

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES,
LETCWORTH GARDEN CITY
ON WEDNESDAY, 22ND JUNE, 2022 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Councillor Judi Billing MBE (Chair), Councillor Ruth Brown (Vice-Chair), Claire Strong, David Levett, Raj Bhakar, Ralph Muncer and Val Bryant*

Town/Parish/Community Councillors: Parish Councillor Martin Griffin

Nicholas Moss OBE (Independent Person), non-voting advisory roles

In Attendance: *Isabelle Alajooz (Deputy Monitoring Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer)*

22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 59 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Simon Bloxham, James Denselow, Mandi Tandi and Sean Prendergast.

Apologies for absence were also received from Parish Councillor Rebecca Elliot.

Having given due notice, Councillor George Davies substituted for Councillor Simon Bloxham.

Councillor Clare Billing was absent.

23 MINUTES - 19 OCTOBER 2021

Audio Recording – 2 minutes 50 seconds

Councillor Judi Billing, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Claire Strong seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 19 October 2021 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

24 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 12 seconds

There was no other business notified.

25 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 17 seconds

(1) The Chair welcomed new Members of the Standards Committee.

- (2) The Chair made a statement regarding the passing of the former Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health Councillor Gary Grindal, following his funeral which had taken place earlier in the day.

26 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 5 minutes 41 seconds

There was no public participation at this meeting.

27 STANDARDS MATTERS REPORT

Audio recording – 5 minutes 47 seconds

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled Standards Matters and advised Members of the following:

- There had been 52 complaints received in 2021, 24 of which were from an individual.
- So far in 2022 there had been 24 complaints and 19 of these were from the same individual.
- Point 8.5 of the report highlighted, through a compare and contrast table, the difference between the Complaints Handling Procedure as approved at the Committee meeting on 19 October 2021 and the subsequent guidance issued by the Local Government Association. It was proposed that the procedure be kept as is for now, and reviewed for effectiveness after 1 year.
- Code of Conduct training had been provided to District Councillors and 12 of the required 17 Members attended one of the sessions.
- Parish Councils had also received separate Code of Conduct training for their Members.
- The recording of these sessions will be available for Members who were not available to attend in person.

The following Members asked questions and took part in the discussion:

- Councillor David Levett
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Judi Billing
- Councillor Carol Stanier

In response to questions, the Deputy Monitoring Officer advised:

- Regarding Code of Conduct complaints, there was a procedure for dealing with vexatious complaints, but if a complaint is made it has to be triaged in order to identify if there is a genuine complaint. Work has to be carried out to assess whether further action is required.
- There is a separate procedure for dealing with non-Code of Conduct complaints.
- In certain circumstances complaints can be refused, but these still have to be triaged to see if the complaint is legitimate.
- She will speak with the Monitoring Officer to see if dates of complaints received can be added to future reports.
- A list of non-attendees at the Code of Conduct training will be shared with the Group Leaders and there will be a deadline set for when this must be completed.
- It is a requirement of the Code for the training to have been completed, so failure to complete this within the timeframe would be a technical breach of the Code.

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- Training was offered remotely to the Parish Councils and their Members and the attendance at the two sessions was good. It has now been made available offline for any Members who were unable to attend the live sessions.
- North Herts Council cannot make the training compulsory for the Parish Councils in the district, but there is constant liaison between both parties regarding this.

In response to questions Mr Nicholas Moss OBE, the Independent Person on the Committee, advised:

- He was confident complaints were dealt with in an appropriate way and that anyone is able to lodge a complaint.
- Regarding the individual mentioned, the procedure has been followed for each complaint lodged and the complaints received are now verging on excess.
- One or two of the complaints had some limited validation and therefore it was important that the triage took place. It was vital to balance the need to investigate against the cost and time taken in dealing with unnecessary complaints.
- There were two separate aspects of non-attendance at training. The first is at the District Council, which can discuss the issue within the Standards Committee and develop a remedy. The second is the Parish Councils, which are separate entities, and most of these know what to do and are committed to working well.

Councillor Judi Billing, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Ruth Brown seconded and following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Committee noted the content of the report.
- (2) That the Committee considered the points made at 8.3-8.6 and will review the Complaints Handling Procedure at its meeting on 23 March 2023.
- (3) That the Committee considered/noted the Government's response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life on Local Government Ethical Standards (Appendix A).

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure good governance within the Council.

The meeting closed at 7.58 pm

Chair