

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 27 January 2021

PRESENT – Councillors, Afzal (Chair) Casey, Connor, Khonat, Liddle, Rawat, Slater and Whittle.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Miranda Carruthers-Watt and Paul Fletcher
(Independent Members)

OFFICERS – David Fairclough, Asad Laher, Phil Llewellyn and Shannon Gardiner

RESOLUTIONS

14 Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting, and asked Phil Llewellyn to read out the statement explaining that this was a virtual meeting.

The Chair also welcomed Miranda Carruthers-Watt to the Standards Committee, who had recently been appointed as an Independent Person.

Apologies were received from Councillor Roy Davies and Alan Eastwood.

15 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declaration of Interests received.

16 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28th October 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

Councillor Neil Slater asked about the progress on the review of the process relating to Call-in meetings and it was noted that a report would be prepared for Policy and Corporate Resources Committee for the Committee to consider.

17 Local Government Ethical Standards - Review of Complaints Form and Website

The Committee was provided with an update on work to modernise the website access to the complaints process. The Members were presented with a revised complaints form for their approval.

As part of the Committee's work programme for 2020/21 the Committee at the meeting in October undertook a review of the Member Complaints Form utilised by complainants to record their concerns for consideration by the Monitoring Officer.

The full range of improvements and recommendations proposed by the Committee was agreed as follows:

- To schedule the converting of the Form into an E-Form that can be completed on-line or downloaded for completion and e-mailing later

- Improve the general launch page on the website to include a simple process flow-chart
- Ensure that there is as few as possible `clicks` from the main site to the E-Form on the Launch page so it is as direct access as possible
- To add to the Form a section on desired outcome from the complaint.
- Explain on Website the potential outcomes to complaints and ask Complainant in completing form to indicate what outcome is desired
- Provide on website simple reference to key timescales (quoted in the Arrangements for Member Conduct
- Reference on website that if complaint made directly to Monitoring Officer as long as information on key information as required on the Form has been addressed, Monitoring Officer has discretion to accept complaint.

The Committee were informed that the e-form was now in process and would be available to the public next week. The Members were shown a demonstration of how to access the form from the Council's website and how the 'clicks' to get to the e-form had been reduced. The public would also have access to other information that would assist with their complaint such as, Code of Conduct, timescales, process flow-chat and the complainant's desired outcome.

Members of the Committee were satisfied with the e-form and thought it would be helpful and easier for members of the public to submit a complaint if they wish to do so.

RESOLVED –

- That the improvements to be made to the website be noted
- That the revised complaints form incorporating the changes as agreed be noted

18 **Member Training Update**

A report was submitted which reviewed Members training to date.

It was reported at the last Committee meeting in October, that given the current situation with the pandemic the move to 'on-line' training has provided a vital method of ensuring members can be kept up to date with key aspects of their responsibilities.

Currently three key training courses were made available online targeted directly at Councillors in their role with many more generic courses covering a range of subjects and personal skills also available for Councillors to access.

The 3 targeted courses this year were:

- Civil Contingencies for Elected Members
- DOJO Cyber Security Awareness (2020)
- Information Governance for Elected Members

All elected members were expected to undertake and refresh their training each year in these 3 key areas, however as at 15th January 2021, 5 Councillors had not completed the programme and the Standards Committee was advised that:

2 had reported some issues with their computer equipment as the reason for their non-completion to date.

A further councillor could not complete for medical reasons and this issue was being addressed via an alternative solution.

2 Councillors provided no reason for their failure to complete the programme. It had also been agreed by the Committee in the previous municipal year that all elected members complete equality and diversity related training & workshop, but this 'in person' event had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 restrictions that came into place in March 2020.

The Committee noted that the plan remains for this programme to be scheduled for a date later in the municipal year 2020/21 when it would hopefully be possible to deliver this training safely and securely respecting any remaining Covid-19 restrictions that may be in place at that time. A further update will be provided at the next meeting in March.

The Committee discussed the importance of Members attending the 3 targeted training courses and were supportive of the proposals in the report to encourage Members to complete the training in a timely fashion.

The Chair, Saima Afzal and Vice Chair, Kevin Connor, suggested multiple training courses such as Safeguarding, Neglect and the appropriate use of social media. It was proposed that briefing sessions be set up all Councillors to attend to discuss the issues along with Officers who specialise within those fields. Members were invited to forward their own personal experiences with social media to the Monitoring Officer, which may be used within the briefing sessions.

RESOLVED –

- That the Member training update be noted
- Endorse a request from the Monitoring Officer that each Councillor who has yet to complete their course be provided support as required to complete the training.
- Note that all elected members are due to complete equality and diversity related training & workshop, but this externally arranged 'in person; event had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 restrictions coming into place in March 2020 and to,
- Note that the plan remains for this programme to be scheduled for a date later in the municipal year when it would hopefully be possible to deliver this training safely and securely respecting any remaining Covid-19 restrictions that may be in place at that time and that a further update will be provided at the next meeting.

19 Committee on Standards in Public Life - Local Government Ethical Standards

The Committee were provided with a position statement on the recommendations made in the Committee on Standards in Public Life report of January 2019 on local government ethical standards and provided options for updating the Code of Conduct & Arrangements for dealing with complaints and the Code of Conduct for Members.

As reported at the July Standards Committee meeting, they identified 15 best practice recommendations which they consider represent a benchmark for ethical practice and which they expect any local authority should implement. The Monitoring Officer and the Head of Legal & Governance have reviewed the recommendations and compared with the Council's current Code of Conduct and the current Arrangements for dealing with Complaints about the Code of Conduct for Members.

Although, some of these recommendations were already reflected in the existing Code and arrangements for dealing with Member complaints, the Committee may wish to consider the other recommendations with a view to reflecting all of the 15 best practice statements in these documents. Since the completion of this work, a new National Model Code of Member Conduct was developed and published by the Local Government Association.

This presented a further option for the Committee to consider as an alternative to updating the local Code of Conduct, by completely replacing the local Code of Conduct section of the Constitution with the LGA new National Model Code of Member Conduct, with the Arrangements for dealing with Complaints about the Code of Conduct for Members, continuing to be updated as now suggested. As a further alternative, the new LGA Model Councillor Code of Conduct 2020 could be adopted with some localised amendments.

It was noted that if the recommendations were adopted then the Council still has no powers in legislation under the complaints process to suspend or dismiss an Elected Member however; it helps the public to use as a tool to submit their complaints.

Members of the Committee discussed the various recommendations within the report and cooperatively concluded which option was most suitable to adopt.

RESOLVED –

- That the committee consider the report and ask Full Council to:
 - 1) Adopt the 15 best practice recommendations which the Committee on Standards in Public Life consider represent a benchmark for ethical practice and which they expect any local authority should implement.
- Then subject to 1) above agree the Full Council be recommended to:
 - A) Update the local Code of Conduct and update the local Arrangements for dealing with Complaints about the Code of Conduct for Members reflecting the Committee on Standards in Public Life best practice recommendations as set out in both documents referenced in Appendix B of the report.

Signed:

Date:

Chair of the meeting
at which the minutes were confirmed