of respondents reporting some instance of this behaviour in the last 12 months. Comparatively, only 25% reported experiencing abuse or intimidation from officers.

All of this demonstrates that poor standards and incivility are not isolated incidents but a widespread challenge affecting organisations and individuals across the sector.

In terms of personal impact, eight in 10 (80%) respondents said they felt some level of risk when fulfilling their role as officer, with 34% feeling at risk 'frequently' or 'occasionally'. This was consistent with the 2024 survey (85%), demonstrating that this is an ongoing issue.

Almost half (45%) have either considered changing role and/or organisation or actually did make a change because of issues around poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour showing the picture has not really changed in this regard compared to previous years (50% in 2024 and 51% in 2023).

It is perhaps unsurprising then that nearly a quarter (23%) feel they have become less effective in their job due to poor standards or inappropriate behaviour – an improvement on the 34% reported in 2024 but still a worryingly high number.

Poor standards undermine trust, damage organisational culture and create hostile working environments in which people feel less able to perform at their best. Poor behaviour can also have other significant organisational consequences, contributing to recruitment and retention challenges, consuming valuable leadership time through lengthy standards processes and disputes, and diverting already stretched resources away from delivering services to communities. As the evidence throughout this report demonstrates, standards are therefore not simply a governance issue; they are fundamental to the effectiveness, resilience and long-term sustainability of local government.

Scope of the Report

The Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics was established in July 2025 to better understand the changing nature of standards and behaviour across local government and to identify practical actions that can strengthen ethical leadership, organisational culture and governance.

The Commission met every month over a twelve-month period to gather evidence from a wide range of contributors, including chief executives, senior officers, including monitoring officers, as well as councillors through engagement with the Local Government Association. In addition to this the Commission also took evidence from academics, professional bodies, charities, civil servants and sector experts, recognising that improving standards requires a shared understanding of the challenges across the whole system.

Split into two parts, this report aims to capture the challenges faced by those in the sector, as told by those within it, and then to offer practical proposals addressing those challenges. Organised thematically, Part I gives an overview of the most frequently referenced issues affecting standards, whilst Part II tackles these thematic areas with suggestions at the national, organisational, and individual level. Each section in Part II ends with a concise set of actionable recommendations for the relevant parts of the system that the Commission feels are key to achieving concrete change. The Commission has also developed a couple of tools to help readers navigate some of the issues explored within this report.

Whilst the Commission heard evidence from a broad range of perspectives, this report focuses primarily on the experiences of officers, particularly chief executives and senior leaders. This is not intended to diminish the challenges that elected politicians face in their roles. Members, just like officers, also operate within a broken standards system that undermines local government. As such, there are significant problems in how they are treated, particularly by members of the public, as well as how those problems are dealt with. We absolutely support moves to address this to make the sector a place where all of those within it, members and officers alike, are free from fear of abuse and intimidation. Indeed, earlier this year Solace worked with the LGA and all other professional sector bodies to publish a joint statement on civility in public life, in response to concerns about the increase in abuse council workers are facing whilst doing their jobs. That joint work is continuing to this day.

This report's focus, therefore, is not about sidelining the concerns of others but rather reflects the Commission's remit and the evidence it was established to examine.

A Changing Operating Environment

"I have seen a marked decline in standards, understanding and acceptance in both the public and councillors in my career. Navigating that whilst encouraging future recruitment, and staff retention, in that environment is challenging

A consistent message throughout the Commission's evidence was that this is not a static problem. Contributors repeatedly reflected that standards and behaviour have deteriorated over recent years, with many describing a decline in the baseline level of civility within public life.

Relationships between officers, elected members and members of the public have become increasingly strained, while behaviours once regarded as unacceptable are now perceived to occur with greater frequency. From Solace's 2026 survey, more than half (52%) of officers say standards and behaviours among councillors are getting worse and more than two-thirds (70%) said behaviour among members of the public had worsened in the last three years.

This is not contained to the UK either. When the Commission met with international colleagues from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA, all affirmed a sense of declining civility and worsening behaviours in their respective countries.

The Commission heard that these changes should also be understood within a wider societal context. Declining levels of trust in public institutions have contributed to a more challenging environment for those working in public service. Where confidence in institutions is weakened, frustration and hostility are more readily directed towards those delivering local services, often placing officers and elected members at the forefront of wider public dissatisfaction.

Several contributors also reflected on the lasting social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship, many observed that standards of behaviour appeared to deteriorate following the pandemic, with increased hostility, reduced patience and greater incivility evident both within organisations and in interactions with members of the public.

The Commission recognises that further evidence in this area continues to emerge, but the consistency of these observations across contributors to this work suggests this perception is widely shared.

Indeed, research by Ipsos found that 84% of Britons view the country as divided, with 67% believing the UK is actively gridlocked in "culture wars". A 2026 "Britain Under Strain" study by More in Common revealed that one in six Britons now finds verbal harassment acceptable under certain political or social circumstances.

Pollsters and sociologists attribute the spike in post-Covid hostility to a distinct combination of systemic pressures. The ongoing economic strain is acting as a primary catalyst for public anger. Continuous tracking by the Office for National Statistics reveals that massive majorities (between 88% and 90%) consistently rank the cost of living and the state of the NHS as their top anxieties. This prolonged financial stress has left the public with a much shorter fuse.

Meanwhile, trust in political institutions has eroded significantly. Rather than blaming fellow citizens, data from Ipsos reveals that half of Britons view the nation as increasingly "ungovernable", pointing the finger squarely at politicians for eroding public standards and stoking cultural divisions for political gain.

Specifically in relation to local government, persistent financial pressures have further intensified these challenges. Years of financial constraint have inevitably reduced organisational capacity. Meanwhile many council run services have seen inexorably increasing demand. As a result, the decisions about which services to further cut, and the extent to which these difficult decisions will have on people, intensifies year on year.

Contributors to the Commission's work consistently highlighted that these pressures have affected working relationships, increased tensions within organisations and shaped public perceptions of local government.

At the same time, standards issues themselves create additional demand on already stretched systems, requiring authorities to dedicate time and resources to resolving disputes despite having fewer staff and less funding available to do so. Rather than being separate challenges, financial pressures and standards issues increasingly reinforce one another. Indeed, our analysis of Public Interest Reports demonstrates that the consequences of poor leadership are felt in both weak financial management and pervasive behavioural problems.

The Commission also recognises that local government is currently operating during a period of considerable reform and organisational change. Reforms to planning, children's and adult social care combined with the development of new combined authorities, confusion over the future of local government reorganisation, and changes taking place across other parts of the public sector as part of a broader agenda to rewire the state all create additional pressures and uncertainty, as well as opportunities. While further evidence is needed to fully understand the relationship between these reforms and their impact on standards and behaviours, contributors warned periods of significant transition can increase organisational tensions and place additional demands and difficult decision making on leaders responsible for maintaining effective governance and healthy organisational cultures.

Alongside these changes, contributors highlighted the changing media landscape. The decline of traditional local journalism, coupled with the rapid growth of social media, has altered the context in which local government operates. While social media has created valuable opportunities for engagement, it has also enabled misinformation and disinformation, personal attacks and online abuse to spread more rapidly, placing additional pressure on councils, elected members and officers alike. These issues are explored in greater detail later in this report.

Finally, the Commission heard that uncertainty surrounding the respective roles of local authorities and the police can sometimes complicate the handling of serious standards issues. This should not be understood as a criticism of policing itself, but rather reflects the lack of clarity that can exist around when unacceptable behaviour crosses the threshold from a breach of standards into potential criminal conduct. It may be time to consider whether public servants and staff in local authorities should be treated as having a slightly different threshold for intervention, as occurs for blue light services. Greater clarity around responsibilities and thresholds would support more consistent responses where serious incidents occur.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that declining standards cannot be understood in isolation. They reflect the interaction of wider societal change, organisational pressures and weaknesses within existing governance arrangements. The remainder of this report examines these issues in greater depth before setting out practical recommendations to strengthen standards, support leaders and foster organisational cultures founded on professionalism, integrity and respect.



PART I

The State of Standards

In my time working for local authorities, I have witnessed/seen… a former Leader of a Council bullying browbeaten officers because they did not like the advice they were given and being called to the Leader's Office like a naughty school pupil… and separately officers being told in public meetings that they are incompetent. And this is just the tip of the iceberg

This section sets out the Commission's findings on the current state of professional standards and ethics in local government. It examines how declining standards are being experienced in practice, the behaviours and circumstances that appear to be driving these issues, and the consequences for officers, elected members, organisations and their partners.

The evidence gathered by the Commission points to a complex picture. Poor standards do not arise from a single cause, nor do they take a single form. They range from persistent low-level disrespect and poor communication through to bullying, intimidation, harassment and threats. They can arise between officers and elected members, between elected members themselves, from members of the public towards those working in councils, and, increasingly, through online spaces. And the culprits can be a single person or multiple individuals in any given local authority.

These behaviours also need to be understood within their wider context. Changes in the nature of political discourse, the increasing use of social media, organisational and financial pressures, changes in political representation and a lack of confidence in existing standards arrangements can all contribute to an environment in which poor behaviour is more likely to occur and less likely to be effectively challenged.

To begin, we are going to first look at the forms of poor behaviour most frequently experienced by our members. These fall broadly into the categories of disrespect, bullying and inappropriate behaviour and are often the most visible manifestation of poor standards. Within the Commission's research, they were also the types of misconduct that featured most prominently anecdotally and within survey data. Additionally, this section will also touch on other manifestations of inappropriate behaviour such as overly close professional relationships, as well as how the consequences of misconduct can extend beyond the boundaries of an authority.

IN THIS PART

01 Behaviours
Respect · Bullying and Abuse · Blurred Boundaries

02 Impacts of Behaviour
Partnership working · Women and minoritised groups

03 Contextual and Wider Factors
Inexperience · Social media · Councillors · A failing regime · The police



PART I · THE STATE OF STANDARDS

01 Behaviours

Respect

//

The lack of trust is awful. Councillors see officers as the enemy sometimes, when we're actually on the same side

Underlying many of the behaviours described to the Commission was a broader issue: a lack of respect.

Solace's 2026 survey found that respect, or the lack of it, was the most commonly reported issue of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour, identified by 91% of respondents. This finding is consistent with the wider evidence gathered by the Commission about a perceived deterioration in everyday civility and conduct.

A lack of respect can manifest itself in relatively commonplace ways: interruptions during meetings, dismissive attitudes, an unwillingness to listen to alternative views or a lack of collaborative working. However, the same erosion of respect can also exist alongside much more serious behaviours, including belittling comments both in private and in public, sustained bullying campaigns, intimidation, threats and, in the most extreme cases, death threats.

Respect therefore needs to be understood as more than simply an expectation of polite behaviour. It is a foundation for effective working relationships, good governance and a functioning democratic system. Without it, officers and members are less able to challenge one another constructively, difficult decisions become harder to navigate and trust within organisations begins to deteriorate.

Bullying and Abuse

//

I have witnessed councillors berating officers over email when requested actions have been declined as not in line with policy. I have witnessed councillors publicly issue rhetoric intentionally disparaging officers

The nature and severity of abusive and disrespectful conduct can vary considerably. Some are isolated incidents, others form part of persistent patterns of behaviour. Some occur between individuals, while others can become embedded within wider organisational cultures. Regardless of their form, these behaviours can damage professional relationships, undermine organisational effectiveness and have a profound impact on an individual's experience of work.

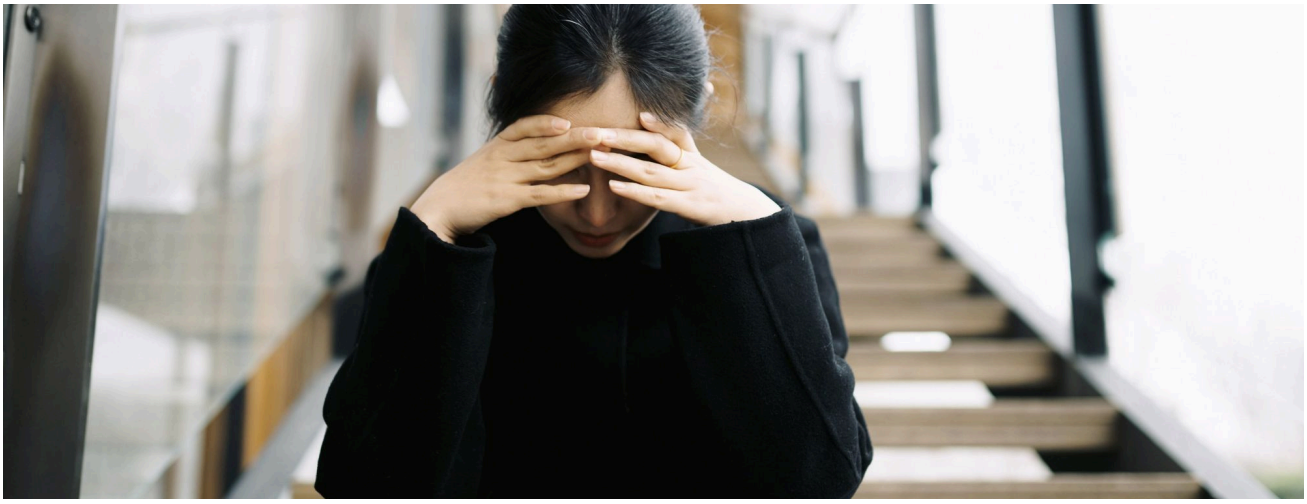
For officers, misconduct by elected members was most frequently identified as the primary source of standards issues directed towards them. Within Solace's survey, for example, half (49%) of respondents to Solace's 2026 survey identified councillors as the most frequent source of poor standards and/or inappropriate behaviour. This was mirrored in the anecdotal evidence heard by the Commission where councillors were also most frequently identified out of all groups as breaching codes of conduct.

> *"I have experienced behaviour from a senior councillor that was borderline bullying and had to call out respectfully that the behaviour was not OK nor conducive to effective working relationships, whilst not undermining the legitimate role they played"*

This does not mean that poor behaviour is confined to relationships between members and officers, however. The Commission also heard significant evidence of abuse and intimidation from members of the public and Solace's survey revealed that three quarters (74%) of respondents reported some instance of this behaviour in the last 12 months. This behaviour could often take the form of harassment campaigns, vexatious requests for information, and threatening online behaviour.

The limited statutory protections that officers have around these issues was exemplified by a recent news story in which a council director was named directly by a member of the public and taken to court. This singling out for a legal attack is just one example of the ways in which officers are increasingly experiencing harassment. From Solace's wider conversations with other sector bodies, there were discussions around the violence experienced by frontline staff, abuse faced by members of elections teams, and the intersection of the changing political landscape with abuse and intimidation.

> *"The member of the public was a professional, and the employer did all it could to restrain and protect the officers from the intimidation and bullying approaches they used. However, there was only so much that could be done"*



This reflects what contributors to the Commission often reflected on; a sense that behavioural standards across public life, and towards those in it, have deteriorated considerably in recent years. Additionally, claims around 'free speech' have underpinned the defences of those that violate standards of behaviour.

Having to devote attention to dealing with this misconduct by members of the public not only depletes an organisation's resources by having them tied up in attempting to handle complaints and address issues – with mixed results – but has serious effects for the wellbeing of the individuals being targeted.

> *"Those guilty of poor behaviour refuse to accept it as such, citing it as 'freedom of speech'"*

Inappropriate behaviour also takes place within groups too, such as between elected members or between officers. These behaviours can occur in person, through meetings and other workplace interactions, or through email, social media and other forms of electronic communication.

The Commission repeatedly heard that the cumulative effect of persistent, low-level inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour can be particularly damaging. Individual incidents may not always appear sufficiently serious to trigger a formal response, but repeated interruptions, dismissive comments, aggressive communication, public criticism or a refusal to engage constructively, can gradually erode professional relationships and individual confidence. Over time, this can create an environment in which people become anxious about interactions, reluctant to speak openly and less able to work collaboratively.

This dimension of the problem is important. The impact of poor standards should not be assessed solely by considering the most extreme incidents. A culture in which low-level incivility is routinely tolerated is equally corrosive because it establishes a new baseline for what is considered acceptable. Once this happens, behaviours that would previously have been challenged can become normalised, making it increasingly difficult for individuals and organisations to intervene effectively.

Blurred Boundaries

> *"I have witnessed senior councillors decline transformation plans developed to ensure fair and efficient service delivery because of potential negative impacts on the personal interests of other party members*

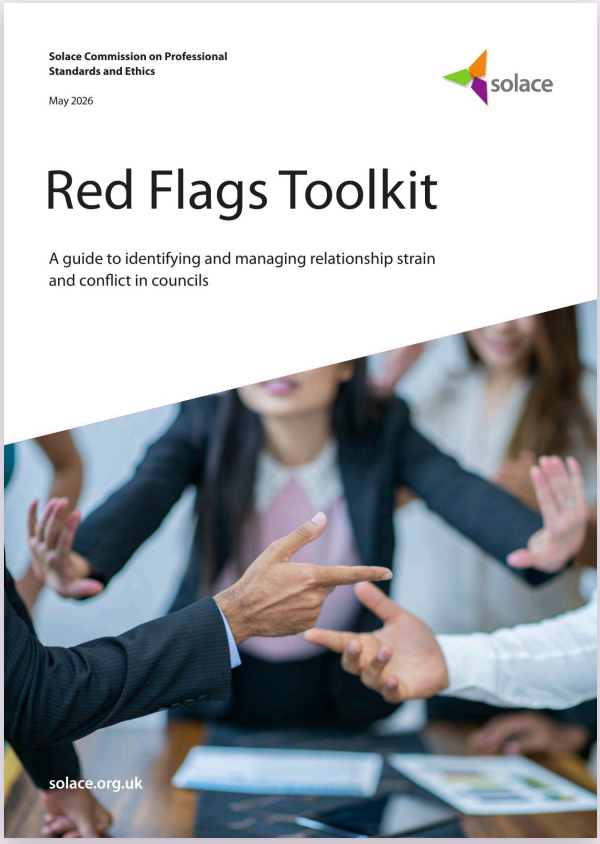
Poor standards do not always take the form of overt hostility. The Commission also heard about the risks created by relationships between elected members and officers that become overly close or fail to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. This is an example of a type of inappropriate behaviour that is potentially more difficult to spot within an authority as it is often

low-level, doesn't always easily lend itself to being addressed through the traditional standards system, and can leave those affected by it unsure of who to report to.

However, just as an abusive remark would violate the principles of an organisation's code of conduct, so too would a relationship that threatened an officer's political neutrality. As such, it needs to be taken just as seriously.

The political impartiality of officers is fundamental to local government. Officers must be able to provide professional advice, including advice that elected members may find difficult or unwelcome, without their independence being compromised by personal or political relationships. Where boundaries become blurred, the traditional checks and balances within an authority can be weakened and behaviours that should be challenged can become more difficult to address.

The Commission's Red Flags Toolkit provides an illustration of how these risks can develop – and, crucially, what you can do about it.



SOLACE RESOURCE

Red Flags Toolkit

A guide to identifying and managing relationship strain and conflict in councils, produced by the Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics.

Available on the Solace Civility Hub
solace.org.uk/civility-hub

CASE STUDY

Blurred professional boundaries and a culture of fear

At a large unitary council in England during the mid 2010s, the Chief Executive and other officers experienced significant behavioural challenges from the Council's leader and other members. There were a number of signs of escalating incivility and misconduct such as hostile communications, shouting in meetings, and reports by officers of a culture of anxiety and fear that went unmanaged.

These behaviours were compounded, and reinforced by, blurring of boundaries of professional responsibility and inappropriately close relationships between the leader and certain officers. For example, the Chief Operating Officer/s151 Officer going on holiday with the Leader, and members becoming too closely involved with service delivery. The consequences of this became clear when the situation reached a crisis point and a scandal ensued around contracts given to a health organisation headed by someone personally known to the leader. A Public Interest report found that permissive behaviour by senior officers had been created as a result of the culture of fear that the leader had been able to establish, as well as lack of clarity regarding professional boundaries.

The Chief Executive had attempted some level of challenge and scrutiny to counteract the Leader, but behaviour and the operating environment had devolved to the point that this was insufficient to address the problem.

The outcome was an internal whistleblowing report that resulted in a lengthy police investigation, the resignation of the Council Leader in question and various further resignations and disciplinary investigations into key officers, who also eventually resigned from the Council. This period of poor governance and culture were not effectively or proactively tackled by senior leadership and had serious consequences for the morale of staff and the public image of the authority.

This case study demonstrates not only the risks of inappropriately close working relationships, but also the broader relationship between poor organisational standards and conduct and authorities that require intervention due to governance and financial failings. As in the authority above, a failure to rigorously uphold professional boundaries and respect had serious implications for the governance of the organisation and its financial decision making. This was founded on two axes – the aggressive behaviours of the Leader and the permissive stances of the officers that failed to appropriately offer challenge. The resulting intervention and investigation resulted from fiscal problems caused in part by the culture of poor standards that already existed within the authority. What this makes clear is how an organisational culture that fails to promote and embed good behaviours lays the groundwork for situations that necessitate intervention.



02

Impacts of Behaviour

This section explores the effects of misconduct on both individuals and organisations. In particular, it looks at how the consequences of poor standards can extend beyond the bounds of an authority, as well as how they can affect women and those from minoritised groups.

Effects on Partnership Working

The consequences of poor standards extend beyond the individuals directly involved and beyond the organisation itself.

The Commission heard that external partners are often aware when relationships and behaviours within an authority have deteriorated. Poor internal culture can affect how partners experience an organisation, potentially undermining confidence, collaboration and the ability to work effectively across organisational boundaries.

This is particularly significant because local government has always had a unique convening role in place, operating through complex networks of partnerships. Councils already work closely with health services, police forces, voluntary and community organisations, businesses and other public bodies to deliver services and achieve shared outcomes. However, this activity is only going to increase as part of a rewired state. Effective partnership working depends on trust and professional relationships. Where poor standards and behaviours become visible externally, the consequences can therefore extend well beyond the immediate workplace.



Impact on Women and Minoritised Groups

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I really hate to say this, but there is almost a boys' club atmosphere among some of the more senior male colleagues, and a lack of respect for females who are often more senior and more qualified than themselves

The experience of poor standards and inappropriate behaviour is not equally distributed across the workforce. The Commission heard evidence that women and people from minoritised groups experience more targeted forms of abuse, often linked directly to their protected characteristics.

Findings from the 2025 Solace/ALACE survey on women in local government indicate that women in senior leadership roles, particularly those working in public services and local government, can feel that they are held to higher standards and subjected to greater scrutiny than their male counterparts.

Solace's 2024 survey also found that more than a quarter of respondents (28%) had experienced abuse or intimidation relating to their protected characteristics. Importantly, 59% identified sex as one of the characteristics involved, making it by far the most commonly reported protected characteristic.

> *"It would seem that elected members generally prefer the advice of a male"*

The survey also found that almost half of respondents (49%) had experienced abuse or intimidation in their role as an officer either frequently or occasionally over the previous twelve months, while 47% said they had felt personally at risk either frequently or occasionally when fulfilling their role.

These findings provide further evidence of the targeted nature of abuse experienced by officers and, in particular, the disproportionate relevance of sex within reports of protected-characteristic-related abuse.

> *"We often aren't seen as leadership contenders unless we operate in a very masculine, overconfident and abrasive way"*



The experiences shared through the Solace/ALACE survey further illustrate the complex nature of this problem:

> *"Black women in leadership are subjected to the worst treatment"*

Another respondent observed:

> *"I believe it is even more difficult for women from global majority backgrounds to be treated the same as their counterparts"*

The experiences described were not limited to racial discrimination. One respondent reported:

> *"In my previous authority … I was removed from a Director role after a couple of peers wrote to say they felt uncomfortable serving next to a gay woman in leadership"*

Others described the way misogyny can manifest through relationships between senior women and elected members:

> *"The level of scrutiny in public arenas and on social media, along with the levels of abuse on social media feel and appear different for senior female leaders in the public sector when compared to male counterparts"*

These experiences are unacceptable in themselves, but they also have consequences for the future composition of local government leadership. If talented people from underrepresented groups face greater hostility, scrutiny or abuse when they enter senior public service roles, this can create additional barriers to recruitment, retention and progression at a time when councils are already struggling to create workforces and council chambers which are truly representative of the places they serve.

For the sector to achieve this aim councils must therefore take seriously the environments in which professionals and elected members are expected to work. Greater representation cannot be achieved simply through recruitment. People must also feel that they can succeed and progress without being subjected to disproportionate hostility because of who they are.



03

Contextual and Wider Factors

Consequences of Inexperience

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I have experienced shouting and swearing at me in front of other senior officers; shouting and swearing at other senior officers in front of me; harbouring grudges against individuals; making personal comments; making passive-aggressive digs and exhibiting just plain aggressive behaviours more akin to a football match than a professional workplace

Those who make up the local government workforce and elected membership come from a diverse range of professional and political backgrounds. This diversity is a strength, but it also means that individuals enter local government with varying levels of experience and understanding of its culture, governance arrangements and expectations.

Periods of change, including elections, changes of administration, local government reorganisation and turnover in senior leadership, can result in large numbers of people entering new roles simultaneously. The Commission repeatedly heard that this can create particular challenges where individuals have limited understanding of:

- their role and responsibilities;
- the distinction between member and officer functions;

- the culture and values of the authority; and
- where to seek guidance, support and mentorship.

Inexperience does not inevitably result in poor behaviour. However, it can make existing tensions harder to manage and increase the likelihood of misunderstandings, particularly where relationships are already strained or where individuals are unclear about the boundaries of their role.

Professor Catherine Needham, who spoke to the Commission on her research 'Revisiting the 21st Century Councillor' and 'Revisiting the 21st Century Public Servant' – a body of work which has taken place over the last 10 years, drew attention to a recurring source of friction between councillors and officers: differing views about who speaks for a place, particularly as officers increasingly operate at neighbourhood level. She noted that tensions often arise where the boundary between strategic and operational responsibilities is unclear. The Commission heard that these challenges can be further intensified following changes in political control, particularly where significant numbers of members are entering office for the first time.

The Commission also heard evidence from Dr Jason Lowther, Director of the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham, whose research examines the experience of "challenger parties" entering local government. His research highlights a period of adjustment to formal governance structures, variations in member-officer relationships, and the risks associated with political instability and high turnover.

Dr Lowther also looked at the potential implications of this for professional standards and ethics, which include:

- internal tension and instability
- conflict with officer roles and perceptions of adversarial 'bureaucracy'; and
- attempts to limit or undermine scrutiny (council, public and press)

The issue is not confined to elected members. Inexperienced or insufficiently supported senior officers may struggle to manage difficult relationships, challenge inappropriate behaviour effectively, or navigate unfamiliar political circumstances.

The Commission heard that standards can be particularly vulnerable during periods of organisational or political transition, when members and officers are working together for the first time and established relationships have yet to develop. Even experienced senior officers may find themselves facing unfamiliar challenges where there are significant changes in political composition, such as a move to no overall control. The Commission also considered the changing political environment within which local authorities operate, including the increasing presence of independent councillors and councillors elected from groups without established party structures.

A higher proportion of councillors in some authorities now have limited or no accountability to a traditional party structure or party whip. At the same time, some councillors and groups have explicitly campaigned on platforms of disruption or opposition to established political arrangements.

This reflects a wider change in the political composition and control of local government. The Local Government Association reported in 2023 that the number of councils under no overall control had more than doubled since 2019, with one in three English councils then operating without a single party holding a majority. The 2026 local elections continued this pattern, with the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) stating that 42% of English councils were under no overall control following the elections. At the same time, independent and smaller-party representation has increased: the LGA reported that independents with Residents Associations gained 104 councillors in the 2024 elections, while Greens gained a further 74, with 464 members elected across independents, Greens and smaller parties. This was a trend similarly replicated across 2026's elections, with massive gains for parties such as the Greens and Reform who gained 441 and 1,452 councillors respectively, as well as continued modest growth in the number of independents winning seats across the country.

The increased influence of independent councillors can be particularly significant where relatively small numbers of members hold the balance of power. This isn't an issue in and of itself; the composition of local government can take a multitude of different forms and has done so for decades in some places. However, where relationships between members and officers are

already under strain, different political priorities and competing agendas can lead to friction and make effective governance more difficult.

These challenges may be compounded where independent councillors or newly formed political groups have fewer formal support structures, mentorship opportunities or established processes than are typically available within larger political parties. This does not imply that independent councillors are more likely to behave poorly. Rather, it reinforces the importance of ensuring that all councillors have access to appropriate induction, guidance and support, regardless of political affiliation.

The Commission also considered examples where individual councillors have adopted particularly disruptive approaches, with consequences for officer-member relationships and organisational governance.

One councillor who, after being kicked out of the Conservative group and operating as an Independent, exhibited worsening and more uncontrollable behaviour. His most recent offence related to allegations of homophobic abuse, after which he was subject to legal proceedings. The contributor who shared this with the Commission noted how the lack of established party structures through which to escalate complaints about behaviour made dealing with this individual that much more difficult.

The wider point is that changes in political composition can alter the dynamics within a council. Authorities need governance arrangements and leadership practices that can accommodate these changes while maintaining professional relationships, clear delineation of roles and appropriate standards of conduct. At present, there is no universal approach to addressing these challenges. Variations in the application of codes of conduct, induction arrangements and participation in training mean there is no consistent sector-wide standard for ensuring that members and officers fully understand their responsibilities when entering local government.



Social Media and Technology – Pitfalls and Challenges

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The advent of social media where you can hurl insults and abuse at people without any seeming consequence has emboldened poor behaviours and expectation that we should tolerate what should not be tolerated

The development of social media has fundamentally changed the wider environment in which local government operates. Platforms that can perform a hugely useful role in supporting engagement and communication with communities are also, sadly, increasingly important channels through which abuse, intimidation and harassment are directed towards those working in local government.

Over a third of respondents (39%) to Solace's 2026 survey identified social media as the location in which poor behaviour most frequently occurs. This proportion was even higher in the LGA's 2025 Debate Not Hate survey of councillors where almost two thirds (64%) named social media or open online forums as the most frequently reported channel of abuse or intimidation. While the most visible examples heard by the Commission involved abusive comments from members of the public, inappropriate behaviour can also originate from within authorities, including from elected members and other individuals working in local government.

The Commission also heard concerns about the wider online environment in which this behaviour takes place. Social media algorithms can reinforce particular views and communities, while increasingly hostile online discourse and the growth of radicalised language and movements can contribute to a more aggressive environment.

On top of this, there is also often an inherent asymmetry between those within councils and the transparency measures they operate within, such as publicly available information including names, contact details, and so on, and anonymously perpetrated online abuse. For those who become the target of abuse, the ability for comments and content to spread rapidly can significantly increase the scale and persistence of the experience. Professor Needham's research, for example, found that the negative role played by social media was a part of an increasing sense of public life feeling less safe.

> *"My experience involves a recent sustained politically motivated attack towards officers from an elected Member over six months. This included a bombardment of rude and abrupt emails sent at inappropriate times, being publicly berated by the member in a formal public meeting. Inappropriate social media posts, which included mistruths to gain political advantage. Subject access requests and FOIs over a sustained period. Phone calls out of hours, making threatening suggestions such as 'change your plans otherwise this will go nuclear' as well as face-to-face gaslighting to such an extent it became disenabling to undertake my role effectively"*

Social media has also created new challenges around misinformation and disinformation. False or misleading information can spread quickly, requiring councils to devote considerable time and resources to monitoring, responding and correcting claims. Local online groups and forums can similarly become environments in which negative or inappropriate commentary about council staff is amplified. As the Commission heard, this has become a significant issue for the sector.

Contributors gave accounts of how social media had driven targeted harassment campaigns, eaten up capacity, and overwhelmed communications teams. The pace at which inaccurate information can circulate was also discussed as having a particularly detrimental effect in the current politically polarised operating environment. Councils operating in this context were further affected by closed social media groups that eliminated any opportunity to offer corrections and facilitated the proliferation of incorrect messaging. Overall, the sheer volume of misinformation and disinformation that organisations must contend with has rendered councils continually struggling to play catch up, with little ability to proactively address it.

One incident shared with the Commission concerned the use of AI by an independent councillor to generate a politically motivated video of a political opponent. This followed a disagreement within the Council around when to hold a debate on the city's finances. Due to constraints within the current standards system, the councillor responsible for creating the video didn't face any consequences for creating the video or for circulating it online. Online misconduct is particularly difficult to address through existing standards arrangements. One challenge is determining whether an elected member is acting in their official capacity when using social media. There are often no clear distinctions between personal and official councillor accounts, making it difficult to establish when conduct falls within the scope of existing standards arrangements. These questions intersect with legitimate rights to freedom of expression and with the willingness and ability of social media companies to enforce their own rules.

One respondent to Solace's survey recorded the following experience:

> *"I've seen dirty tricks social media campaigns between parties seeking to vilify opponents and dragging senior officers into the crossfire, I've been stalked in person and virtually, had spurious complaints made to civil servants, police etc. I've been described as part of the cultural Marxist elite – terms used by Anders Breivik and the alt right, I've had my diary subject to FOI and weekly publication online"*

The account illustrates how online abuse can move beyond criticism of decisions or policies and become sustained personal targeting. It also demonstrates the way in which online and offline behaviours can intersect, with social media activity generating complaints, scrutiny and pressure across multiple institutions.

Beyond this, a more foundational issue that is preventing the robust tackling of online abuse; the categorisation of social media sites as "platforms". This designation, as opposed to "publishers", allows for the companies that sit behind them to dodge responsibility for the content and behaviour that takes place on their websites. As a result, there is a lack of meaningful pressure on them to grapple with this issue. Whilst local government can do what it can to introduce its own codes of conduct and influence behaviours, if a space exists where individuals feel uninhibited and unconstrained to act badly, there is currently little recourse to be taken at the sector level to address it.

Experiences of Councillors

Although the Commission's primary focus has been on officers, standards issues clearly affect elected members as well. Councillors operate in an increasingly challenging environment, with many experiencing poor behaviour from members of the public as well as from other councillors.

Evidence from the Local Government Association, alongside material gathered by the Commission, provides an important perspective on these experiences. The LGA's 2025 Debate Not Hate survey of councillors found that almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) reported feeling personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor, with around the same number (72%) reporting having experienced abuse or intimidation due to their role as councillors over the last 12 months.

Councillors can face hostility and abuse because of decisions they take, the political positions they represent or simply because they hold public office. As Professor Needham's research showed, councillors often feel they become a 'lightning rod' for hostility.

This is important to recognise because standards and civility cannot be framed solely as an issue of member behaviour towards officers. Councillors themselves can be victims of inappropriate behaviour and abuse, and creating a healthier environment for local government requires standards to apply consistently across the whole system.

At the same time, the distinct roles of elected members and officers must remain clear. Officers have professional responsibilities and duties of political impartiality that differ from those of elected representatives. A strong standards framework must therefore recognise both the shared expectation of respectful behaviour and the different responsibilities of those working within the local government system.

It should be made clear that it is not an either/or dichotomy between doing more to tackle abuse from members of the public and remedying the absence of a fit-for-purpose standards regime within local government – we can do both. Building effective standards is about more than just the regime itself, it is about addressing all the parts that sit around it, including the relationship between the public and those within authorities. Nonetheless, building an effective standards system should remain a priority.

A Failing Standards Regime

// The sanctions that could be posed upon elected councillors for inappropriate behaviour I have experienced are not worth the paper they are written on

The standards issues plaguing the sector are evidently prolific and damaging, but what role does the system that underpins them play? The most commonly cited complaint that the Commission heard is that the current regime 'lacks teeth', undercutting its role as both deterrent and disciplinary system. As a result, many have felt increasingly disenchanted with the system, with some noting that even when they have used it, it is woefully insufficient.

> *"There is limited action that can be taken, especially against councillors"*

The distinction is important because the current regime does provide some sanctions, but these are limited in their scope and severity. Where a breach is found, councils can, depending on their local arrangements, issue a formal censure or public criticism, require a councillor to apologise or undertake code of conduct training, and remove them from cabinet, committee or other representative roles. However, councils currently have no power to suspend a councillor for breaching the code of conduct, disqualify them from office for such a breach, or withhold their allowances as a disciplinary sanction. There is also no explicit statutory power to impose a ban from council premises or withdraw access to facilities. The Government has acknowledged that these limitations leave councils without an effective way of dealing with more serious or persistent misconduct.

This has also led to emboldening perpetrators of inappropriate behaviour and repeat offenders. Those who are minded to operate in such a way understand there are limited consequences for violating conduct codes and feel they can act either with impunity or are proud of the recourse taken against them. As one respondent to Solace's survey on standards in 2024 detailed:

> *"I have experience of a member who uses standards as a badge of honour and laughs during any conduct enquiries as he is aware that there are no sanctions"*

Whilst this is an extreme example, it is emblematic of the ways in which the standards regime fails. Not only are some significant sanctions unavailable, including suspension, disqualification and withholding of allowances, but the sanctions that are available are insufficient to have a meaningful impact. In this current moment the most that is required of offenders is being 'required' to write a letter of apology. This renders standards processes entirely ineffectual as there are no meaningful mechanisms with which to punish conduct violations.

The failures of the regime are also evident in its lack of capacity to deal with vexatious complaints, whether from elected politicians, or members of the public. What this means is that the standards system not only fails to address and disincentivise poor behaviour but can itself be wielded as tool of abuse.

This is an issue that is becoming ever more pressing with the rise of technologies such as generative AI, particularly at the hands of members of the public. New tools allow for individuals to draft and submit complaints and appeals at a faster pace than ever before, creating even more strain on the system as councils still need to review and respond to them fairly and thoughtfully. As AI use continues to grow, the challenge for councils is not simply managing increased volumes, but ensuring they can continue to provide compassionate, human responses while drawing out the insight needed to make improvements.

> *"I was systematically targeted by a member of the public. I think the council didn't know quite how to handle it"*

As it stands, the system is currently unable to offer officers robust protections when experiencing these types of harassment campaigns – or adequate methods to tackle them.

It is not just in the dealing with incidents that the system falters. This has also led to non-reporting of incidents due to a fear of retribution and intimidation; an issue exacerbated by the knowledge that the system lacks real capacity to remove offending parties.

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents to Solace's 2026 survey said they did not feel safe to raise concerns or challenge poor standards and behaviour from councillors, compared to 13% for members of the public and 10% for other officers.

The Commission also heard frequent accounts of retaliatory behaviour following challenges to inappropriate conduct. This was particularly evident where officers had raised concerns about the behaviour of elected members, but similar experiences were also described between members. Solace's 2026 survey reinforced this, with numerous respondents referencing the retaliatory behaviour that could accompany reports. For example, one individual shared that:

> *"I have witnessed other officers who have raised issues against an officer only for them to be targeted and forced out of the organisation"*

Officers are particularly vulnerable in this due to lacking the same 'right of reply' as elected members possess. Individuals who challenge poor behaviour can themselves become the subject of complaints, criticism, intimidation or other forms of retaliation due to the failure of the standards system.

> *"I was bullied after a councillor found out I had given a statement to police after he assaulted other councillors in the chamber"*

The consequences of this extend beyond those directly targeted. Firstly, fear of retaliation can discourage people from reporting concerns in the first place, undermining the effectiveness of standards processes and allowing poor behaviour to continue unchecked.

Further to this, where those targeted are Monitoring Officers, this undermines the system even further as it opens up those tasked with standards issues to personal attacks and harassment campaigns.

It has also led to cases where standards committees are initiated but struggle to find individuals to sit on them due to this culture of fear. A system cannot provide meaningful protection if those who are expected to use it, or administer it, believe that doing so will expose them to further hostility or professional consequences.

> *"Monitoring Officers are challenged with dealing with such behaviours and they become part of the witch hunt for trying to bring them into line with standards and officer/member protocols"*

These elements reinforce themselves in a vicious cycle. Perpetrators feel able to act disrespectfully or aggressively where they know no consequences will occur and victims feel either too intimidated or fail to see the point in reporting for the same reason – thereby leading to even lower levels of standards processes being started. At each turn, the inherent weaknesses in the standards regime serve to undermine its purpose and fail to meaningfully address misconduct. Without rapid and robust reform, it will continue to do so although a strengthened standards regime on its own will not be enough.

Colleagues in Scotland and Wales, where more robust standards regimes already exist, testify to the fact this is not a silver bullet – this was demonstrated in 2026 by a unanimous vote of no confidence by Edinburgh City Council in the Ethical Standards Commissioner and Standards Commission for Scotland.

Rather than the whole solution, a strengthened standards regime is a safety net that needs to be seen to be as part of a suite of tools to tackle this issue head on.

The Role of the Police

A complicating factor in addressing issues around the standards system can also come from the variable relationships and levels of coordination local authorities can have with their local police force.

There is a perception that a lack of action by the police in response to standards-related incidents is down to a lack of understanding as to the functioning of local government systems, the way in which poor standards manifest in the sector, and how the police can provide support.

As the Commission heard, the police can often be at a loss as to what to charge individuals with and often don't have a significant number of officers who have a good understanding of local government. As a result, there is an organisational gap in knowledge and this lack of understanding often serves to disadvantage organisations by denying them an external partner in combatting standards issues.

The extent this affects local authorities in dealing with standards issues can be seen in when cooperation with the police goes right.

CASE STUDY

Partnership working with the police

One example shared with the Commission related to abusive and harassing behaviour by a councillor that escalated into police involvement, a restraining order being brought into force, and a prison sentence.

The councillor involved was initially subject to a code of conduct standards investigation where he refused to participate and accused those involved of corruption. After being found to have breached the organisation's code of conduct, he was told to apologise – the only possible action to be taken following an investigation – which he refused to do. His behaviour then worsened, including bombarding officers with emails, as well as speaking about shooting another councillor (whilst in possession of a gun license) over a disagreement. He was offered both mental health and occupational health support by the authority, but denied both. He also started physically and verbally harassing officers, such as lingering in car parks and attending committees he wasn't a member of to shout at attendees.

In the end, with the support of the local policing force, the council were able to bring forward an offence. Due to the evidence of his use of emails as part of his abusive behaviour, and through cooperation with the police, he was convicted on use of a public communication network to cause annoyance, inconvenience, and anxiety.
The effect of his behaviour on the authority was considerable. It caused significant difficulty and distress for both officers and monitoring officers, with some having to be escorted from the building at the end of meetings. It also demonstrated the inefficacy of the standards regime when behaviour is below the legal threshold and how robust action being taken often relies on cooperation with local police forces, as well as their understanding of how to address issues in a local government context. Even after conviction, the councillor responsible was not removed from office.

Although the Commission repeatedly sought to engage the police on this piece of work, we were unable to secure their involvement or contribution. While, at the time of publication, we had been unable to share our findings with the police and discuss potential ways forward, Solace will continue to attempt to engage at a national level.



PART II

Where to Go Next?

Local government should not simply believe poor behaviour is an inevitability. Accepting it takes place shouldn't be seen as the norm

This section deals with the suggestions, proposals, and recommendations that the Commission has heard and developed over the last year.

It addresses the thematic areas outlined above and offers ways forward for the sector to proactively address the challenges it currently faces.

Whilst some of the factors contributing to the proliferation of standards-related issues in local government sit outside the direct control of councils, what the Commission's work has revealed is that local government is not powerless – there are always steps that can be taken. Bad behaviour should not be tolerated and there is much that individuals and organisations can do to tackle misconduct.

IN THIS PART

01 Organisational/Corporate Culture

02 Induction, Training, and Member/Officer Awareness

03 Social Media and Internet-Based Abuse

04 Preventing Burnout

05 Advocating for a Stronger Regime



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

01

Organisational/Corporate Culture

"I am confident and forthright enough to have always tackled disrespect head on myself, and when I see it, tackle it on behalf of others. It isn't easy though and is often unexpected – positive behaviour, honesty and trust matter a lot

Looking beyond the standards system, building an effective culture was widely identified by those speaking to the Commission as one of the foundational pillars of strong standards and ethics in an authority.

The Commission also heard that no matter the administration, adequate and robust governance structures are a necessity.

Numerous contributors to the Commission noted that, before anything else, having the right culture in place was one of the most significant things an authority could do to meaningfully impact standards. An authority requires a strong scaffolding of governance where, at the most fundamental level, there must be respect, cooperation, and understanding.

These behaviours should not be viewed as entirely separate. A healthy organisational culture depends upon a shared understanding that people can disagree robustly while continuing to treat one another with professionalism and respect. Where that distinction is lost, disagreement can become personal, political differences can become hostility, and challenge can become intimidation.

Within this, the importance of the Chief Executive's role and that of the extended senior leadership team in 'setting the tone' was stressed. When a set of foundational values are agreed, the modelling of these behaviours is a key part of creating a culture in which expectations around conduct are clearly communicated and understood. If senior leadership fails to live the principles of an authority, this not only sets a poor example, but undermines these agreed principles from the very start.

Beyond this, those in leadership have a responsibility to model respectful challenge and holding individuals to account. Where bad behaviour is ignored or overlooked, it is functionally the same as accepting or condoning it and denies support to those affected. Leaders must therefore be visible and vocal in condemning instances of poor standards.

Solace's Code of Practice for Good Governance, written in conjunction with CIPFA and LLG, provides advice and sets expectations for local government's three highest profile statutory roles of Head of Paid Service, Chief Finance Officer, and Monitoring Officer.

The aim of the Code is to enable them to effectively work together in what is known as the 'Golden Triangle' to best advise their authority, implement its decisions, and help achieve good outcomes. These three roles are senior, critical, and influential positions within a local authority, and have collective responsibility for governance. For the individuals concerned, it is a privilege to undertake the work, delivering positive results with a tangible impact. When done well, the postholders can leave an authority with a lasting, inspiring legacy. Best practice in working arrangements will enable the postholders to perform to the best of their ability. However, as recent failures have clearly and repeatedly demonstrated, where the posts do not operate effectively as a team, their advice is not afforded proper respect, where there is a poor culture, or what they have to say is not heard or understood, governance and decision making suffers and the consequences for local communities can be severe.

It is therefore important that these statutory officer posts, their roles and why they exist are understood, respected, and given the support required for their duties to be undertaken to the full. Additionally, it is important for those in, or aspiring to be in, these roles to understand the power that they wield, its potential impact on others and the responsibility that comes with it. The roles have a unique part to play in modelling good behaviour in governance, calling out poor behaviour, and actively demonstrating the Nolan Principles in practice. Solace's Guide to the Golden Triangle, again written in conjunction with CIPFA and LLG, provides more detail and is a useful reference point.

There are, of course, other key leadership roles within the council which also play an important governance role and sometimes have their own statutory responsibilities – the wider leadership team of any council could also be referred to as a 'Golden Star' and has a vital role in governance, setting and maintaining the right culture, and, where appropriate, calling out inappropriate behaviours.

Beyond the Chief Executive, the first officer that may jump out in this context would be the Monitoring Officer. They are undoubtedly of utmost importance in thinking about good governance due to the significance of their role within standards processes. Monitoring Officers will often be the individual that knows the authority's code of conduct best – if one is in place – and are responsible for much of the formal and informal conflict resolution that takes place in an organisation. As such, the Commission frequently heard from senior leaders that the Chief Executive's relationship with their Monitoring Officer is a key part of successfully dealing with standards issues.

> *"So many times the issues have dragged on, and the Monitoring Officer was swamped with both complaints and the day job"*

However, in thinking about good governance, it is crucial that understanding codes of conduct and governance processes should not solely be the responsibility of the Monitoring Officer, but well-understood across the authority and, in particular, by all senior officers. Ideally an organisation will embed a sense of collective responsibility among officers involved with leadership – the 'Golden Star', but especially the 'Golden Triangle' of statutory officers – when dealing with standards and governance issues, particularly during times of escalating challenge. The 'Golden Triangle' refers to the combination of the Head of Paid Service, Chief Finance Officer, and Monitoring Officer, whereas the "Golden Star" is the extended team of Heads of services and senior officers. Beyond this, it should also be an aim to push this further and have a strong organisational culture of standards which is collectively owned by all members of an authority, from the Chief Executive all the way down.

This responsibility shouldn't start and end with officers, either. Upholding organisational values and standards of the authority also extends to councillors. As the Commission heard, in combatting standards violations by members, it was felt that one of the most effective means of calling out inappropriate behaviour was when this accountability came from other councillors. In particular, this is an area where Group Leaders and Group Whips can play an invaluable role in upholding good standards among their peers.

As the Commission found, part of why culture must be a whole-organisation effort is due to the effect that even one individual can have on the atmosphere and standards of an authority.

A contributor spoke to the Commission about the negative effect one councillor has had on worsening the behaviours of other councillors within an authority. Throughout his time in office, he had repeatedly partaken in bullying and abusive behaviour both virtually and in-person. His actions not only contributed to the high turnover of Monitoring Officers within this council, but also led to mimicry, with other councillors imitating his behaviour, rallying around him, and looking to his example to see what they are able to get away with. The impact this one individual had, therefore, is significant. His own conduct encouraged the deterioration of standards within the authority, negatively affected staff retention, and contributed to an overall degeneration of constructive and respectful working relationships.

Ultimately, addressing standards is not the job of any one individual – it is an everybody, everyday issue and should be seen as a joint endeavour.

Governance and Reporting

Part of having good governance lies in the culture that sits around standards systems. This means ensuring that senior leaders function as an approachable point of contact that individuals feel able to report experiences of inappropriate conduct to.

Beyond just reporting, individuals need to feel safe to begin standards proceedings at all. This is especially crucial in the context of issues discussed in Part I. As the Commission has heard, and as Solace's own surveys have revealed, the inefficacy of current standards systems and the failure of it to hold offenders accountable has led to a lack of recourse for officers, targeted bullying, and, occasionally, a fear of retaliation resulting from making a complaint. These reservations apply to some groups more than others. As Solace's survey showed, almost a quarter of respondents (23%) said they did not feel safe to raise concerns/challenge poor standards and behaviour from councillors.

To counteract this, authorities can take steps to ensure a system of support around that individual where they might feel at risk personally or professionally for starting proceedings.

It is important that victims of standards offences are not minimised within standards processes, whether this is through formal or informal resolution. It is here where senior leaders can have impact, leading with empathy, care, and a firm line on misconduct.

It should also be kept in mind that Chief Executives and senior leaders are also employers and as such have a duty of care to their workforce, including being able to be offered and access employee support arrangements, particularly where individuals may have experienced or are currently experiencing misconduct. Councillors as a

collective also come under this status of employer and this legal duty of care to staff, inclusive of senior officers, therefore extends to them too. These elements are all part of building a positive culture around standards.

As contributors to the Commission stressed, real importance lies in building trust both in the system and its processes, as well as trust that those processes will be undertaken at all.

Another avenue that could be pursued, would be to regularly check in with external partners as to how they see an organisation could have real benefit in identifying issues, as well as improvements, in order to gauge the state of standards. Given an authority's role as a convenor in place, it may benefit to get an outside view from time-to-time to understand how your organisation is perceived and how to improve.

Ultimately, good governance and a positive organisational culture flow from a code of conduct and set of principles that is both widely understood across an authority and continually reinforced, a senior leadership team that models and upholds these values, and a collective sense of ownership of these behavioural standards.



TOOL 1

Healthy Culture and Governance Audit

Ten questions to assess your own organisation's culture and governance. Rate each one Green, Amber or Red.

	QUESTION	GREEN	AMBER	RED
1	Do elected members and officers share a common statement of expected behaviours across the organisation? i.e. is a Member-Officer Protocol in place?	○	○	○
2	Is the Member-Officer Protocol reviewed annually?	○	○	○
3	Do leaders actively model organisational values?	○	○	○
4	Do you consider your Golden Triangle to be functioning effectively?	○	○	○
5	Do people within the organisation feel safe to raise concerns?	○	○	○
6	Are standards complaints analysed for themes?	○	○	○
7	Are these thematic issues regularly discussed by SLT?	○	○	○
8	Are any behavioural concerns tackled early?	○	○	○
9	Are external partners asked for feedback on your organisation's culture, governance and conduct?	○	○	○
10	Are whistleblowing routes well publicised and trusted?	○	○	○

8–10 Greens
Strong culture

5–7 Greens
Improvement needed – see recommendations

Below 5 Greens
Governance risk requiring immediate attention – see recommendations

The Commission has produced a tool to assess your own organisation's culture and governance. In addition to this report, the Commission has also created a set of slides exploring how to build a positive governance culture that can be adapted to local circumstances. The slides can be found on Solace's Civility Hub at: solace.org.uk/civility-hub.

→ Recommendations

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

- Undertake an annual review of organisational culture and standards risks as a senior management team.
- Promote the early use of mediation and other informal resolution mechanisms to prevent disputes from escalating into formal standards cases.

COUNCILLORS

- Councillors subject to upheld complaints must undertake robust and targeted behavioural improvement and/or mediation programmes.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Co-produce, between councillors and officers, a set of agreed values and behaviours that apply to the entire organisation, not just employed officers.
- Adopt and uphold the Model Code of Conduct and embed it within organisational values, governance arrangements and decision-making processes.
- Co-create and/or regularly review the authority's member-officer relations protocol, using the LGA's good practice guide to help clarify expectations and understanding in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as identifying key examples of how this will work in practice and setting out how things will be resolved if they go wrong.
- Ensure robust governance frameworks are in place and subject to regular independent review, but especially where concerns are identified.
- Introduce annual reporting on standards complaints, outcomes and lessons learned.
- Seek and report on independent feedback from external partners on organisational culture, governance and conduct, potentially as part of an annual reporting process.
- Establish organisational culture champions across the organisation aimed at complementing, not competing, with the role of Monitoring Officer. Champions must be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support, including a forum where they can come together and share learning and tools, as well as have access to the senior leadership team and council leader.
- Appoint a whistleblowing champion who also should be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support and work closely with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Audit. (If all the other recommendations put forward here are implemented, the need for this may only be short-term until all changes are embedded).

SOLACE

- Create a Chief Executive Civility Lead, with championing respectful conduct and professional leadership across the sector as part of their remit.
- Review and update all learning programmes to strengthen training on ethics, governance and member-officer relations.
- Review and raise awareness of the Solace Code of Ethics across the profession.
- Provide ongoing practical guidance and support to chief executives and senior officers on standards and ethical leadership, such as creating practical toolkits on mediation, conflict resolution and culture change.
- Establish and promote peer support arrangements for chief executives/senior officers facing standards-related challenges.
- Maintain ongoing monitoring of standards and ethics in the sector.



02

Induction, Training, and Member/Officer Awareness

Setting good standards starts at the very beginning with an effective introduction to an authority's values and expectations. As part of this, one of the most pressing refrains throughout the Commission's work has been highlighting the value of a robust and comprehensive induction programme. It was heard that these programmes should come as early as possible, particularly for new members, but also for new officers or those officers new to the local government sector.

The issue of inexperience for councillors has been explored at length; in order to counter the potential obstacles it can raise, a thorough introduction to governance processes, an organisation's code of conduct (which all should have), and the boundaries of their authority is key for new members. This last element is especially crucial for those members who are new not only to an authority, but to the sector. If expectations and understanding on the specific remits and responsibilities of members and officers are embedded early, this can build a foundation for productive cooperation down the line. It is highly useful to communicate as early as possible on this to prevent future misunderstandings that may underpin standards issues.

This should also apply to established members too – frequent refreshers on expectations and rules around behaviour and conduct can be a valuable tool in consistently signalling the importance of standards within an organisation. As Ed Hammond, then Deputy Chief Executive of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, noted in his evidence to the Commission, the best induction and training programmes were co-

designed and developed 'in-house', had a specific focus on the authority's needs and skills, and were regularly updated.

However, as it is not only members that can be inexperienced, it is crucial for officers to undertake adequate personal and professional development too. For younger or less experienced officers that may be moving into the leadership pipeline, for example, it should be a priority for them to build up their political acumen and have sufficient exposure to operating in a political environment, dealing with members, and the member-officer relationship more generally. For senior officers, an emphasis on training and induction might look different. Senior officers that are new in post, particularly those that are entering the sector for the first time, should have an induction to the demands, processes, and scope of their role.

For more experienced Chief Executives and senior officers, on the other hand, there may be some benefit in more tailored training, such as programmes or protocols to address where individuals might become desensitised to issues in their organisation. In a bid to avoid circumstances in which a certain level of poor behaviour is considered the norm, officers may periodically look to resources such as Solace's Red Flags Toolkit to ensure that their authority is functioning healthily.

Finally, whilst senior officers should be at the forefront of maintaining standards and organisational culture, there should also be a system in place where possible to regularly run refresher sessions on good governance.



SOLACE RESOURCE

Managing Political Transition to a New Administration

Practical guidance for chief executives and senior leaders on preparing for, and working through, a change in political control – with key timelines and checklists for each stage.

Available on the Solace Civility Hub
solace.org.uk/civility-hub

In thinking about leadership for both members and officers, good standards are a crucial part of the equation. As such, more attention must be paid to this element within any training programmes or curricula for leadership development. This is where Solace's leadership programmes for current and future leaders, as well as coaching, action learning, peer learning and top-team development, can play a crucial role, helping leaders build the judgement, confidence and relationships needed to navigate complexity and establish good organisational cultures.

It is also worthwhile to keep in mind periods that may be pressure points on standards and to adjust as needed. For example, the Commission repeatedly heard about transition of administration as a time where it was a necessity to have both robust induction programmes for new members, and refreshers for officers on handling transition. Recommendations made by contributors emphasised the value of a neutral approach to inductions, as well as officers making sure to put in ample time to meet with the new administration before and during changeover. This could also be bolstered by scenario planning ahead of elections. If a change is anticipated, it can be useful to prepare by going through different scenarios ahead of results to ensure measures are ready to put into place that cater to each potential outcome. For support in helping navigate this change, Solace also produced a guide to Managing Transition to a New Political Administration that covers key timelines in transition, crucial checklists for ensuring governance is up to date,

and milestones for each step of the process. Steps can also be taken on a peer-to-peer level. For example, one recommendation made by Professor Needham to the Commission discussed the value in peer coaching, mentoring, or creating safe spaces for individuals coming into public life. An example used was of a successful women's network set up by a council to address misogyny in the workplace. However, options could also be explored for officer-to-officer mentoring, or member mentoring for new elected members, but in particular for independent councillors who may not have established party structures for support.

When designing these induction programmes, it was also emphasised that there is no 'one size fits all' model. As local government often necessitates in all things – due to the hyper local nature of an authority, it is vital that training is tailored to its specific needs and context. Within the Commission's research there was a real sense of wanting to share best practice and authorities should feel encouraged to take inspiration from peers in the sector to bolster their own programmes.



→ Recommendations

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

- Complete mandatory governance and standards inductions within three months of being appointed to their roles and undertake mandatory refresher training at least every three years.
- Develop future senior leaders by providing team members with early exposure to member-officer relations, governance and standards issues via regular shared learning and shadowing opportunities to sit in/contribute to public (e.g. Full Council) and private meetings.

COUNCILLORS

- Complete standards and code of conduct training within three months of an election and undertake refresher training during each council term.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Deliver induction and refresher training for all councillors and officers covering governance, codes of conduct, and role/organisational boundaries.

SECTOR BODIES

- Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to develop accredited standards training for councillors and officers.
- Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to create a national repository of standards case studies and learning, and use this to inform:
  - an annual state-of-the sector update on trends in standards and ethics, produced by Solace and other sector bodies;
  - the development of advice/guidance that responds to trends, facilitates sector-wide learning, and disseminate best practice on conduct and standards.

SOLACE

- Feed in to, and influence where possible the direction of, the Ethics and Integrity Commission's Call for Evidence on guidance around designing and embedding codes of conduct for public servants.

POLICE

- Work with the sector to develop and run regular training for police liaison officers tasked with dealing with/responding to local government issues.



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

03

Social Media and Internet-Based Abuse

The complexities of dealing with poor standards via social media and online are obvious, but steps can still be taken to embed good practice where possible within an authority.

Each authority should have its own code of conduct that encompasses online activity, but it is also crucial that this is regularly updated to reflect the changing landscape in which those in local government operate. This is particularly true for emerging technologies like AI – authorities need to be aware of how issues could/can develop and take appropriate steps to ensure policies remain relevant.

Guidance provided by the LGA here can be a useful starting point for forming your own guidelines around safe social media use by members and officers.

Given the vitriol and hostility that can often emerge online, there should be robust support in place for those facing abuse, but in particular for communications teams that are on the front line of dealing with online behaviours. As the Commission has heard, prolonged exposure to negativity can have a deeply detrimental effect on mental health, so it should be made a priority. This may be especially applicable for those authorities with smaller comms teams.

As with all measures, the earlier policies can be put in place, the better. It is necessary to have consistent programmes of support, training, and awareness across an authority – as well as an awareness that it is not just the preserve of comms teams.

It should also be the responsibility of senior officers to understand what challenges and risks social media poses and embed protections for all members of an authority. Where abuse does happen, it is also their responsibility to be an approachable point of contact to offer support. However, this can only happen if a comprehensive understanding of an online context is in place.

When it comes to misinformation and disinformation, another useful guide on how to prepare for and respond to such incidents has been produced by the LGA. The first part of the document sets out definitions of mis/dis/malinformation and its effects on communities, local authorities and individuals. How to respond to such information and possible countermeasures are also covered in section one. The second part of the guide includes case studies provided by councils and the learning that can be taken from these.

For those dealing with mis/disinformation, defamatory comments, or inflammatory content online, the greatest challenge can be in getting it removed by the platform it is hosted on. This can often be attributed to social media companies' own processes around content flagging, which can feel extraordinarily difficult to make progress with. As such, it is important that authorities do what they are able to pre-emptively establish good standards around online conduct within their own organisation. This includes establishing clear frameworks and expectations so each councillor, officer, and member of staff is clear on how to ethically and responsibly use social media and digital platforms, as well as what irresponsible use looks like. Councils and Strategic Authorities must be proactive and practical in their planning in this space, with strategies and protocols in place to tackle information-based issues.

On a broader scale, the Commission heard that the sector should be part of the voices calling for social media companies to be recategorised as "publishers" as opposed to "platforms". This allows them to be held accountable on a national scale for the content that is produced and published via their websites. As a result, it may significantly contribute to combatting the ongoing fights against mis- and disinformation, as well as abusive language and attacks. Without this, there is little to no recourse that can be taken beyond the usual reporting features of these sites, whereas a recategorisation would pressure these companies into taking real action.

→ Recommendations

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Create clear and cohesive organisational guidance on responsible and ethical social media use and online conduct for both officers and councillors.
- Agree a social media strategy which includes arrangements for identifying and responding to mis/mal/disinformation.

COUNCILLORS

- Comply with their authority's guidance and expectations around use of social media and online conduct.

SECTOR BODIES

- Work together to co-create national guidance for elected members on the use of AI, social media and emerging technologies.
- Solace, along with other sector bodies such as the LGA, should seek to forge links with key platforms to create a centralised point of contact through to channel concerns about harmful content.

GOVERNMENT

- Recategorise algorithmically driven social media companies as publishers, in order to establish their accountability for what is published via their platforms.



PART II · WHERE TO GO NEXT?

04

Preventing Burnout

"Asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength

Dealing with standards issues can often feel like an overwhelming task.

For Chief Executives and officers that are often on the front lines of addressing misconduct, it can be a fine balance between performing their duty of care for staff, but also looking after themselves. Too often the mental health of senior leaders and responsible officers can be neglected in the day-to-day crush of working in the sector. This is exacerbated by the pernicious expectation that a role in local government necessitates a 'thick skin', that poor standards are part of the job, or that bad behaviour should simply be expected.

The narrative desperately needs changing. Part of this can be in carving out space for senior officers to proactively address their mental health and introduce measures that make it a clear priority. Otherwise, this damaging association of poor standards with taking on roles in local government – particularly those in leadership – will put the sector in serious danger of losing staff and further thinning out the leadership pipeline.

There are steps that can be taken by senior officers right away, for example accessing supportive peer support networks – such as Solace. These can be a lifeline for

those going through a period of serious challenge even just to speak to a peer with similar experience. It is important to remember that asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength. Knowing when to reach out, to seek support, and to ask for what you need is a skill, and a crucial one at that.

Performing check-ins with yourself as you would with other members of staff can also be invaluable. This means becoming familiar with signs of burnout and taking note of when things might seem to be taking a greater toll. Part of understanding the wider senior leadership team is also key in knowing when issues can be delegated and an awareness that it doesn't all lie on one pair of shoulders. At the most basic level – knowing when to take time, step away, and regroup is also important.

More broadly, greater support structures can be embedded within an authority. These might be the introduction of resources, such as mental health first aiders among staff, or the previously mentioned intra-authority support networks. Ideally, greater funding would come from Government to resource the training and support that the sector needs.

→ Recommendations

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

- Provide dedicated support services, including mental health, and protection for employees subjected to abuse, harassment or intimidation, as well as to individuals who raise standards concerns and/or participate in complaints processes.
- If not already in place, create and support a trained and accredited mental health first aider (MHFA) network, proportionate to the size of the workforce.



TOOL 2

Leadership Wellbeing & Resilience Audit

The purpose of the audit is to help chief executives, statutory officers and senior leaders assess whether standards-related pressures are becoming personally and/or organisationally unsustainable and to act as an early warning system. It is suggested you check in with this audit at least once every six months.

FOR EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS, USE THE SCORING SYSTEM BELOW:

4	3	2	1	0
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

At the end of the audit, add up your score (total statements = 42 so the maximum score = 168)

Green
126–168

You have strong, healthy wellbeing and resilience. No significant concerns.

Action: Continue monitoring, sharing good practice and learning across the organisation.

Amber
84–125

Some emerging pressures identified, such as a growing workload, reduced resilience, and/or relationship strains.

Action: Review your support arrangements, discuss findings with colleagues, line manager, and/or peers and identify actions to address any issues identified. Consider reaching out for additional coaching or mentoring.

Red
0–83

Wellbeing, resilience, and/or organisational health requires urgent attention.

Action: Review pressures, develop a support plan, access coaching or peer support, and/or consider organisational interventions to address underlying causes.

If a member of your team scored Red on this audit, what support would you provide them?

TOOL 2 · THE AUDIT

Score each statement from 4 (strongly agree) to 0 (strongly disagree).

1. ENERGY AND MOTIVATION

1	I finish most weeks with sufficient energy to perform effectively.	
2	I recover effectively following periods of heightened pressure.	
3	I feel equipped to deal with difficult situations and conflict.	
4	Standards-related issues do not dominate my thoughts outside work.	
5	I remain motivated and engaged in my role.	

2. PERSONAL SAFETY AND CONFIDENCE

6	I feel confident challenging inappropriate behaviour when necessary.	
7	I feel able to speak up when I have concerns.	
8	I believe I would be supported if I raised concerns.	
9	I can maintain perspective when facing challenging situations.	
10	I feel safe carrying out my role.	

3. BOUNDARIES AND BALANCE

11	My workload is generally sustainable.	
12	I take annual leave and breaks regularly.	
13	I make time for interests, relationships and activities outside work.	
14	I maintain appropriate boundaries between work and personal life.	

4. REFLECTIONS AND SELF-CARE

15	I actively prioritise my personal wellbeing.	
16	I make time to reflect on difficult experiences and learn from them.	
17	I know where to access professional wellbeing support if needed.	
18	I would feel comfortable using support services if required.	

5. PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

19	I have trusted peers I can speak to confidentially.	
20	I actively use professional support networks when appropriate.	
21	I seek advice and support before issues become crises.	
22	I feel well supported by colleagues and professional contacts.	

6. LEADERSHIP TEAM

23	Senior leaders actively support one another.	
24	Difficult issues can be discussed openly and honestly within the leadership team.	
25	I trust my senior colleagues to help address challenges when they arise.	
26	Responsibilities can be shared effectively during periods of pressure.	

7. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

27	Behavioural expectations are understood throughout the organisation.	
28	Organisational values are reflected in day-to-day behaviours.	
29	Poor behaviour is challenged appropriately and consistently.	
30	Colleagues feel able to raise concerns safely.	
31	Difficult conversations are addressed constructively rather than avoided.	

8. GOVERNANCE AND REPORTING

32	Governance processes are trusted and respected.	
33	Governance challenges are identified and addressed before they escalate.	
34	Standards-related issues are handled fairly and consistently.	
35	Appropriate resources are available to address standards-related concerns.	
36	I understand how concerns and complaints will be handled.	

9. LONG-TERM LEADERSHIP HEALTH

37	Standards-related challenges are manageable within my role.	
38	I feel able to perform my role effectively despite difficult circumstances.	
39	I believe my organisation takes leadership wellbeing seriously.	
40	I believe the organisation is creating conditions in which leaders can thrive.	
41	I remain positive about my future in local government leadership.	
42	I would recommend local government leadership as a rewarding career.	

Your total score (maximum 168)

TOOL 2 · CRITICAL INDICATORS

Critical indicators

Alongside the audit, read the following statements and tick any that apply:

- [ ] I have considered leaving my role due to standards-related issues.
- [ ] I have experienced targeted intimidation, harassment or abuse.
- [ ] I am concerned about my personal safety while undertaking my role.
- [ ] I am reluctant to raise concerns because of potential consequences.
- [ ] Standards-related issues are having a significant impact on my wellbeing.
- [ ] Unresolved conflict is affecting my ability to perform my role effectively.

> **Guidance:** If you ticked any of the statements above that should be the trigger for a supportive conversation with a colleague/peer/coach/mentor, even where your overall score falls within the Green range.

Team-level discussion prompts

What happens *after* is just as important as the audit itself. Periodically, as a senior leadership team reflect on your results together as this will help to shift the conversation away from individual resilience and towards organisational responsibility. A discussion could explore:

01 What standards issues are consuming leadership time?

02 Where are relationships under strain?

03 What patterns are emerging?

04 What action should be taken before problems escalate?

05 What support do colleagues need?



05

Advocating for a Stronger Regime

One of the main conclusions of this Commission's work is that the standards system is only as strong as its weakest link – and, at present, there are several weak links.

This is a topic that Solace has been campaigning on for several years. And over that period, the breadth of the coalition of those who agree that the current standards regime is not fit for purpose has continued to grow. Whilst wider factors have contributed to the place local government finds itself in, it is abundantly clear that a robust and universal regime would stand as a bulwark against these exacerbating factors, as well as prevent bad actors from continually reoffending or, ideally, offending at all.

As Part I detailed – and those within the sector will know all too well – the structures underpinning the standards system are demonstrably unfit for purpose. The current regime not only fails to appropriately hold individuals accountable, but also falls wildly short of providing any preventative effect.

What is badly needed is legislative change at the national level. This is something that Government itself has acknowledged. In December 2024, the Government launched its consultation on strengthening the standards and conduct framework, proposing a mandatory minimum code of conduct, stronger sanctions and new powers to suspend councillors for serious breaches. In its formal response, published on 11 November 2025, Government went further, confirming its intention to legislate for a mandatory

code of conduct, powers to suspend elected members for up to six months for serious breaches, the ability to withhold allowances in the most serious cases, interim suspension powers, a new disqualification criterion for repeated serious breaches, and a national appeals function. Government also announced that principal authorities would be required to establish formal standards committees and that complainants and councillors would have a right to have cases reviewed.

However, while the direction of travel is now clearer, the detail and delivery of these reforms remain uncertain. Government has stated that it intends to bring forward the necessary legislation "as soon as parliamentary time allows", but has not set out a firm timetable for when legislation will be introduced or when the new powers will come into force. Important questions also remain around how the new mandatory code will operate in practice, the precise circumstances in which suspension and other sanctions will be available, and the design of the national appeals function.

What the Commission has heard, and what Solace's surveys reveal, are two main areas that feel non-negotiable for successful standards reform: a universal code of conduct and effective sanctions to enforce it. This is something Solace has long advocated for; a robust, legally binding standards system, including compulsory codes of conduct, empowered standards committees, and implementation of sanctions such as suspension.

On this first element, whilst the majority of authorities will have their own code of conduct, there are discrepancies between them. The extent of local variation can be seen particularly in areas of emerging conduct, such as bullying, harassment and social media. For example, the LGA Model Code recommends that councils include explicit provisions prohibiting bullying and harassment, but these provisions are adopted and adapted locally. To give a flavour of the variation across the country, our research found Cambridgeshire County Council's code explicitly prohibits bullying, harassment and unlawful discrimination, and expressly applies its provisions to electronic and social media communications. By contrast, Medway Council's Code of Conduct has previously made no explicit reference to social media, instead relying on separate guidance for members, while West Berkshire Council has a dedicated social media protocol setting out additional expectations around issues including courtesy and respect, bullying and intimidation, confidentiality and conduct that could bring the council into disrepute. This illustrates how expectations around similar areas of councillor conduct can vary between authorities, creating potential inconsistency in what councillors, officers and residents understand to be expected.

A uniform national code of conduct, designed in consultation with local government and bodies such as Solace and the LGA, would ensure that the principles underpinning the operation of local government organisations were universally recognised, and aid in the implementation of a new standards system. It would allow for the application of the same standards of behaviour across all authorities, ensuring that expectations were consistent. This removes any ambiguity around what conduct is and is not acceptable and, by making it both compulsory and binding, empowers this further. An added benefit would be a decrease in any learning curve from individuals moving between authorities.

However, a code of conduct with no teeth delivers no change. As has been made abundantly clear during the Commission's research, if there are no effective sanctions to address misconduct, nothing will change. Any reform from Government must include the ability to meaningfully punish those that commit serious standards violations. Without this, other measures are severely undermined as perpetrators, or potential perpetrators, know there is little to no effective means of holding them accountable.

The appetite for these reforms is evident. A majority of those the Commission spoke to would welcome robust powers to appropriately deal with inappropriate behaviour and poor standards.

It goes without saying that any and all reform by Government requires adequate resourcing. If standards committees are to be successful in reducing the instances of code of conduct breaches, effectively punishing inappropriate behaviour, and supporting victims, they must have the funding and staffing to work effectively and at pace. For example, it can be expected that with the introduction of a new system, initial levels of referrals are likely to be higher. As such, appropriate resourcing should be provided to account for this and increase necessary capacity. It should, however, also be expected that, if implemented and

supported appropriately, an effective system would have a disincentive impact and thereby reduce future numbers of reported cases.

On the staffing element, it is also crucial that the officers involved are equipped with the necessary skills to navigate both standards systems, and the interpersonal challenges that are part and parcel of the process. To ensure this, authorities need further resourcing to deliver training and support.

What is obvious is that these reforms are needed swiftly and to be implemented in full – the system needs drastic change, and it needs it now.

→ Recommendations

SECTOR BODIES

- Work with government to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
- Collectively monitor and evaluate the operation of any new standards framework and advocate for continuous improvement.

GOVERNMENT

- Work with the sector to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
- Provide sustainable and long-term funding for the operation of the strengthened standards system.
- Work with the sector to conduct a comprehensive review of statutory governance roles and strengthen support available to those roles.

POLICE

- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to work with Solace and the Local Government Association to co-design a national Code/guidance of how to report and respond to standards and conduct issues relating to both elected members and officers.
- NPCC to ensure all police forces adopt and enact the national Code/guidance.
- Co-create effective engagement mechanisms between senior representatives from local police forces and local councils to improve understanding of the latest standards-related risks and trends, as well as reporting thresholds, available powers and appropriate responses.
- Establish clear communication channels between every local authority and a named police liaison officer for local government issues.
- Improve data collection on abuse, harassment and intimidation directed at councillors and officers and work with Solace, the LGA and Association of Monitoring Officers to produce an annual update on trends in standards complaints.



Robin Tuddenham
Solace President, and Member, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Conclusion

Over the past twelve months the Commission has heard the experiences of those on the front lines of local government and beyond. The picture that emerged was a complicated one. The challenges were obvious – a sense of worsening behaviours, an inadequate standards regime, and complicating factors in the form of political and technological change combined with an increased level of inexperience within the sector among both councillors and officers.

However, what also emerged is a strong determination to set the sector right and build better workplaces, not just to improve things for those working within councils, but to strengthen the foundations of local democracy.

To make the future of local government about people, place, equity and purpose we must first put in the work to address incivility in public life. The resolve to do so was in no short supply by those that contributed to the Commission's work. For all the accounts of abuse, harassment, and disrespect, there were also countless proposals, suggestions, and recommendations to make things better. Where individuals could have lingered, and rightfully so, over the negative, they looked to take it and transform it into something actionable and positive.

Some of this undoubtedly could, and can, not be done without cooperation at the national level. It is plain to see that without robust legislative reform, local government will still be left without the full suite of tools it needs to tackle poor behaviour.

But, in the meantime, there are still many meaningful steps to be taken. Contributors told the Commission about the power of the individual – the impact each person can have on the culture of an organisation and on others. It is the responsibility of every one of us to do our part in building inclusive, respectful, and productive workplaces, but it is particularly the responsibility of those in leadership to set the tone. What has come through throughout the Commission's work is the crucial role local government leaders have not only in embedding cultures that embody the principles of good public service, but upholding them.

Given the immense good that this sector is capable of, it is unacceptable that local government has, in part, come to be defined by the misconduct of a small number within it. For too long it has been seen as "part of the job" to weather behaviour that goes against the values that underpin our organisations and ourselves as individuals. Addressing these issues will not be an overnight endeavour. The scale of change needed means that it will take time, patience, and determination to realise the difference that we want to see and need to make.

So, for those that live and work in their places, that have been at the sharp end of misconduct, or have been frustrated by the inefficiencies of the current system, one thing is overwhelmingly clear – enough is enough and Solace is here to support you to be the change you want to see.

Robin Tuddenham
Solace President, and Member, Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

APPENDIX I

Recommendations in full

The current standards system is unarguably broken and not fit-for-purpose – failing to both inhibit inappropriate behaviour or deliver for victims of poor conduct. With adequate reform and resourcing, the system instead should be swift, balanced, and effective in its purpose, something badly needed by the sector.

However, in addition to statutory changes to the standards system, through the evidence gathered by the Commission, we have generated a list of recommendations to support all those with agency in the system, to take ownership over what they can do to bolster standards, encourage good conduct, and foster effective working relationships.

STATUTORY OFFICERS/SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Standards is a collective responsibility for the whole senior leadership team and not the sole responsibility of the Monitoring Officer. To that end, every officer should abide by the Nolan Principles at all times and set high organisational standards for conduct by modelling professional behaviour and to challenge misconduct consistently and impartially, regardless of seniority, status or political influence, as and when it occurs.

It is crucial that individuals also build relationships of trust and respect with other officers, staff members, and councillors, including group whips. Specifically, senior officers should:

1. Complete mandatory governance and standards inductions within three months of being appointed to their roles and undertake mandatory refresher training at least every three years.
2. Develop future senior leaders by providing team members with early exposure to member-officer relations, governance and standards issues via regular shared learning and shadowing opportunities to sit in/contribute to public (e.g. Full Council) and private meetings.
3. As a senior management team undertake an annual review of organisational culture and standards risks.
4. Promote the early use of mediation and other informal resolution mechanisms to prevent disputes from escalating into formal standards cases.

COUNCILLORS

Standards is a collective responsibility for the whole council – members as well as officers. To that end, every councillor should abide by the Nolan Principles at all times and robustly uphold the Model Code of Conduct when performing their duties to ensure they support organisational values and to challenge/call out unacceptable behaviour by peers as and when it occurs. The latter should also be a whole political group endeavour. Specifically, councillors should:

1. Complete standards and code of conduct training within three months of an election and undertake refresher training during each council term.
2. Councillors subject to upheld complaints must undertake targeted behavioural improvement and/or mediation programmes.

3. Comply with their authority's guidance and expectations around use of social media and online conduct.

COUNCILS AND COMBINED/STRATEGIC AUTHORITIES

From councils to mayoral combined/strategic authorities, everyone in local government should be able to work in a safe, secure, and supportive environment. To enable this, local and regional authorities specifically should:

1. Co-produce, between councillors and officers, a set of agreed values and behaviours that apply to the entire organisation, not just employed officers.
2. Adopt and uphold the Model Code of Conduct and embed it within organisational values, governance arrangements and decision-making processes.
3. Co-create and/or regularly review the authority's member-officer relations protocol, using the LGA's good practice guide to help clarify expectations and understanding in relation to their respective roles and responsibilities, as well as to identify key examples of how this will work in practice and set out how things will be resolved if they go wrong.
4. Create clear and cohesive organisational guidance on responsible and ethical social media use and online conduct for both officers and councillors.
5. Agree a social media strategy which includes arrangements for identifying and responding to mis/mal/disinformation.
6. Ensure robust governance frameworks are in place and subject to regular independent review, but especially where concerns are identified.
7. Deliver induction and refresher training for all councillors and officers covering governance, codes of conduct, and role/organisational boundaries.
8. Introduce annual reporting on standards complaints, outcomes and lessons learned.
9. Seek and report on independent feedback from external partners on organisational culture, governance and conduct, potentially as part of an annual reporting process.
10. Provide dedicated support services, including mental health, and protection for employees subjected to abuse, harassment or intimidation, as well as to individuals who raise standards concerns and/or participate in complaints processes.
11. If not already in place, create and support a trained and accredited mental health first aider (MHFA) network, proportionate to the size of the workforce.
12. Establish organisational culture champions across the organisation aimed at complementing, not competing, with the role of Monitoring Officer. Champions must be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support, including a forum where they can come together and share learning and develop tools, as well as have access to the senior leadership team and leader.
13. Appoint a whistleblowing champion who also should be provided with appropriate and regular training, guidance and support and work closely with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Audit. If all the other recommendations put forward here are implemented, the need for this may only be short-term until all changes are embedded.

SECTOR BODIES

As bodies representing different parts of the sector, we all have a responsibility to engage in, and seek to address, standards related issues. Specifically, sector bodies should:

1. Work with government to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
2. Collectively monitor and evaluate the operation of any new standards framework and advocate for continuous improvement.
3. Work together to co-create national guidance for elected members on the use of AI, social media and emerging technologies.
4. Solace, along with other sector bodies such as the LGA, should seek to forge links with key platforms to create a centralised point of contact through to channel concerns about harmful content.
5. Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to develop accredited standards training for councillors and officers.
6. Solace, the LGA, and the Association of Monitoring Officers should work together to create a national repository of standards case studies and learning, and use this to inform:

- an annual state-of-the sector update on trends in standards and ethics;
- the development of advice/guidance that responds to trends, facilitates sector-wide learning, and disseminate best practice on conduct and standards.

SOLACE

In addition to the above, Solace – as the UK's leading member network for senior professionals – we see ourselves as having an additional role and responsibility to champion and promote high standards, as well as drive collaboration with the LGA and the Association of Monitoring Officers on standards. Specifically, Solace should:

1. Create a Chief Executive Civility Lead, with championing respectful conduct and professional leadership across the sector as part of their remit.
2. Review and update all learning programmes to strengthen training on ethics, governance and member-officer relations.
3. Review and raise awareness of the Solace Code of Ethics across the profession.
4. Provide ongoing practical guidance and support to chief executives and senior officers on standards and ethical leadership, such as creating practical toolkits on mediation, conflict resolution and culture change.
5. Establish and promote peer support arrangements for chief executives/senior officers facing standards-related challenges.
6. Feed in to, and influence where possible the direction of, the Ethics and Integrity Commission's Call for Evidence on guidance around designing and embedding codes of conduct for public servants.

POLICE

In order to improve understanding of standards-related risks and trends, there is a need to strengthen collaboration between the police and local government. Specifically, the police should:

1. National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) to work with Solace and the Local Government Association to co-design a national Code/guidance of how to report and respond to standards and conduct issues relating to both elected members and officers.
2. NPCC to ensure all police forces adopt and enact the national Code/guidance.
3. Establish clear communication channels between every local authority and a named police liaison officer for local government issues.
4. Co-create effective engagement mechanisms between senior representatives from local police forces and local councils to improve understanding of the latest standards-related risks and trends, as well as reporting thresholds, available powers and appropriate responses.
5. Work with the sector to develop and run regular training for police liaison officers tasked with dealing with/responding to local government issues.
6. Improve data collection on abuse, harassment and intimidation directed at councillors and officers and work with Solace, the LGA and Association of Monitoring Officers to produce an annual update on trends in standards complaints.

GOVERNMENT

There is a national responsibility to promote high standards in public life, create the conditions for safe working environments for councillors and officers, and model both good standards of behaviour, as well as robust treatment of misconduct. Specifically, Government should:

1. Work with the sector to co-design and implement an effective, efficient, modernised standards regime for local government in England, as well as a nationally prescribed code of conduct that applies consistently across all councils, including town and parish councils.
2. Provide sustainable and long-term funding for the operation of the strengthened standards system.
3. Work with the sector to conduct a comprehensive review of statutory governance roles and strengthen support available to those roles.
4. Recategorise algorithmically driven social media companies as publishers, in order to establish their accountability for what is published via their platforms.

APPENDIX II

Contributors to the Commission

Members of the Commission

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NB: At Solace Summit 2025, the Commission held a roundtable discussion with several international colleagues from New Zealand, Australia, and the USA on their experiences of poor standards.

WITH THANKS

Acknowledgements

With thanks to:

- All members of Solace's Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics for their input and advice in developing not only this report but all of the other guides and toolkits.
- Everyone who gave written and/or verbal evidence to the Commission and helped develop the recommendations contained within this report.
- All of the Solace members who have told their stories.

Written by **Romy Patrick** and **Nekisa Gholami-Babaahmady**

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Designed by **Jonathan Kay**

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Solace Commission on Professional Standards and Ethics

Enough is Enough:
A Blueprint for Rebuilding Standards in Local Government
October 2026

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Report to Standards Committee

Subject: Code of Conduct Complaints Update

Date: 26th November 2026

Author: Monitoring Officer

Purpose

To inform members of the Standards Committee of complaints received between 25 June 2026 and 26 November 2026.

Recommendation

THAT:

The report be noted.

1 Background

1.1 A summary of the number of complaints received since the implementation of the existing Standards regime (from 1 July 2012) is set out in the graph in Appendix 1. A summary of the complaints received since 2023/24 is set out in the table at Appendix 1. Since 25 June 2026, the Monitoring Officer has received three new Code of Conduct complaints. Of these three new complaints, two have concluded and the outcomes are published in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 (Exempt). The remaining new complaint has recently been received and is currently being assessed.

1.2 Members may recall that at the last Committee, there was one complaint outstanding. This complaint was referred for investigation under the Council's arrangements for dealing with complaints and a final investigation report is expected imminently.

2 Proposal

2.1 It is proposed that the Committee notes the report.

3 Alternative Options

3.1 Not to report code of conduct complaints received by the Monitoring Officer however this would be contrary to the Council's arrangements for dealing with complaints.

4 Financial Implications

4.1 The costs associated with complaints are met from existing budgets.

5 Legal Implications

5.1 Code of Conduct complaints must be dealt with in accordance with the Council's Approved Arrangements for Dealing with Complaints.

6 Equalities Implications

6.1 There are no equalities implications arising from this report any equality related matters are dealt with within individual complaint responses. The complaints process is accessible and complaints can be submitted in a number of formats.

7 Carbon Reduction/Environmental Sustainability Implications

7.1 There are no carbon reduction/environmental sustainability implications arising from this report.

8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 – Summary of the Code of Conduct complaints received since 1 July 2012.

Appendix 2 – Outcome of complaint

Appendix 3 – Exempt Appendices

9 Background papers

9.1 None identified.

10 Reasons for Recommendation

10.1 To keep Committee updated on Code of Conduct Complaints

11 Local Government Reorganisation

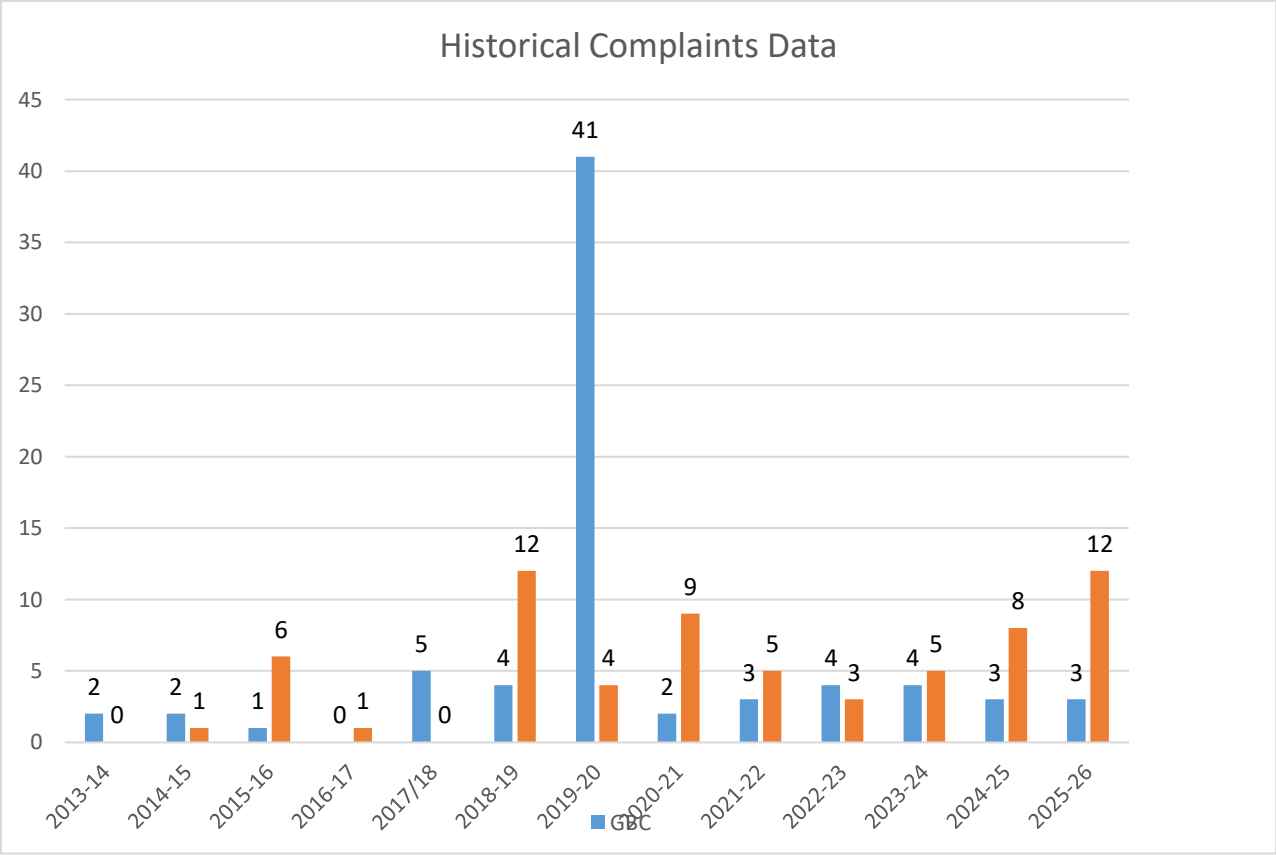
10.1 Any new authority must adopt a Code of Conduct for its Members and arrangements as to how complaints will be managed.

Statutory Officer approval

Approved by the Chief Financial Officer
Date: 17/11/2026

Drafted by the Monitoring Officer

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Complaint Ref	Date received	GBC/Parish Council	Complainant	Decision	Date of decision
Complaints received 2023-24					
STD003558	13/04/23	Burton Joyce Parish Council	Member of the Public	No further action	13/7/2023
STD003677	30/6/23	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not	Investigation concluded – No breach, no	27/6/24

Complaint Ref	Date received	GBC/Parish Council	Complainant	Decision	Date of decision
			GBC)	further action	
STD003687	10/7/23	Newstead Parish council	Member of the Public	Potential breach identified – informal resolution proposed	17/08/23
STD003690	13/7/23	Newstead Parish Council	Member of the Public	Potential breach identified – informal resolution proposed	17/08/23
STD004065	26/1/24	GBC	Member of the Public	No further action	8/2/24
STD004092	16/2/24	GBC	Member of the Public	No further action	29/2/24
STD004118	6/3/24	GBC	Member of the Public	No further action	28/3/24
STD004121	9/3/24	GBC	Member of the Public	Withdrawn	1/7/24
STD004143	27/3/24	St Albans Parish Council	Member of the Public	No further action	14/8/24
Complaints Received 2024/25					
STD004264	28/6/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action	3/10/24
STD004302	27/7/24	GBC	Member of the Public	Investigation concluded – breach found Local Resolution	19/11/24

Complaint Ref	Date received	GBC/Parish Council	Complainant	Decision	Date of decision
STD004323	3/8/24	GBC	Councillor GBC	Investigation concluded – breach found, local resolution	19/11/24
STD004450	19/8/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No Further Action	19/12/24
STD004347	23/8/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Closed – insufficient evidence	2/12/24
STD004358	31/8/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Withdrawn	Jan 24
STD004455	14/10/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Closed – insufficient evidence	Jan 25
STD004520	17/11/24	Calverton Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Referred for investigation – no breach found	16/5/25
STD004563	28/11/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Initial Assessment: Potential Breach Informal Resolution	3/2/25
STD004775	30/12/24	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Withdrawn	3/4/25
STD004862	26/03/25	GBC	Councillor (GBC)	No further action – no breach	27/05/25
Complaints received 2025/26					
STD004885	7/4/25	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action – no breach	21/8/25

Complaint Ref	Date received	GBC/Parish Council	Complainant	Decision	Date of decision
STD004928	23/5/25	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action – no breach	20/8/25
STD004950	2/5/25	St Albans Parish council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action – no breach	7/8/25
STD004958	28/5/25	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	Not valid Code complaint	13/8/25
STD004929	13/5/25	St Albans Parish Council	Member of the Public	Not valid code complaint	13/8/25
STD005071	7/8/25	GBC	Member of the public	Initial Assessment – Informal Resolution	20/11/25
STD005190	14/10/25	GBC	Councillor GBC	No further action – no breach	23/12/25
STD005192	14/10/25	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action – no breach	15/12/25
STD005193	14/10/25	St Albans Parish Council	Councillor (not GBC)	No further action – no breach	15/12/25
STD005231	3/11/2025	St Albans Parish Councillor	Councillor GBC	Initial Assessment - Potential Breach – Informal Resolution	23/3/26
STD005267	14/11/25	St Albans Parish Councillor	Member of the Public	Initial Assessment - Potential Breach – Informal Resolution	2/3/26
STD005270	2/11/25	GBC	Member of the	Not Valid Code Complaint	4/12/25

Complaint Ref	Date received	GBC/Parish Council	Complainant	Decision	Date of decision
			Public		
STD005462	16/1/26	St Albans Parish council	Councillor (not GBC)	Initial Assessment - Potential breach – Informal Resolution	30/3/26
STD005509	5/2/26	St Albans Parish Council	Member of the Public	Initial Assessment – Potential breach – Informal Resolution	25/3/26
STD005528	22/2/26	St Albans Parish Councillor	Councillor GBC	No further action – not acting in capacity	23/3/26
Complaints Received 2026/27					
STD005695	29/5/26	GBC	Councillor GBC	Referred for Investigation - ongoing	
STD005848	29/6/26	GBC	Councillor GBC	Initial Assessment – Potential breach – Informal Resolution	8/10/26
STD005985	9/9/26	St Albans Parish Council	Member of the Public	Initial Assessment – No breach	9/11/26
STD	16/11/26	GBC	Councillor (not GBC)	Ongoing	

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Reference: STD005848

Complaint

The complaint was made about Councillor Darren Maltby, a Gedling Borough Councillor by Councillor Alison Hunt, also a Gedling Borough Council Councillor.

A general summary of the complaint is set out below:

The complainant states Councillor Darren Maltby commented on social media posts which are false and misleading. The comment in question was following an article in the Gedling Eye from 26th June 2026 regarding the proposed introduction of an Article 4 Direction in Netherfield. The complainant states these posts are false and misleading because the complainant has incorrectly stated publicly that Councillor Hunt voted against an Article 4 Direction.

The Complainant provided screenshots of those related posts along with the original article for context.

Decision

In accordance with Sections 28 (6) and (7) of the Localism Act 2011, having carefully considered the allegation and the additional potential breach of the code identified through considering the allegation in accordance with the Council's Arrangements for Dealing with Complaints about breach of the Code of Conduct, and taking into account:

- the complaint as submitted by the complainant;
- Facebook screenshots provided by both the complainant and Councillor Maltby;
- the response to the complaint submitted by Councillor Maltby;
- the views of the Independent Person; and
- the Council's Code of Conduct.

I am satisfied that Councillor Maltby was acting in capacity as a councillor at Gedling Borough Council, the reasons for this assessment are below.

I have determined that on balance Councillor Maltby has breached the code of conduct by posting that Councillor Hunt had previously voted against an Article 4 Direction relating to HMO's, it is noted that Councillor Maltby acknowledged the error and swifty rectified this, I consider that there is potentially a technical breach of the Code of Conduct in this regard.

Whilst reviewing the screenshots provided by the complainant and Councillor Maltby as part of the complaint, screenshots of a conversation on a social media thread which openly discussed the outcome of a Code of Conduct complaint were discussed. In considering if the Code has been breached relating to publicly announcing the existence of a Code of Conduct Complaint and the outcome of such a complaint from Councillor Meads, I again find on the facts there to be a technical breach of the code.

Reasons for Decision

<u>Acting in capacity as a Councillor</u>

Section 27(2) of the Localism Act 2011 requires all relevant authorities to "adopt a code dealing with the conduct that is expected of members and co-opted members of the authority when they are acting in that capacity."

Gedling Borough Council has adopted such a Code of Conduct which reflects this and states:

"*5.2 This Code of Conduct applies to you when you are acting in your capacity as a councillor which may include when:*
• you misuse your position as a councillor
• your actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that you are acting as a councillor.

5.3 The Code applies to all forms of communication and interaction, including:
• at face-to-face meetings
• at online or telephone meetings
• in written communication
• in verbal communication
• in non-verbal communication
• in electronic and social media communication, posts, statements, and comments.

Councillor Maltby has stated that he was using his personal Facebook page to post the comments on social media. I can see from the name of the posting it does not reference 'Councillor' and is in the name of Darren Maltby. There isn't anything readily accessible on the home page of Darren Maltby's Facebook page which states he is a councillor of Gedling Borough Council. That said, this is not the only consideration when assessing whether a councillor is acting in capacity.

The Livingstone v Adjudication Panel for England [2006] EWHC 2533 (Admin) case confirms that a councillor is not a councillor 24 hours a day and is entitled to have a private life. A sufficient connection must exist between the conduct complained of and the councillor's role as a member, with each case determined on the facts. Councillors cannot use personal Facebook accounts as a means of providing cover whilst actions would amount to acting as a Councillor. The important consideration is 5.2 of the Code of Conduct which states "*your actions would give the impression to a reasonable member of the public with knowledge of all the facts that you are acting as a councillor".* This is explained further in the LGA guidance where consideration should be given to whether a reasonable observer would think they were acting as a councillor. Important factors for consideration are,

- Who was the audience
- The subject matter
- Whether council business was discussed
- Whether the members role was discussed/emphasised
- Whether they appeared to be speaking on behalf of the council or ward residents

Although Councillor Maltby was using a private Facebook page, in considering the post subject to the complaint and chain of posts, the responses are predominantly borough councillors of Gedling Borough Council engaged in the discussion, the subject matter is one of Council business and within the chain of posts Councillor Maltby implies he is a borough councillor including through making reference to a complaint being made against him. I am therefore more than satisfied that a reasonable member of the public would consider that Councillor Maltby was acting as a councillor.

Complained of Social Media post

It is not a point of dispute that Councillor Maltby posted an inaccurate statement about Councillor Hunt publicly onto Facebook. Councillor Maltby accepts he did this, and once corrected on the point, amended the post and made an apology to Councillor Hunt. Councillor Hunt did not go back onto Facebook following the exchange between her and Councillor Maltby as she was upset by the comments. It is because of this she did not see the apology and rectification of the post by Councillor Maltby.

A false statement does not automatically amount to a Code breach. Political debate frequently involves disagreement, exaggeration and opinion. An assessment of the Human Rights Act 1998 must be considered, Article 10 ECHR (Freedom of Expression). The courts have consistently held that elected politicians enjoy a particularly high level of protection when engaging in political speech and debate. Therefore, when considering if a breach has occurred, I have carefully considered whether the misinformation was done deliberately, done with the intention to damage Councillors Hunts reputation, was done knowingly, was done with reckless disregard for truth, was made to gain an advantage or whether it undermines public confidence. In those cases, a false statement is more likely to engage the Code and the conduct amount to a failure to treat other councillors with respect.

Councillor Maltby was incorrect in his Facebook post, he recited his opinion not based on the facts. I have concluded that this was not done dishonesty, or knowingly, but I do find that Councillor Maltby was reckless in posting the comment. A councillor who makes an allegation without checking obvious facts may still fall below expected standards of a councillor. I find that the issue of whether Councillor Hunt had voted against the Article 4 Direction for HMO's at Gedling Borough Council is easily accessible information accessed via the Councils records and recordings of Council meetings.

There is no evidence to support that Councillor Maltby posted the offending comment knowingly and deliberately or with any dishonesty, but I do find on balance it was done so recklessly without regard for facts which are easily accessible to Councillor Maltby, therefore amounting to a breach of the Code. Despite this conclusion I find that Councillor Maltby's swift apology and amendment of the post when challenged about the misinformation was an immediate rectification and mitigated.

I have considered, in line with the Council's arrangements for dealing with complaints, whether further investigation is merited given that there is a potential breach of the Code of Conduct found. I do not consider further investigation of this matter is necessary or proportionate. I do not consider there is any merit in engaging further resource in investigating this matter as Councillor Maltby has already provided a public apology on the Facebook post chain and amended the original offending post. I therefore do not consider any further action should follow. That said Councillor Hunt did not go back onto Facebook to see the apology or rectification so Councillor Maltby may wish to provide an apology directly to Councillor Hunt.
In line with the arrangements for dealing with complaints a summary of this matter will also be referred to the next Standards Committee meeting for information and will be in the public domain.

Secondary Social media post

The Monitoring Officer has statutory responsibility for the implementation of the Code of Conduct and has responsibility for upholding standards of member conduct. Application of the Code by the Monitoring Officer through complaint handling is confidential. All matters relating to complaints and breaches of the code are to remain confidential unless a breach is established, at which point they will be published by the Monitoring Officer through the Standards Committee.

The arrangements for dealing with code of conduct complaints states at Paragraph 8 states,

"*It is important, first, to preserve the integrity of the complaints process and, second, to minimise any negative impact of the complaint on all the people affected by it, that information relating to the complaint is treated as confidential. The assessment of complaints will therefore be conducted by the Monitoring Officer in private. The parties to a complaint are expected to maintain confidentiality as well. Parties are not prohibited from discussing the complaint to seek advice and support; however, it should not be discussed in the public domain. Details in relation to complaints will only become publicly available if there is a finding of a breach of the Code of Conduct either at the initial assessment stage or following full investigation."*

An opportunity was given to Councillor Maltby to provide representation about this post but did not supply any representations for consideration within the time frames of the complaint. An email was sent after he deadline stating further details have come to light but this information has never been produced.

The Facebook post made by Councillor Maltby expressly refers to another councillor having made a complaint against him, the post then goes further and details the outcome of that complaint. This complaint is one subject to confidentiality as there was no finding made. The requirement to maintain confidentiality as a councillor is contained within the code and a breach of confidentiality would amount to a breach of the Code of Conduct.

I have considered the context in which Councillor Maltby breaches confidentiality, relating to the previous messages of the other Councillor. That said, one wrong does not cancel out another. Each councillor is responsible for their own actions and compliance with the Code of Conduct. All councillors should be mindful and cautious about the use of social media. Whilst undertaking a role as a councillor, you are in a position of responsibility where you are required to uphold the principles of public life and abide by the Code of Conduct.

I find that Councillor Maltby has breached the Code of Conduct by failing to maintain confidentiality with the Standards regime. In this case I recommend that Councillor Maltby undergo refresher training on the Code of Conduct.

I have considered, in line with the Council's arrangements for dealing with complaints, whether further investigation is merited given that there is a potential breach of the Code of Conduct found. I do not consider further investigation of this matter is necessary or proportionate, whilst a potential breach of the code is demonstrated, I do not consider there is any merit in engaging further resource in investigating this matter and I conclude that the matter can be dealt with informally through the attendance at a training session on the Code of Conduct. It is my view that Councillor Maltby was under the mistaken view that as he was using his personal Facebook account, communications from account would not

have engaged the Code of Conduct, and this is something that could be impressed through attendance at training.

In line with the arrangements for dealing with complaints a summary of this matter will also be referred to the next Standards Committee meeting for information and will be in the public domain.

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