

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
HELD ON 24 JANUARY 2022 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.37 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Kaiser (Chairman), Prue Bray, Imogen Shepherd-DuBey, Abdul Loyes, Daniel Sargeant (Vice-Chairman), Caroline Smith and Jackie Rance

Parish/Town Council Representatives Present

Sally Gurney (Co-Optee, Wokingham Town Council), Roy Mantel (Co-Optee Twyford Parish Council) and Sheena Matthews (Co-Optee, Earley Town Council)

Officers Present

Jennifer Lee, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer
Callum Wernham, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

17. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

18. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 October 2021 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Chairman welcomed Sheena Matthews, Co-Optee from Earley Town Council, to the Committee following her appointment at full Council on 20 January 2022. Sheena stated that she was a Member of Earley Town Council and had been for a number of years, and added that she had a background in international development and the Civil Service, with a particular interest in good governance and standards, and looked forward to providing input into the Standards Committee.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

20. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

21. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

22. PARISH / TOWN COUNCIL QUESTION TIME

There were no Parish or Town Council questions.

23. UPDATE ON COMPLAINTS

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 9 to 14, which provided an update on progress relating to Councillor Code of Conduct complaints.

The report stated that since the previous meeting of the Committee, on 11 October 2021, two new complaints had been received and a number of other complaints had been progressed.

Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer, provided a progress report on each of the complaints (set out in Appendix A to the report). Andrew stated that a further complaint had been received in the past week, over and above those mentioned in Appendix A.

Andrew reaffirmed the Committee's expectations in relation to clearer and more expedient timescales when dealing with complaints, including acknowledging complaints within three days, holding an initial meeting within fifteen days, and concluding an investigation within three months where a hearing was required.

In relation to the three outstanding historical complaints, Andrew stated that two were in relation to the same Councillor and the cases were progressing with a view to resolve by the next meeting of the Committee on 2 March 2022.

Andrew sought the Committee's views on improving the overall understanding of the relevant Code of Conduct for all Members, including any additional training opportunities.

In the ensuing discussion, the following points and queries were raised:

- What progress had been made in relation to the complaint lodged in September 2021? Monitoring Officer response – Active communications had now been established with the Councillor concerned, and a resolution was very much the focus within the next few weeks. The previous engagement of this particular Councillor had not been up to the level expected of a Councillor alleged to have breached the Code of Conduct, and any influence that the Committee could bring in terms of encouraging all Councillors to engage with the process in future would be welcomed.
- It was noted that the Monitoring Officer had met with Town and Parish Council clerks to discuss the adoption of the Local Government Association's (LGA's) model Code of Conduct, and a further meeting could be set up to reinforce this and to explore options to make Councillors more aware of the expectations of the Code of Conduct and engagement with the complaints process when required.
- Was it unusual for Councillors to persistently or repeatedly breach the Code of Conduct? Monitoring Officer response – No, this was quite exceptional and the particular case was being viewed as a one-off.
- The Monitoring Officer agreed to schedule an item on how to make the training process (including social media and press related training) more meaningful for the meeting of the Committee on 2 March 2022, and welcomed the Committee's thoughts on any possible improvements.
- The Monitoring Officer agreed to schedule an item updating on the position of each Town and Parish Council in relation to adoption of the new LGA model Code of Conduct, including exploring the option of requiring all Members to re-sign the new Code of Conduct, for the meeting of the Committee on 2 March 2022.
- Members discussed the sanctions available to the Committee when a Member was found to be in serious breach of the Code of Conduct. In addition to naming the Member and detailing the breach of the Code of Conduct, which some Councillors could view as a positive as they felt that they had stood up for residents, the most stringent sanction available was to ban a Councillor from a particular Committee for a period of time. It was noted that prior to 2010, the Standards Board had the ability to ban a Councillor

from sitting on the Council for up to six months. Very serious breaches of the Code of Conduct could be a police matter.

- It was noted that the complaint lodged against the Wokingham Town Council Member should have been dealt with more quickly, and a resolution would be achieved by the date of the next Committee meeting.
- It was noted that more examples of breaches, in an anonymised and redacted format, would be useful for the Committee to understand common themes and potential grey areas. It was added that examples from other Local Authorities could be used, and miniature case studies could also be presented.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the update on Councillor Code of Conduct complaints be noted;
- 2) the Monitoring Officer meet with Town and Parish Council clerks to explore options to make Councillor's more aware of the expectations of the Code of Conduct and engagement with the complaints process when required;
- 3) the Monitoring Officer schedule an item for the meeting of the Committee on 2 March 2022 on how to make the training process including social media and press related training more meaningful;
- 4) the Monitoring Officer schedule an item for the meeting of the Committee on 2 March 2022, updating on the position of each Town and Parish Council in relation to adoption of the new LGA model Code of Conduct, including exploring the option of requiring all Members to re-sign the new Code of Conduct;
- 5) opportunities to present redacted and anonymised examples of breaches of the Code of Conduct to the Committee be explored.

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