

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
HELD ON 29 JANUARY 2024 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.20 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

Officers Present

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

19. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

20. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 October 2024 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

21. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

23. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

24. PARISH / TOWN COUNCIL QUESTION TIME

There were no Parish or Town Council questions.

25. UPDATE ON CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 9 to 16, which provided an update on Code of Conduct complaints.

The report stated that, since the previous meeting in October 2023, nine new complaints had been received. This brought the total number of complaints in 2023/24 to 18. 17 of the complaints related to WBC with one complaint relating to a Parish Council.

At the October 2023 meeting, Members asked if there any trends relating to Member to Member complaints along party lines. It was confirmed that of the 17 complaints received in the year to date, six were submitted by WBC Members. There was no discernible pattern with complaints being from more than one political group. Members also asked whether individuals were making multiple complaints. In 2023/24 there was no evidence of multiple complaints. There were, however, three examples of incidents leading to multiple complaints from different complainants. This could be a factor in the increased number of complaints received compared to previous years.

Appended to the report was a breakdown of the complaints received and an update on progress.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the update on Code of Conduct complaints be noted;
- 2) progress on the complaints currently under investigation be reported to the Committee's next meeting in March 2024.

26. LGA GUIDANCE - DEBATE NOT HATE CAMPAIGN

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 17 to 20 which reminded Members that, at its previous meeting, the Committee had received a presentation on the Local Government Association's (LGA) "Debate Not Hate" campaign.

The Debate Not Hate campaign related to councillors and individuals considering putting themselves forward in the future to stand for election with a view to enhancing key themes such as prevention, policies and guidance, training, technology, risk assessment, engaging with the police, managing councillor information, setting expectations, and managing public narratives and behaviour/conduct.

The Committee noted the report and was keen to identify the extent of the issue locally. Therefore, a survey of all 54 borough councillors was conducted between 30 November and 20 December 2023. Seven responses were received, the details of which are provided in the main body of the report. Whilst a low response may be indicative that there were no significant issues locally, there were examples reported where councillors had suffered abuse on the doorstep when campaigning and also on social media, particularly for those councillors who used social media extensively.

A summary of the main findings from the survey was:

- A low response rate may indicate that councillors felt that this was not a significant area of concern. However, for those councillors who did respond, the following conclusions may be drawn.
- 3 out of 7 reported that they had been subject to a form of abuse, harassment or intimidation.
- Types of abuse reported were verbal abuse, distribution of misinformation, character assassination, inappropriate emails, letters, phone calls and communications on social media.
- 1 out of 3 who were subject to abuse reported this to the Monitoring Officer. Others reported the abuse to their political party.
- 2 out 3 knew the process for reporting abuse.
- 4 out 7 suggested that written guidance would be helpful – there was also 1 proposal for a training session and 1 for establishing a forum to share experiences.

- 1 out of 7 indicated that there should be greater scrutiny of how the Monitoring Officer conducts the initial investigation process to determine whether a complaint is valid.

In the ensuing discussion, Members commented that seven responses to the local survey was too low to draw firm conclusions. It was suggested that the survey be repeated supported by a statement from the Chair. The aim should be to achieve a full response from Members, including nil returns.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the Debate Not Hate survey be repeated for WBC Members, with an update to the next meeting of the Committee in March 2024;
- 2) officers review the sequencing of questions in the survey;
- 3) Members confirm the importance of completing the survey to their political groups;
- 4) the survey be rolled out to Town and Parish Councils following consideration of the WBC findings.

This page is intentionally left blank