

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
HELD ON 10 JULY 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.35 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Morag Malvern (Chair), Rachel Burgess (Vice-Chair), Sam Akhtar, Phil Cunnington, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey and Caroline Smith
Parish/Town Council Representatives:- Sally Gurney (Co-Optee, Wokingham Town Council) and Sheena Matthews (Co-Optee Earley Town Council)

Officers Present

Neil Allen, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer

36. ELECTION OF CHAIR

The Committee elected a Chair for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Morag Malvern be elected as Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

37. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Committee appointed a Vice-Chair for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

RESOLVED: That Councillor Rachel Burgess be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year.

38. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

39. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee, held on 24 March 2023, were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

40. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

41. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

42. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

43. PARISH / TOWN COUNCIL QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from Town or Parish Members.

44. MEMBER TRAINING SESSION

Andrew Moulton (Monitoring Officer) gave a presentation to the Committee on the terms of reference and role of the Standards Committee.

The presentation covered issues such as the composition of the Committee, the role of non-voting Town and Parish Council representatives and the role of the Independent Person in relation to Code of Conduct complaints.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

The presentation highlighted the role of the Standards Committee in promoting high standards of conduct. How did the Committee carry out this role? It was confirmed that one example of this role was the publication of the Committee's Annual Report to Council. The annual report gave details of the Code of Conduct complaints considered during the previous year together with any other issues considered by the Committee. It was noted that there could be further opportunities for promotional work and that this could be considered by the Committee during 2023/24.

It was noted that the Committee currently had a vacancy for a Town/Parish representative. What progress was being made to fill the vacancy? It was confirmed that Parish Councils had been asked to submit details of any interested Members by the end of July. If more than one Parish Member came forwards, the Monitoring Officer and one of the Independent Persons would carry out an informal interview process. It was hoped that the vacancy would be filled by August 2023.

The Committee had previously noted the increasing number of Code of Conduct complaints which related to the use and abuse of social media. This was felt to be a good subject for the Committee's promotional work in 2023/24.

What Code of Conduct/Governance training was provided for newly-elected and re-elected Members? It was confirmed that training was provided following elections. However, there may be a gap for re-elected Members. Further consideration would be given to this point. In 2024, the Borough would be holding all-out elections following the boundary review process. All 54 newly elected Members would receive appropriate training on the Code of Conduct.

It was noted that an important issue was ensuring that all Members signed the Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Member training session be noted;
- 2) the Committee consider ideas for promoting high standards of Member conduct at future meetings.

45. UPDATE ON COMPLAINTS

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 9 to 14. The report reminded Members of the process for handling Code of Conduct complaints covering both Borough and Town/Parish Council Members.

Appendix A to the report listed the 12 complaints received during 2022/23 and the outcome of each complaint. There were nine complaints relating to Borough Members and three complaints relating to Town/Parish Members. All 12 complaints had now been resolved.

Only one complaint had resulted in a finding of a breach of the Code of Conduct. This complaint (WBC 6) had resulted in the publication of a decision notice on the WBC website. It would also be reported to full Council.

It was noted that resolution of some complaints had not been met within specified timescales. There were a number of factors at play – staff workloads (e.g. around elections), delays in responses and setting up interviews with witnesses.

It was noted that the Council had agreed to a review of the Council's Constitution. Chapter 9 of the Constitution related to the Standards Committee and the Code of Conduct. It was suggested that the Committee consider suggestions for changes to the Constitution at its next meeting.

As an example of the variation in numbers of complaints received, it was noted that four new Code of Conduct complaints had been received in the past week – three of the complaints related to one meeting.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and questions.

Complaint WBC 6 was initially submitted in August 2022 – it then took 10 months to reach a conclusion. It was confirmed that the complaint related to the May 2022 elections, so it was several months before the complaint was submitted. An external investigator was retained to review the complaint – the investigation took several months followed by discussion and input into the draft report. A tighter timescale would be more efficient and it was suggested that a shorter deadline for informal resolution may be more effective, with referral to a Hearings Panel for complaints that could not be resolved.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the update on Code of Conduct complaints be noted;
- 2) the Committee consider potential changes to Chapter 9 of the WBC Constitution at the next meeting;
- 3) Members submit any comments or questions on issues raised at the meeting to Andrew Moulton.