

TEIGNBRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL MEMBER CONDUCT REVIEW REPORT

5th May 2026

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. From 2019 onwards, concerns around the organisational culture (in particular, behaviours and the relationships between councillors, and between councillors and officers) and governance at Teignbridge District Council were identified by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, the Local Government Association, and the District Council's external auditors, Grant Thornton.
- 1.2. Grant Thornton's Annual Reports for each of the financial years from 2020/21, to 2023/24 identified significant weaknesses in the District Council's governance arrangements.
- 1.3. Grant Thornton made recommendations in its 2020/21 Report and the 2021/22 and 2022/23 Joint Report relating to upholding good standards in councillor behaviour and in councillor-officer relationships. The 2023/24 Report noted that underlying poor behaviour had continued with a lack of trust underpinning some of those behavioural issues. The auditors felt that the issues with relationships and trust were affecting arrangements for supporting decisions once they had been made.
- 1.4. The 2023/24 Report also found that there was insufficient progress on the implementation of the key recommendation from the previous two Reports and instances of poor behaviour from 2023/24 were noted, including a councillor swearing at the Chair at a full Council meeting and councillors talking over one another and using condescending and aggressive language. As a result, the Report made a statutory recommendation under section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, which included:

“The Council should commission a suitably qualified expert to investigate the underlying causes of member behaviours which contravene the standards set out in the Council's constitution under the Members Code of conduct and the member/officer protocol; and which have impacted the Council's reputation and working culture.”
- 1.5. Wilkin Chapman Rollits, working with Hoey Ainscough Associates and Fortis Therapy and Training were commissioned by the Council in relation to the above. This is our report to the Council of our findings and recommendations, based on responses by councillors and senior staff to our questionnaire and three days of interviews with a range of members and officers.
- 1.6. In 2019, control of the Council passed from the Conservative Group to the Liberal Democrat Group. At the same time a number of local campaigners seeking to oppose a large housing development under the slogan “Newton Says No” were elected as the South Devon Alliance (SDA) Group.
- 1.7. Many interviewees felt that Newton Says No/SDA councillors were elected on a promise to disrupt and challenge, and the confrontational nature of their approach caused tension and brought a climate of defensiveness and mistrust to the District Council. This was exacerbated by the combative use of social media by the Newton Says No group prior to the 2019 election and a perception that SDA councillors sought to encourage public outrage online, primarily through voicing controversial political agendas at filmed meetings.
- 1.8. Though there is a feeling among some councillors that the mood at the District Council has started to improve since the SDA Group disbanded and became part of the Independent Group, it is evident that there is still a pervasive negative view of former

Newton Says No/SDA councillors. This is illustrated by a number of the comments we received, which asserted that some members of the Independent Group had been confrontational, abusive and disruptive.

- 1.9. However, those we interviewed also felt that the approach of the Liberal Democrat leadership had contributed to the poor relationships among councillors. For example, the previous Leader of the Council had excluded opposition groups from all Committee Chair positions.
- 1.10. Some councillors felt that the Executive had refused to engage meaningfully with Opposition Groups and had not shown respect to the Independent Group's democratic legitimacy. Those interviewed felt the Executive had too frequently taken the approach of shutting concerns down or reacting to confrontation in a manner that escalated it, including making complaints to the Monitoring Officer whenever challenged, rather than providing a reasoned and transparent response.
- 1.11. It was apparent that a culture of councillors not taking collective accountability for improving conduct at the District Council has been facilitated by inappropriate behaviour being generalised and not discussed in a more focused manner. Many councillors on both sides of the 'divide' appear so set in their view of what the root cause of the issue is that they are unable to recognise when it is their own behaviour which is being referred to.
- 1.12. The way the process for considering complaints under the councillor code of conduct has been operated previously at the District Council has not helped this problem. There had been long delays in dealing with complaints and the way some complaints had been handled had been seen as treating people differently and as a means of shutting down criticism. Trust in the Council's standards arrangements had been eroded, and councillors have been unwilling to accept the outcome of complaints as a result.
- 1.13. However, since the Grant Thornton report and the commencement of our work, significant governance improvements have been implemented through a successful and effective cross party Constitution Working Party and the personal leadership of a new Monitoring Officer. A new Leader of the Council has brought a more amicable style of working, together with a non aligned Independent councillor being appointed as the Chair of Council.
- 1.14. Improvements to the arrangements for handling complaints against councillors under the member code of conduct have been accompanied by a significant reduction in the numbers of complaints by members and staff against members.
- 1.15. Overall, member conduct and member-officer relationships at the Council continue to present challenges, although there are clear signs of improvement from a previous low point. Changes in leadership roles, meeting management, complaints handling and some areas of working across political groups have begun to rebuild confidence and reduce overtly disruptive behaviours.
- 1.16. However, these improvements are not yet consistently embedded and remain vulnerable to individual behaviours, changing circumstances and changes in key positions. There is a persistent need for shared strategic focus, improvement in the understanding of respective member and officer roles, to improve confidence in governance processes, and to reduce, if not eradicate, residual mistrust across parts of the organisation.

1.17. When we fed back our initial findings to the Council in January we made a number of recommendations. Many of these have already been acted upon or are in train but we repeat them here as an aid to mapping progress. Commentary on each recommendation appears in section 6 below.

R1 full Council to resolve that all members treat each other and Council staff and the public with politeness and courtesy in behaviour, speech and in the written word, whilst respecting the right of members to express, debate and challenge political views freely within the law;

R2 all members pledge personally to:-

- listen and respect differing views
- respect the rights of all councillors to carry out their roles
- hold themselves and fellow councillors to account
- be open
- be civil

R3 the Monitoring Officer report to the Governance Committee on the adoption by the Council of the Local Government Association's (LGA) Debate Not Hate campaign and in particular the Ending Abuse in Public Life Council Self-Assessment toolkit as a means of creating a culture of safety and respect for members within and without the Council Chamber;

R4 the Monitoring Officer and Head of Paid Service report jointly to the Governance Committee on a revised member – officer protocol to include clear guidance on:-

- Members' rights to accessing Council information;
- Member visits to officer working areas

R5 the Council identify with the Local Government Association what support it might offer to strengthen the capacity of the Executive;

R6 the Council provide further training and assistance to strengthen the capacity and capability of the Overview and Scrutiny process;

R7 that all regulatory committees be chaired by a councillor who is not a member of the ruling Group;

R8 that there be a comprehensive training programme for all members to be reviewed annually and rolled out for all new members. This would include training on the Code of conduct, the different role of members and officers, effective decision-making, chairing skills and understanding the constitution.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. Teignbridge is a local government district formed on 1 April 1974 under the Local Government Act 1972. It is located in South Devon and covers the towns of Ashburton, Bovey Tracey, Buckfastleigh, Chudleigh, Dawlish, Kingsteignton, Moretonhampstead, Newton Abbot and Teignmouth as well as many smaller villages. It contains part of the South Devon coastline, including the Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve, and some of the inland western parts of the district lie within the Dartmoor National Park. In 2024, its population was 138,548. The District Council offices are located in Newton Abbot.
- 2.2. Since 2019, the District Council has had 47 councillors (also referred to as members in this report) representing 24 wards across the district.
- 2.3. In the May 2019 elections, three of the councillors elected were part of a campaign group known as 'Newton Says No'. The campaign group opposed development in Newton Abbott, particularly plans for development of the Wolborough Hills in the NA3 area.
- 2.4. In 2021, the Newton Says No group founded a political party, the South Devon Alliance ("SDA"). In the May 2023 elections, 9 members of the SDA were elected to the District Council and formed a political group on the Council. In November 2024, the SDA disbanded and 8 of the Councillors became part of the Independent Group, with 1 joining the Conservative Group.
- 2.5. The composition of the District Council at the time of writing is as follows:

Group	Councillors
Liberal Democrat	25
Independent	10
Conservatives	9
Not in a political group	1 Reform UK 1 Liberal Democrat 1 Unaligned independent

One seat is currently vacant.

- 2.6. Since May 2025, the Chair of the District Council has been held by a non-aligned Independent.
- 2.7. The political control of the District Council has been as follows:
- Liberal Democrat Group: 2019 – 2021
 - No overall control: 2021 – 2023
 - Liberal Democrat Group: 2023 – Present
- 2.8. The District Council operates a strong Leader/Executive model of governance. Since May 2019, there have been 4 different Leaders of the District Council, all members of the Liberal Democrat Group. The time in post of each Leader is as follows:

- May 2019 – September 2020
- September 2020 – May 2023
- May 2023 – July 2024
- July 2024 – Present

2.9. Prior to 2019, the District Council had been under Conservative control since 2011. It is acknowledged that the shift from the Conservative Administration to the Liberal Democrat Administration saw the political landscape of the District Council shift significantly. That and the election of members of the Newton Says No group in 2019 appeared to mark the start of a decline in relations among councillors and between councillors and officers at the District Council.

3. Background

- 3.1. Under the Local Government Act 1999, the District Council has a duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Under section 27 of the Localism Act 2011, the District Council has a duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by its councillors.
- 3.2. Concerns around the organisational culture (in particular, behaviours and the relationships between councillors, and between councillors and officers) and governance at the District Council have previously been identified by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (“CfGS”), the Local Government Association (“LGA”), and the District Council’s external auditors, Grant Thornton.
- 3.3. In August 2022, CfGS issued a discussion paper on ‘governance, scrutiny and ethical matters’ at the District Council. It identified two key areas: relationships and ethics, and the formal systems in place at the District Council.
- 3.4. The paper suggested that the relationships between councillors were poor for a number of reasons, including:
 - Not all councillors saw themselves as being part of the District Council, and instead as being ‘insurgents’;
 - A perception that the governance shortcomings of the District Council were so severe that poor behaviour was justified;
 - A sense that the standards framework at the District Council was used as a political tool, and that the outcomes of standards hearings were politically influenced;
 - A lack of a consistent understanding across councillors of acceptable member behaviour;
 - A lack of willingness to address the issues cross-party as councillors did not recognise their collective responsibility to resolve them.
- 3.5. It was also noted that there were a number of challenges in the relationships between councillors and officers:
 - a lack of member leadership on standards and behaviours;
 - councillors, including members of the Executive, were focused too much on operational matters which had frustrated officers trying to do their day-to-day work. In turn, this had frustrated councillors who interpreted that frustration as an indication that officers wished to run the District Council;
 - councillors tended to debate and discuss the same matters repeatedly, producing confusion, and the operational focus makes it difficult for officers to act with confidence and certainty;
 - a lack of mutual respect between councillors and officers. Some councillors had little confidence in officers and were suspicious of them, occasionally questioning their competence. Some officers were exasperated by councillors’

lack of focus on strategic issues and had difficulty understanding the needs and expectations of members.

- 3.6. In relation to the District Council's formal systems, the paper highlighted that:
- there was a lack of understanding around the roles of councillors and the roles of officers in relation to strategic and operational matters;
 - the District Council's constitutional and decision-making systems exhibited weaknesses and needed more rigour and clarity. There was uncertainty among councillors as to the validity of the Constitution which exacerbated issues around clarity of roles and responsibilities;
 - access to information rules for councillors were unclear and the lack of consistency in the extent of information provided by officers in their reports contributed to increased suspicion;
 - the overview and scrutiny function undertook a lot of work, but it was not clear that it had any impact. The quality of reports was variable and there was a lack of meaningful engagement with them from councillors;
 - there was a lack of wider councillor ownership and discussion of risk.
- 3.7. In January 2024, the LGA carried out a Corporate Peer Review of the District Council. The Peer Review noted that there was tension in the relationship between the Executive and the Senior Leadership Team ("SLT") which needed to be resolved. Group Leaders and Heads of Service needed to model and uphold expected standards of behaviour.
- 3.8. The Peer Review also recognised that previous behaviours had created a culture of mistrust, resulting in a deterioration in the relationship between councillors and officers. There was a need for a space to facilitate informal councillor-officer interaction so effective and respectful joint working could become the norm. The processes leading up to decisions needed to be improved so that discussion and formulation of policies could take place before formal decisions to avoid last minute changes to reports and recommendations.
- 3.9. The District Council's external auditors are required to be satisfied that the District Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The external auditors are Grant Thornton. Their Annual Reports for 2020/21, 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24 identified significant weaknesses in the District Council's governance arrangements.
- 3.10. A key recommendation was given in the 2020/21 Report published in August 2023 and the 2021/22 and 2022/23 Joint Report published in February 2024 relating to upholding good standards in councillor behaviour and in councillor-officer relationships:
- Councillors and senior officers needed to commit to building up respect and good working relationships;
 - Group Leaders needed to make a commitment that party members would be held to account for unruly behaviour; and

- Senior leadership (both SLT and the Executive) needed to demonstrate that there was a zero tolerance to inappropriate behaviour. This included changing the organisational culture in relation to complaints.
- 3.11. The 2023/24 Report published in February 2025 noted that underlying poor behaviour had continued with a lack of trust underpinning some of those behavioural issues. The report suggested that councillors did not always understand which aspects of District Council business they had access to by law and were not always confident that declarations of interest had been made by other councillors. The auditors felt that the issues with relationships and trust were affecting arrangements for supporting decisions once they had been made.
- 3.12. The 2023/24 Report also found that there was insufficient progress on the implementation of the key recommendation from the previous two Reports and instances of poor behaviour from 2023/24, including a councillor swearing at the Chair at a Full Council meeting and councillors talking over one another and using condescending and aggressive language, were noted. As a result, the Report made a statutory recommendation under section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014, which included:

“The Council should commission a suitably qualified expert to investigate the underlying causes of member behaviours which contravene the standards set out in the Council’s constitution under the Members Code of conduct and the member/officer protocol; and which have impacted the Council’s reputation and working culture.”

4. Review Methodology

- 4.1. On 8 August 2025, the Democratic Services Manager (now Monitoring Officer) at the District Council appointed Wilkin Chapman Rollits (“WCR”) in conjunction with Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd and Fortis Therapy and Training Ltd to undertake a member conduct review in accordance with the statutory recommendation. Jonathan Goolden, Paul Hoey, Natalie Ainscough, and Alexis Powell-Howard carried out the review. Emily Briggs of WCR assisted with report writing.

Personnel

- 4.2. WCR is a solicitors’ firm based in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire with a national local government legal practice. Jonathan Goolden is a regulatory and public sector solicitor. He has worked in, or for, local government for over 30 years, and has been an Independent Person and a Monitoring Officer.
- 4.3. Hoey Ainscough Associates is a consultancy firm in the local government sector focusing on supporting effective governance, particularly in relation to the local standards framework for members. Paul Hoey and Natalie Ainscough are co-founders of Hoey Ainscough. They support councils through a series of different tools, including tailored support for individual councils through training, complaint assessment and investigative work and support on governance reviews as well as advice and guidance and events designed to meet specific local, regional or national needs. As the recognised national experts on local government conduct issues, they also work in partnership with national representative bodies to support local government. They and WCR were commissioned in 2020 by the LGA to draw up a new model Code of conduct and supporting guidance and their submission on local government standards was the most-quoted submission in the 2019 report into the standards framework by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.
- 4.4. Fortis Therapy and Training is a mental health consultancy service. Alexis Powell-Howard is a BACP accredited psychotherapist and the Managing Director of Fortis. Fortis offers training on mental health, leadership and unconscious bias for businesses and organisations across all sectors, as well as therapy, mediation, coaching, supervision, and reflective practice. Alexis also developed ‘Tribe’, an innovative organisational culture change approach, for businesses and organisations across a variety of sectors. Together with Jonathan Goolden, Alexis has been a conference speaker to local government lawyers on wellbeing and behavioural support for elected members.

Methodology

- 4.5. The review was approached in phases, building on a methodology developed under the supervision of the former Standards for England which has proved successful in the past in improving governance and resolving underlying issues.

Phase 1 – Initial Preparation

- 4.6. We reviewed the CfGS paper, the LGA Peer Report, the Audit Report for 2025 and other public reports and documents related to the District Council. We also reviewed recently recorded meetings of the District Council, including the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 November 2024, 13 May 2025 and 17 June 2025, and the Full Council meetings of 25 February 2025 and 29 July 2025.

Phase 2 – Questionnaire

- 4.7. A questionnaire relating to the governance, attitudes and culture at the District Council was developed and sent to all members of the Council, 18 senior and governance officers and 13 external stakeholders.

Phase 3 – Response Analysis

- 4.8. We received 32 responses to the questionnaire from 22 councillors (from all political groups in the Council), 8 officers, one co-opted member and one Independent Person. and analysed these to identify a number of key themes.

Phase 4 – Interviews

- 4.9. We interviewed 16 councillors, 9 officers and one Independent Person. Councillors included the Chair of Council, the Chair of the Audit Committee, four members of the Executive, three Group Leaders and four Shadow Portfolio Holders. They were drawn from all political groups on the Council. Officers included the Managing Director, 6 members of staff with legal, governance and scrutiny roles and several SLT members.

Phase 5 – Analysis

- 4.10. We analysed the information shared with us in the interviews to identify a number of key themes which we presented in person to members and senior officers at a briefing held on 15 January 2026.

5. Report and Findings

- 5.1. As we stated in our presentation to members, our findings are derived from what councillors and officers told us, together with our reflections on those comments.

Councillor relationships

- 5.2. It is clear that May 2019 was a key turning point in the relationships between councillors at the Council. Some members commented in interviews that prior to 2019, the District Council was a more enjoyable place, with debate being constructive and respectful.
- 5.3. There was a consistent feeling among the majority of the councillors interviewed that, since 2019, the Council had been a toxic environment for a number of years, and the 'other side' was the one being obstructive and causing the problems. It is clear that there have been conduct issues across the chamber, with some of the comments received highlighting that there has been a lack of respect between political groups.
- 5.4. Many interviewees felt that Newton Says No/SDA councillors were elected on a promise to disrupt and challenge, and the confrontational nature of their approach caused tension and brought a climate of defensiveness and mistrust in the Council. This perception was exacerbated by the combative use of social media by the Newton Says No group prior to the 2019 election and a feeling that SDA councillors sought to encourage public outrage online, primarily through voicing controversial political agendas at filmed meetings.
- 5.5. Many members were of the view that the Newton Says No/SDA councillors did not really understand how the District Council worked. Their conduct was said to have put those chairing Council meetings in difficult positions on a number of occasions. An example of this is an incident at a full Council meeting in September 2021 where a councillor used their speaking slot in the councillor questions portion of the agenda to accuse the District Council of conspiracy to defraud Teignbridge residents in relation to a controversial planning development. When the Chair asked if the councillor was going to ask a question, the councillor stood up, approached the front of the room continuing their speech and ignoring the Chair's requests for them to sit down. This led to another councillor attempting to physically remove them.
- 5.6. A further example occurred at a full Council meeting in July 2024, where a number of members sought to use points of order to undermine the Chair's attempts to curtail the use of public questions to give prolonged gender critical speeches which included inflammatory language. Councillors suggested that the Chair was preventing free speech but failed to recognise that:
- freedom of expression is a qualified right;
 - public questions are intended to allow for supplementary questions to be asked, not for long speeches and statements to be made, and the Chair was enforcing that; and
 - speakers could have raised questions on the issue of single sex spaces without engaging in a disrespectful characterisation of LGBTQ+ persons and were given multiple chances to do so by the Chair before being shut down.
- 5.7. Both officers and members felt that many councillors tended to focus on hyperlocal issues and lose sight of the district wide context and priorities.

- 5.8. Though there is a feeling among some councillors that the mood at the District Council has started to improve since the SDA Group formally disbanded and became part of the Independent Group, it is evident that there is still a pervasive negative view of former Newton Says No/SDA councillors. This is illustrated by a number of the comments we received, which asserted that some members of the Independent Group had been confrontational, abusive and disruptive.
- 5.9. However, those we interviewed also felt that the approach of the Liberal Democrat leadership had contributed to the poor relationships among councillors. The previous Leader of the Council had excluded opposition groups from all Committee Chair positions (including the Chair and Vice Chair positions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which remained under the control of the Liberal Democrat Group).
- 5.10. Some councillors felt that the Executive had refused to engage meaningfully with Opposition Groups and had not shown respect to the Independent Group's democratic legitimacy. Those interviewed felt the Executive had too frequently taken the approach of shutting concerns down or reacting to confrontation in a manner that escalated it, including making complaints to the Monitoring Officer whenever challenged, rather than providing a reasoned and transparent response. This had entrenched the former SDA councillors' sense of 'us vs them', and, in a wider political climate of increasing scepticism towards the main political parties and the growing effectiveness of outrage politics in engaging public support, encouraged them to further their combative approach.
- 5.11. We considered that *"Interpersonal conflicts are shaped by how individuals interpret the intentions and behaviour of others, rather than by the objective circumstances of the situation"* to quote Dhami, M. K. & Olsson, H. (2023) - Evolution of the interpersonal conflict paradigm - Judgment and Decision Making. As one councillor commented in interview, there was a need for members to learn to be *"hard on the issue, soft on the person"*.
- 5.12. Overall, it was apparent that a culture of councillors not taking collective accountability for improving conduct at the District Council has been facilitated by inappropriate behaviour being generalised and not discussed in a more focused manner. Many councillors appear so set in their view of what the root cause of the issue is that they are unable to recognise when it is their own behaviour which is being referred to. A number of the comments received noted that generic statements which, for example, talk of conduct "across the chamber", did not foster accountability among those engaging in the conduct.

Arrangements for considering councillor code of conduct complaints

- 5.13. The way the process for considering complaints under the councillor code of conduct has been operated previously at the District Council has not helped this problem. Trust in the Council's arrangements for determining standards complaints had been eroded. Councillors have been unwilling to accept the outcome of complaints as a result. Interviewees told us that they felt complaints had been treated differently according to the Group of the subject member or complainant and that there had been a considerable backlog of complaints.
- 5.14. In December 2022, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman upheld a complaint made by a leading member of the SDA Group about the manner in which the Council had handled a code of conduct complaint against him. The Ombudsman found that the Council:-

- initiated an investigation without a complaint in writing in breach of requirements in section 28 of the Localism Act 2011;
- did not provide adequate information to the councillor on alleged breaches of the code of conduct;
- conflated allegations against the councillor with a third party;
- failed to record consultations with the Independent Person;
- introduced new allegations into the investigation;
- failed to respond to the councillor's concerns about the process;

and that the investigation failed to evidence a balancing exercise had taken place between the need to protect officers from critical comments and the councillor's enhanced rights to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

- 5.15. The Ombudsman recommended that the Council apologise to the councillor, rescind its decision to breach him and revise its code of conduct complaint procedures. Whilst the Ombudsman was satisfied with the Council's response in December 2023, a number of former SDA members expressed the view to us that the Council had been reluctant to accept the outcome of the Ombudsman complaint and this had impacted on their level of confidence in the overall process.
- 5.16. However, we were told that the backlog in standards complaints had been cleared, and matters had improved considerably in recent months with much more effective processing and determination of complaints.
- 5.17. The present Monitoring Officer has indicated that 61 complaints were received from June 2024 – June 2025, of which 30 were from members and 3 from officers. From May 2025 to May 2026, 32 complaints were received, a reduction of almost half, especially as these include complaints against town and parish councillors. Of these, 10 complaints were made by members and 4 by officers.
- 5.18. One of the Council's Independent Persons commented to the present Monitoring Officer that they had been involved in fewer complaints since October 2025 and that their attendance at Governance Committee meetings and face to face training on the code of conduct had demonstrated to them that there was now a willingness to understand the code and address the outcome of independent investigations seriously.
- 5.19. Ultimately underscoring the relationships between councillors of different Groups is a serious lack of trust. The Liberal Democrats do not trust a number of Independents to engage in good faith and a number of Independents do not trust that the Liberal Democrats will listen to them and be transparent. Both factions express that they wish to do their best for the District, but neither believe that the other wants the same. The lack of strategic focus of the Council has perhaps contributed to this, as councillors have become overly focused on very localised issues and debates on controversial topics of limited relevance to the District Council as a whole.

Councillor - officer relationships

- 5.20. Interviewees felt relationships between councillors and officers were distant and the working relationship had not been functioning in an effective way. There was lack of mutual support and respect, which had led to frustration and eroded trust. Comments received acknowledged that there was likely a feeling from both councillors and officers that they were not being supported by one another adequately.

- 5.21. The previous Liberal Democrat leadership was considered to have had a poor relationship with some officers, particularly the Senior Leadership Team. One officer said that a previous Leader “kneecapped” officers, and another bullied and harassed them. Other councillors have also had a poor relationship with officers. One officer said that an Opposition Group councillor threatened an officer, and others intimidated planning officers.
- 5.22. Though interviewees acknowledged that the current Leader had improved relationships, some councillors and officers still held a negative perception of one another. For example, one councillor felt that all councillors were tarred with the same brush by senior officers and another suggested that some officers had a stereotypical view of councillors and did not treat them as individuals. These feelings were not helped by the exclusion of councillors from Council offices for a period of time, which, while done for understandable reasons, had not been properly explained and had caused a number of members to feel as though they were being punished for the conduct of one councillor. On the other hand, officers reported feeling undervalued and unappreciated by councillors, and that the thanks they do receive did not feel genuine.
- 5.23. Negative perceptions had been further exacerbated by communication issues between officers and councillors. Councillors felt that officers were withholding information from them and trying to prevent their involvement in the decision-making process. Comments received referred to inconsistency in the responses and information received from officers, and a feeling that officers did not seek contributions from councillors nor properly consider them when formulating policies.
- 5.24. On the other hand, some interviewees noted that officers were cautious in their communications with councillors as a result of the conduct of some members. There were comments received which suggested that some councillors have created a wall between members and officers through their conduct on social media and in public, causing officers to worry about being publicly discredited or undermined by councillors.
- 5.25. Officers interviewed also felt that a lack of engagement by councillors, including the Executive, left them in a difficult position and that the lack of strategic focus of the Executive had made it hard for officers to carry out their roles confidently. Officers noted that not all councillors read committee or meeting reports ahead of time. They felt that they risked being undermined by members in Council meetings. Officers also noted that they had been accused of trying to create an ‘officer led’ Council by some members. They felt this was unfair as councillors left voids for officers to fill – particularly by the Executive which was perceived as having failed to provide clear and consistent strategic direction.
- 5.26. Ultimately, there appears to be a lack of understanding of the respective roles of officers and councillors, particularly in relation to the difference between operational and strategic matters. This is driving perceptions which prevent reconciliation in the working relationship.

6. Improvements, conclusions and recommendations

Initial feedback

- 6.1. We gave initial feedback to all members and senior officers in a presentation in January 2026.
- 6.2. We noted that whilst almost all those responding to the questionnaire said they were proud to be part of the Council, over half disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “councillors treat each other with respect and courtesy”.
- 6.3. We said that those interviewed had told us that:-
 - there had been a period of highly adversarial, disruptive and sometimes abusive behaviour, especially in Council meetings
 - disruptive tactics by newer members had created a climate of suspicion and defensiveness
 - there had been a lack of trust between senior officers and members
 - lack of clear vision from members was a barrier to effective Council operation
 - the councillor code of conduct complaints system had been dysfunctional
 - both officers and members highlighted poor communication
 - newer members were perceived to lack understanding of local government processes
 - Executive leadership fell upon a small number of active members
- 6.4. However, we also reported that:-
 - those interviewed recognised that the Council’s culture had begun to improve
 - code of conduct complaint handling and outcomes had improved
 - cross party work in governance had been positive
 - more information was shared in advance of decisions
 - the new Head of Democratic Services (now Monitoring Officer) had brought a widely praised fresh and inclusive approach
 - good progress had been made on a governance improvement plan
 - a member development strategy had been adopted
 - guidance and training had been provided on chairing Council meetings and conducting scrutiny
- 6.5. We observed that members had a hyper local focus which could lead them to be so passionate about a single issue that district wide context and priorities could be overlooked. We felt that there had been an intolerance of the views of others and that disagreement had been expressed as personal conflict. Whilst improvement was tangible it was not yet embedded.
- 6.6. We identified a number of key recommendations as follows:-
 - (a) full Council to consider a motion calling on all members to treat each other and Council staff with politeness and courtesy in behaviour, speech and in the written word, whilst respecting the right of members to express, debate and challenge political views freely within the law;
 - (b) all members pledge personally to:-
 - listen and respect differing views

- respect the rights of all councillors to carry out their roles
 - hold themselves and fellow councillors to account
 - be open
 - be civil
- (c) the Monitoring Officer report to the Governance Committee on the adoption by the Council of the LGA's Debate Not Hate campaign and in particular the Ending Abuse in Public Life Council Self-Assessment toolkit as a means of creating a culture of safety and respect for members within and without the Council Chamber;
- (d) the Monitoring Officer and Head of Paid Service report jointly to the Governance Committee on a revised member – officer protocol to include clear guidance on:-
- Members' rights to accessing Council information;
 - Member visits to officer working areas
- (e) the Council identify with the LGA and CfGS what further support those bodies might offer to strengthen the capacity of both executive members and Overview & Scrutiny
- 6.7. In addition, we discussed with the Monitoring Officer our views that the following additional recommendations were appropriate:-
- (a) that there be a comprehensive training programme for all members to be reviewed annually and rolled out for all new members. This would include training on the code of conduct, the different role of members and officers, effective decision-making, chairing skills and understanding the constitution;
- (b) that all regulatory committees be chaired by a councillor who is not a member of the ruling Group.

Improvements and progress

- 6.8. We have been heartened to hear from the Monitoring Officer of a number of areas of improvement and progress.
- 6.9. There has been a marked reduction in the numbers of code of conduct complaints. The historic backlog of complaints has been cleared. There appears to be greater confidence in, and trust of the standards process.
- 6.10. A cross party Constitution Working Group, chaired by CfGS has met on 18 occasions from October 2024 to April 2026 and has reviewed:-
- questions at full Council
 - notices of motion
 - extraordinary meetings
 - decision making processes
 - scrutiny process
 - member decisions
 - declaring interests, gifts and hospitality
 - language of the constitution
 - role of political groups
 - councillor role profiles
 - planning site visits

- Petitions
 - Shadow executive protocol
 - Amendments to motions
 - Public engagement and participation
 - Overview and scrutiny call in process
 - Member – officer protocol
 - Access to information
- 6.11. Not only has the Working Party successfully addressed many areas of governance of the Council, it was cited by many parties as an exemplar of effective and constructive collaboration between members of opposing political groups.
- 6.12. There has been significant progress in implementing a governance action plan, including:-
- Decision making guide and updated guide to writing committee reports (December 2025)
 - One Teignbridge Action Plan (Council strategy) adopted by full Council on 23rd October 2025
 - Town and Parish Council Charter approved by the Executive on 2nd December 2025
- 6.13. A member development strategy has been adopted. A new call in procedure, revised Council Procedure Rules and a member – officer protocol are due to be adopted in May 2026. The member – office protocol will include clear expectations on member visits to officers’ working areas. Training for members on rules of debate for Council meetings is also due to take place in May. Training is due to be provided in July to all Committee Chairs and the Chair and Vice Chair of Council on the effective conduct of meetings.
- 6.14. The Monitoring Officer intends to include in revised Access to Information Procedure Rules in the Constitution a clear indication of how members may access information already published by the Council and the exercise by councillors of their rights to information such as by the “need to know” right.
- 6.15. Of the key recommendations we made in the presentation to members in January 2026, it is apparent that those relating to a member – officer protocol and access to information have already been implemented. Nonetheless, we repeat them in this report for ease of reference and completeness.
- 6.16. Given the significant work completed by the Constitution Working Party (which includes improvement of the Overview and Scrutiny process), we no longer consider that external assistance from CfGS is necessary and note that the Monitoring Officer intends to undertake such further work internally.

Conclusions

- 6.17. Overall, the review finds that member conduct and member-officer relationships at the Council continue to present challenges, although there are clear signs of improvement from a previous low point. Changes in leadership roles, meeting management, complaints handling and some areas of cross-party working have begun to rebuild confidence and reduce overtly disruptive behaviours.

- 6.18. However, these improvements are not yet consistently embedded and remain vulnerable to individual behaviours and changing circumstances. There are persistent needs for shared strategic focus, improvement in the understanding of respective member and officer roles, to improve confidence in governance processes, and to reduce, if not eradicate, residual mistrust across parts of the organisation.
- 6.19. The recommendations that follow are therefore intended to build on recent progress, address these underlying needs, and support the development of a more stable, respectful and effective governance culture that is sustainable over time.

Recommendations

6.20. We make the following recommendations to the Council: -

R1 full Council to resolve that all members to treat each other, Council staff and the public with politeness and courtesy in behaviour, speech and in the written word, whilst respecting the right of members to express, debate and challenge political views freely within the law;

R2 all members pledge personally to:-

- listen and respect differing views
Actively listen to others and acknowledge differing political, professional or personal perspectives. Express disagreement constructively and without dismissiveness.
- respect the rights of all councillors to carry out their roles and the roles of officers
Uphold the legitimate roles, responsibilities and democratic mandates of all councillors, irrespective of political affiliation or position, and refrain from any conduct that undermines another councillor's ability to discharge their duties. This includes respecting the authority of the chair, engaging appropriately with officers in line with respective roles, and supporting a culture where poor behaviour is constructively and appropriately challenged.
- hold themselves and fellow councillors to account
Take responsibility for own conduct and decisions and raise concerns about behaviour or actions that fall below agreed standards in an appropriate, proportionate and professional manner.
- be open
Communicate honestly and transparently, sharing information where appropriate and providing clear reasons for decisions, constraints or changes.
- be civil
Treat others with courtesy, respect and professionalism at all times, including during disagreement or challenge, and avoid language or behaviour that could reasonably be perceived as disrespectful, bullying or intimidating.

R3 the Monitoring Officer report to the Governance Committee on the adoption by the Council of the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate campaign and in particular the Ending Abuse in Public Life Council Self-Assessment toolkit as a means of creating a culture of safety and respect for members within and without the Council Chamber.

We make the above three recommendations in order for councillors collectively and individually to commit to high standards of conduct and for the Council as an organisation to take steps to support and protect members from abusive behaviour.

R4 the Monitoring Officer and Head of Paid Service report jointly to the Governance Committee on a revised member – officer protocol to include clear guidance on:-

- Members' rights to accessing Council information;
- Member visits to officer working areas

We make the above recommendation to provide clarity on expected standards of conduct by councillors towards staff, staff conduct towards councillors and the rights of councillors to obtain and scrutinise Council information.

R5 the Council identify with the Local Government Association what support it might offer to strengthen the capacity of the Executive;

R6 the Council provide further training and assistance to strengthen the capacity and capability of the Overview and Scrutiny process;

R7 that all regulatory committees be chaired by a councillor who is not a member of the ruling Group.

We make the above three recommendations to assist the Council in achieving strong governance through clear Executive leadership which is subject to effective scrutiny with councillors not in the ruling political group able to play a meaningful role in the discharge of the Council's functions.

R8 that there be a comprehensive training programme for all members to be reviewed annually and rolled out for all new members. This would include training on the code of conduct, the different role of members and officers, effective decision-making, chairing skills and understanding the constitution.

We make the above recommendation to cement recognition of good governance in the Council where debate and decision making is "hard on the issue, soft on the person".

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