

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES,
LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF
ON WEDNESDAY, 5TH MARCH, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

Present: Councillors: Alistair Willoughby (Chair), Ian Albert (Vice-Chair), Ruth Brown, Val Bryant, Elizabeth Dennis, Keith Hoskins, Vijaiya Poopalasingham, Sean Prendergast, Emma Rowe and Tom Tyson

Parish Councillors: Parish Councillor Rebecca Elliott and Parish Councillor Martin Griffin, non-voting advisory roles.

Nicholas Moss OBE and Wai Bing Hui (Reserve Independent Person), non-voting advisory roles.

In Attendance: Amy Cantrill (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Faith Churchill (Democratic Services Apprentice), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager) and Jeanette Thompson (Service Director - Legal and Community)

Also Present: There were no members of the public present for the duration of the meeting.

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 25 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Dominic Griffiths.

Councillor Michael Muir was absent.

N.B. Councillor Ruth Brown entered the chamber during this item at 19:31

9 MINUTES - 23 OCTOBER 2024

Audio Recording – 1 minute 45 seconds

Councillor Alistair Willoughby, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 23 October 2024 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

10 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 18 seconds

There was no other business notified.

11 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 2 minutes 23 seconds

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council policy this meeting would be recorded.
- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.
- (3) The Chair advised for the purpose of clarification Clause 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution does not apply to this meeting.

12 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 2 minutes 58 seconds

There was no public participation.

13 STANDARDS MATTERS REPORT

Audio Recording – 3 minutes 2 seconds

The Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled 'Standards Matters Report' and highlighted that:

- In 2024, there were 19 complaints received, as outlined in the Table under 8.3 of the report, and in 2025 there had been 3 complaints received to date.
- The Complaints Handling Procedure was updated in June 2024, at which time it had been suggested that the time limit for complaint responses change to 3 months. However, due to announcements following the meeting regarding English Devolution, it was not proposed to continue with the proposed review of these issues, until there was a clearer national picture.
- Following the Constitutional and Governance review and, taking into account national proposals to make a Standards Committee mandatory, the Terms of Reference of this Committee had been strengthened.
- Proposals on national Standards Matters, as included in the English Devolution White Paper, were outlined at 8.10 of the report. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that she and Independent Person attended the Committee of Standards and Public Life and part of their response on the proposals.

The Independent Member noted that the establishing of a single, national code of Standards was one of the most important parts of the proposals, as this would streamline the overall process.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Tom Tyson

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- An advisory recommendation had been sent to the Mayor and Clerk at Royston Town Council regarding complaint 18/2024, and it was brought to the attention of Members for awareness of the lack of response. The lack of response may be due to staffing issues.

- The Word 'that' is missing from the sentence at paragraph 8.11, which should read as follows "The Chair of Standards Committee has indicated that he has been promoting that through Group", in reference to the consultation.

As part of the questions the Independent Person gave his endorsement of the Standards Matters Report as well as commenting positively on the National Code of Standards.

Councillor Sean Prendergast proposed, and Councillor Ian Albert seconded the motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Tom Tyson

Points raised in the debate included that:

- Having standards training figures for Members was useful, further to this an anonymised update on all mandatory training for Members would be a beneficial addition to the report.
- Subject to the changes within the English Devolution White Paper, North Herts District Council may not exist in its current form; a Unitary authority may lead to Parish Councils taking on more, therefore the National Code of Standards should be applicable at all levels of Government.
- Looking at the complaints table the majority of the complaints come from a Parish and Town Council level and therefore that level of Government should comply with Standards Guidance.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis proposed an additional recommendation to include the addition of mandatory training completion figures of Members as part of the report. This amendment was accepted into the substantive motion by the original proposer Councillor Sean Prendergast and Councillor Ian Albert seconded.

As part of the debate the Parish Councillors in attendance shared their views on the applicability of Standards Guidance at their respective Parishes.

As part of the debate the Monitoring Officer advised that during the Committee of Standards and Public Life meeting that although popular, mandatory guidance at Parish and Town level was not deemed necessary at the time. This could change as part of devolution and national guidance.

As part of the debate the Independent Person suggested it was a bad idea to adjust the National Code of Standards at different levels of Government as decent behaviour should be universal for all Members regardless of the level of practice.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, the substantive motion was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee

- (1) Noted the content of the report and makes any suggestions on future actions.
- (2) Noted the changes to the Standards Committee's local remit and potential changes in future following the publishing of the English Devolution White Paper.
- (3) Suggested the addition of mandatory training completion figures of Members (Safeguarding and Data Protection) be added to the report

REASONS FOR DECISIONS: To ensure good governance within the Council and keep the Committee abreast of changes locally and nationally.

14 ANNUAL WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY REVIEW

Audio Recording – 27 minutes 5 seconds

The Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled 'Annual Whistleblowing Policy Review' and advised that:

- The policy was brought to the attention Member of this Committee due to their increased remit.
- In accordance with best practice the policy is reviewed annually.
- The policy was based on the guidance of the charity Protect and was adjusted to fulfil the specific needs of the Council.
- The majority of changes for this year were minor administrative changes.
- A benchmarking assessment carried out with Protect highlighted a need for an amendment advising staff they could go to outsider organisations.
- Engagement was highlighted as an issue, currently this was encouraged by an annual notice in Insight and posters on each floor of the Council offices.
- Further action was required to improve engagement. This would include whistleblowing training and named champions within the Council.
- Last year there was no incidents of whistleblowing and the previous year there was one incident.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Emma Rowe
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham
- Councillor Sean Prendergast
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Tom Tyson
- Councillor Alistair Wiloughby

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- The engagement rating related to how well the Whistleblowing Policy was being communicated to staff.
- The Council would be taking the engagement rating onboard and aimed to form a Whistleblowing team. Then the policy could be updated between now and the annual review if necessary.
- The Whistleblowing Policy was not part of the induction of new staff, but all staff sign off annually that they are aware of the Policy. the Monitoring Officer would consult further with HR on this matter.
- The wording of the page 30, relating to anonymous reports could be altered if Members wished; however, it was not always possible to keep cases of whistleblowing anonymous and if parties were unaware of the person raising the concern, they would not attract the protection under legislation.
- A generic anonymous whistleblowing form could be something the Council implements in the future.
- The information given during a report would be kept confidential unless permission was given or an incident needed to be reported to the police.

In response to questions, the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager advised that Whistleblowing was not currently part of the Member Induction pack, but this could be added.

In response to questions, the Independent Person noted that a balance should be struck between anonymity and protecting those being complained about, and there were sometimes legitimate grounds to remain anonymous.

Councillor Ruth Brown proposed, and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded the motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Emma Rowe
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Sean Prendergast

Points raised in the debate included that:

- Whistleblowing should be part of the mandatory training for Members.
- Councillors believe that an anonymous report form, would help staff feel more secure reporting concerns.
- Softening the wording in paragraph 3 would help but also anonymity could be achieved by a new form.

As part of the debate, Councillor Elizabeth Dennis proposed that the Whistleblowing Policy be included within the Code of Conduct training, which was mandatory for Members to complete, this was accepted by the proposer and seconder of the motion.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, the substantive motion was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee

- (1) Considered and noted the Annual Report, together with the actions proposed post benchmarking.
- (2) Approved the Whistleblowing Policy, Appendix 1, in relation to anonymous allegations, as amended, as follows:

Page 30 of agenda item:

“Concerns expressed anonymously are much less powerful but will be considered at the discretion of the Monitoring Officer.”

“In exercising this discretion the factors to be taken into account would include:

- *the seriousness of the issues raised;*
- *the credibility of the concern;*
- *the likelihood of confirming the allegation from other sources and;*
- *the reasoning behind wanting to remain anonymous.*

Please remember that if you do not tell us who you are (and are therefore raising a concern anonymously) it will may be difficult for us to look into the matter...”

- (3) Requested that the Whistleblowing Policy be included within the Code of Conduct training, which was mandatory for Members to complete.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) Good practice indicates that the Whistleblowing Policy should be reviewed annually. It affords the opportunity to comment on and improve arrangements at the Council.
- (2) To ensure Members are aware of the Whistleblowing Policy and their role within the Policy.
- (3) To use wording that encourages Council employees to use the Whistleblowing Policy as often as required.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm

Chair