

MEMBER STANDARDS COMMITTEE

30 OCTOBER 2024

PRESENT:

Councillors J Smith (Chair), Hill (Vice-Chair), Ashton, Norman, S Wilcox and Woodward

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Leung, Marshall, Robertson, Salter and S Taylor.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Woodward declared a personal interest in item 4 – Review of the Code of Conduct as she is a peer member of the LGA (Local Government Association) whose model code of conduct would be discussed by the Committee.

3 MEMBER STANDARDS COMMITTEE - TERMS OF REFERENCE

Mark Hooper, the Governance Manager and Monitoring Officer, provided an overview of the terms of reference for the newly formed Member Standards Committee. He explained that this was the first meeting of the new committee, following the division of the previous Audit and Member Standards Committee. The Committee's role is to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Councillors. The terms were presented for informational purposes and included details on the two key subcommittees:

- Review Subcommittee: Handles reviews of decisions made by the Monitoring Officer in consultation with the independent person. It may be called upon in complex cases or when additional guidance is needed from committee members.
- Assessment Subcommittee: Functions as a hearings committee to consider investigation findings and decide on potential sanctions.

The Committee's roles, functions, and delegations, as well as support structures involving the Deputy Monitoring Officer and the independent person, were also outlined.

Concerns were raised regarding the quorum being set at three members, which the Committee felt was too low for issues involving member conduct. It was suggested that this should be re-evaluated during constitutional updates. The importance of having a broad representation for decision-making was emphasised.

The committee raised practical issues regarding the registration and updating of members' interests. Members expressed a need for regular reminders and guidance to ensure these are kept current. It was suggested that registers be updated quarterly.

Discussions highlighted the importance of ensuring that all members are adequately trained and comfortable with GDPR requirements, possibly integrating these needs into the Audit Committee's training plan. Parish network training needs were discussed in relation to the code of conduct. Members noted that this could be a future item on the Committee's agenda.

Christine Lewis, Elections & Democratic Manager (Deputy Monitoring Officer), noted that the independent person, though not required to attend Member Standards Committee, would like to attend a future meeting to familiarise himself with Members.

RESOLVED:

- The Committee noted the Terms of Reference for the Member Standards Committee

4 REVIEW OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Mark Hooper, the Governance Manager and Monitoring Officer, outlined the Review of the Code of Conduct report. He explained that one of the Committee's roles is to review and make recommendations on the member code of conduct. He outlined the background of the model code, introduced to create consistency across England and reflect public expectations. Its purpose being to assist councillors in modelling expected behaviour, provide checks and balances, and protect councillors and the reputation of local government. He explained that the LGA was tasked with drafting the new code, which was introduced in December 2020, followed by guidance in July 2021.

Members supported adopting the new code, emphasising its relevance to modern issues such as social media conduct, bullying, and harassment. They stated the more detailed code provided clarity and consistency.

Mark Hooper noted that should the new code of conduct be adopted, training would be available which would be conducted by an experienced trainer familiar with the new code.

The Committee raised concerns about the potential misinterpretation of non-verbal expressions and emphasised the need for updated registers, especially in smaller parishes.

Members discussed the registration and disclosure of interests, detailing the types of interests that need to be declared, including disclosable pecuniary interests, other registerable interests, and non-registerable interests.

The Committee raised that LGA advice on best practice states that Local authorities should have access to at least two Independent Persons and questioned the number LDC had. Mark Hooper explained that the council had advertised for two but there was only one suitable applicant available at the time. He stated that they could readvertise at another point in time.

RESOLVED:

- The committee considered and approved the adoption of the Local Government Association Model Code of Conduct.
- The Committee's recommendations be submitted to Full Council

(The Meeting closed at 6.58 pm)

CHAIR