

STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COMMITTEE ROOM - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX CB11 4ER, on MONDAY, 18 MARCH 2019 at 5.00 pm

Present: Councillor D Jones (Chairman)
Councillors A Dean, N Hargreaves, P Lees and B Light

Officers in attendance: A Bochel (Democratic Services Officer) and S Pugh (Assistant Director - Governance and Legal)

Also present: D Pearl and C Wellingbrooke-Doswell (Independent Members)

ST6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillor Loughlin, Georgina Butcher Doulton, and from Councillor Knight who would be arriving late.

ST7 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

The Chairman noted the following:

- Guidance on Member use of social media had been circulated to all Members.
- He asked whether information on the Harvey v Ledbury Town Council case had been circulated to town and parish councils. The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said he would look into this.
- He was grateful to the Independent Members who had run the previous training session for Standards Committee members.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said procedure was that panel meetings that dealt with disciplinary hearings had to begin as public meetings, but would likely have a resolution to move into a private meeting on the basis that personal information would be discussed.

Councillor Knight entered the meeting.

ST8 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETHICAL STANDARDS: A REVIEW BY THE COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Members considered the report, which set out the Executive Summary from the review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life on Local Government Ethical Standards and its recommendations and best practice suggestions.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said the Local Government Association would take a lead on creating a model code, but there was no timetable as to when this would be.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said Uttlesford District Council had circulated a model Code of Conduct to town and parish councils, and most had now adopted this code. He could circulate the list of parish councils who had yet to do so to the Committee.

Members noted that several of the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life's report would require legislation to enact. However this would take time, and there was no timetable set out for when this would happen.

Councillor Knight said she believed comments in the Review regarding political groups were less relevant to parish councils because parish councils rarely had political groups.

Members discussed whether and how a Chairman or Member of a parish council could take action on poor behaviour during a parish council meeting. The importance of training was discussed, though this was not mandatory for parish councillors. Most parish councils would have standing orders which enabled the Chairman to suspend a meeting if there had been disruptive behaviour.

In response to a question from the Chairman, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said he would circulate advice on Member use of social media to the Independent Members.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services noted that councillors would be given a right of appeal against suspension if imposed by a Standards Panel for breach of the Code.

In response to a question from Members, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said appropriate Code of Conduct training would be given to all members of Uttlesford District Council after the district elections in May. Training would also be given to members of the Planning and Licensing and Environmental Health Committees.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said officers would investigate Uttlesford District Council's current insurance policy to investigate how best to provide legal indemnity to Independent Persons if their views or advice were challenged.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said Uttlesford District Council would be implementing recommendation 23 of the Review on a voluntary basis, and was in the process of ensuring that its whistleblowing policy specified a named contact for the external auditor.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal noted that Best Practice Recommendation 3 from the Committee on Standards in Public Life suggested that principal authorities should review their code of conduct each year, but that

this could be problematic to implement because of the difficulty in keeping town and parish council codes in line with UDC's Code.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said members of Uttlesford District Council were currently obliged to record hospitality received over the value of £50, but that this was not currently published as a register. However this could be done fairly easily.

The Chairman proposed that a standing item be created for officers to report back regularly on the recommendations and their implementation.

In response to a question from the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services, Members said it would be positive to organise a meeting with parish councillors at the Council Offices with refreshments available, in order to have a discussion about conduct in parish councils. It was suggested this might be done with the Chairs of parish councils to start with, as they had a large influence over the culture within the authorities. Discussion should include how to be effective as a Chairman.

The meeting ended at 6.15.