

General	
Why is it necessary to have a Standards Committee? What is the authority for it?	Standards committees were established under the Local Government Act 2000. The Act established a new ethical framework governing the ethical standards and behaviour of local authority members and, for the first time, established an external body (Standards for England) which would take overall responsibility for the behaviour of elected Members. In parallel a model Code of Conduct for Local Authorities was issued and each local authority was required to adopt a code based on the national model and all members and co-opted members were required to give a written undertaking that they would observe the Code. The Act also required the establishment of a Standards Committee (including independent members).
What sort of complaints does the Committee handle?	The Standards Committee deals with complaints about Members – both elected borough, town and parish councillors and independently appointed members. General complaints about Council services and about Council officers are handled through a separate complaints process (available here: http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/complaints)
What does it cost me as a community charge/ratepayer?	The Standards Committee is made up of borough and parish councillors and independent members. Independent members received small allowances and the chairman and vice-chairman receive special responsibility allowance. In addition, it received support from the Council's Monitoring Officer. This, coupled with the costs of any complaints received, costs in the region of £55,000 per annum.
How many complaints has the Standards Committee investigated in the past year?	The Standards Committee has received two complaints in the past year.
Isn't the setting up of the standards Committee 'a sledgehammer to crack a nut'?	Opinions vary on the appropriateness of the use of standards committees and Standards for England to investigate complaints against councillors. As a Committee, we do not take a view on this but we do all strongly believe that it is vital that elected councillors demonstrate high standards of conduct.
Who decides the rules the Committee follow?	There is a wide range of legislation and official guidance outlining the way in which the Committee should operate. The Committee has determined its own approach to dealing with complaints, taking account of both legislation and guidance. It has sought to ensure that it takes a proportionate approach using mediation wherever possible.

<p>How are people appointed to the Committee? On what basis? Who decides which elected members sit on the Committee and how are they chosen?</p>	<p>Borough councillors are appointed by the leaders of their respective groups and parish councillors are appointed by the Kent Association of Local Councils. The Council has established a procedure for appointing independent members that involves advertising in the Council's newsletter and interviewing applicants with a panel made up of borough and parish councillors and an independent member.</p>
<p>Why are Parish and Town Councillors not subject to exactly the same rules as Borough Councillors?</p>	<p>All elected councillors – borough, parish and town councillors are governed by the Council's Code of Conduct. However, in addition, the Borough Council has adopted a number of additional discretionary codes and protocols associated with its functions (for example, licensing and planning).</p>
<p>What happens if my complaint is about one of the staff rather than a Councillor?</p>	<p>The Standards Committee is not empowered to deal with complaints about Council services or officers but does have a separate complaints process for these instances. Full details are available on the Council's website.</p>
<p>Can I ask the Standards Committee to investigate if my planning [licensing etc] application has been turned down?</p>	<p>Absolutely not! Many regulatory functions of the Council have their own appeal procedures. Complaints about maladministration are covered by the Council's internal complaints procedure and are within the jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman. The Standards Committee can only deal with complaints relating to potential breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct.</p>
<p>What triggers the Committee investigating a complaint?</p>	<p>The Standards Committee can only investigate reports that are submitted in writing by a named person. A complaints form has been produced and is available on the Committee's website.</p>
<p>Who carries out the investigation and what steps are taken to ensure s/he is not biased?</p>	<p>A report will initially be assessed by an Assessment Sub-Committee. This Committee (comprising one borough, one parish and one independent member) will decide whether the complaint requires no further action, should be referred for investigation, should be referred to Standards for England or should be referred to the Monitoring Officer for 'some other action' (for example, an apology or an agreement to attend a training course). If a complaint is referred for investigation, this will usually be undertaken by an independent investigator. Further details of how we deal with complaints are available on our website.</p>
<p>How is the investigation carried out? How long does the process take?</p>	<p>Details of how investigations are carried out are available in two Standards for England publications: http://www.standardsboard.gov.uk/TheCodeofConduct/Guidance/Investigations/filedownload,16685.en.pdf http://www.standardsboard.gov.uk/TheCodeofConduct/Guidance/Investigations/filedownload,16686.en.pdf</p>
<p>What about minor misdemeanours – is every complaint investigated so thoroughly?</p>	<p>Not every complaint is investigated. The seriousness of the alleged offence is one of the issues that the Assessment Sub-Committee will consider when deciding whether to refer a complaint for investigation or to Standards for England, to take no further action or to refer it to the Monitoring Officer for other action.</p>

<p>Does the Standards Committee represent value for money for the electors of the Borough? Could we do without it and simply set up an investigation as and when a serious complaint is raised?</p>	<p>At the present time, legislation requires us to have a Standards Committee and to carry out the initial stages of complaints against councillors locally. We have sought to put in place a proportionate system that deals with complaints as cost-effectively as possible.</p>
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