

STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COMMITTEE ROOM - COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, ESSEX CB11 4ER, on MONDAY, 17 JUNE 2019 at 5.00 pm

Present: Councillor N Reeve (Chair)
Councillors S Barker, M Foley, N Gregory, A Khan and E Oliver

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

Also present: G Butcher-Doulton and C Wellingbrooke-Doswell (Independent Persons)

ST1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from David Pearl (Independent Person).

ST2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved and signed by the Chair.

ST3 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE, INDEPENDENT PERSONS AND THE MONITORING OFFICER

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said the role of the Committee was to promote ethical behavior, and it also had a role in determining code of conduct complaints, when it was necessary to hold a hearing. The appointed “Independent Persons” provided an independent, external source of advice at each stage of consideration of a code of conduct complaint.

Catherine Wellingbrooke-Doswell said the Code had been rewritten by the previous council to make it fit for purpose. The point of having three independent members was so that each member could be involved in the complaints procedure at different steps of the process.

ST4 UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL'S CODE OF CONDUCT

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said the code aimed to promote high standards of personal and ethical behavior by councillors.

It was agreed that the Chair would send out a message to all councillors in the Members’ Bulletin asking that they make themselves aware of the importance of the code and high standards of behaviour.

ST5 UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL'S PROCEDURE FOR CONSIDERATION OF COMPLAINTS

Members noted that the Standards Committee had a limited sanctions power. This was on the agenda for the government to address in the light of recommendations made by the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on Local Government Ethical Standards.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal said commissioning investigations and resolving complaints within a specific target time was a difficult thing. Investigations might take some time for a variety of reasons. Georgina Butcher-Doulton said the issue was not so much timescales as that the process was expensive and every opportunity should be taken to resolve the issue in the best way possible. Being the subject of a complaint was often a difficult experience.

ST6 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETHICAL STANDARDS: A REVIEW BY THE COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Georgina Butcher-Doulton said it was unclear when the recommendations in the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life were going to be dealt with. The Independent Members were concerned about the recommended term limits for independent persons. It was hard to recruit suitable people for these posts, and it was important for standards committees to have an element of continuity.

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said he would be happy to discuss suggestions for engaging with town and parish councils on the matter of the code of conduct. The Local Councils Liaison Forum was one option for this. Georgina Butcher-Doulton said the committee needed to explore the options more, including visiting parish councils at their meetings. The Chair said he was happy to take on board the request to give the matter some further thought and report back.

In response to a Member question, the Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said there was currently no sanction against a vexatious or malicious complainant.

ST7 TRAINING NEEDS FOR THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Assistant Director – Governance and Legal Services said training had been scheduled for 4.30pm on 15 July. It would focus on the role of Standards Committee members in sitting as members of a hearing panel considering a Code of Conduct complaint.

The meeting ended at 6.20.