

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

**MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES,
LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF
ON WEDNESDAY, 22ND OCTOBER, 2025 AT 7.30 PM**

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Ian Albert (Chair), Keith Hoskins, Ian Mantle, Ralph Muncer, Sean Nolan, Sean Prendergast and Paul Ward*

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

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

In Attendance: *Isabelle Alajooz (Director - Governance and Monitoring Officer), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer) and James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager)*

Also Present:

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 00 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Vijaiya Poopalasingham, Chris Lucas, Caroline McDonnell, Dominic Griffiths and Val Bryant.

Having given due notice, Councillor Paul Ward substituted for Councillor Lucas.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis was absent.

2 MINUTES - 5 MARCH 2025

Audio Recording – 1 minutes 25 seconds

The Independent Person noted that the attendees included Ms Wai Bing Hui, who was not present at the previous meeting, and should instead have been Mr Patrick Hodson. There was also a typo in response to a question, which should read 'struck' instead of 'stuck'.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed the Minutes with the above amendments and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 5 March 2025, as amended, be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 01 seconds

There was no other business notified.

4 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 3 minutes 03 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.

5 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 3 minutes 46 seconds

There was no public participation.

6 STANDARDS MATTERS REPORT

Audio recording – 3 minutes 51 seconds

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

- Since publication of the report, there had been 5 further complaints received regarding Councillors. This reflected a sector-wide trend, with more public awareness of the standards regimes in place and less tolerance for poor behaviour.
- The Complaints Handling Procedure was clear in how complaints were processed. Once the complaint was received, this would be assessed against the Code of Conduct and procedures. This would also involve potentially meeting with the complainant and the subject and review of any relevant correspondence and paperwork. The outcome of this investigation stage would then be shared with the Independent Person to assess the validity of the complaint.
- All complaints received were logged on a spreadsheet for auditing purposes, including the actions taken, or why a complaint was not taken forward. These were then reported to the Standards Committee.
- It was important that the complaints procedure at the Council was robust, credible and defensible.
- The English Devolution Bill would not automatically change the Code of Conduct for Councillors but would emphasise the need for accountability and ensuring framework was in place to deal with complaints effectively.
- There was a Monitoring Officer protocol for consideration at this meeting, which would be referred onto Full Council for consideration before adoption into the Constitution.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Paul Ward

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- If a complaint was regarding an Officer, it would not be reported to this Committee, but would be dealt with by the line manager and HR.

- There were processes in place, as outlined under the 3Cs policy, for members of the public to make complaints about Officers, and ultimately the Local Government Ombudsman.
- When a complaint was received, it would be triaged by the Monitoring Officer. If further information was required, then this would be sought from the complainant through email, calls and written letters. Should no response be received to these requests, then the complainant would receive a warning that the case would be closed without further detail.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the content of the report and made suggestions on future actions.

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

7 ADOPTION OF UPDATED GUIDANCE TO COUNCILLORS ON OUTSIDE BODIES

Audio recording – 10 minutes 47 seconds

The Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled 'Adoption of Updated Guidance to Councillor on Outside Bodies' and advised that:

- The guidance document would provide clear and practical guidance to Members appointed to Outside Bodies, including expectations, liabilities and responsibilities.
- The previous guidance was updated in 2016 and therefore this update was required to bring the guidance in line with current practices, especially given the increase in partnership working.
- There was no change to the overall principles of the previous guidance, but it simplified the information to make it easier for Members to understand their responsibilities as appointees on Outside Bodies.
- If approved at Full Council, the guidance would be circulated to all Members and would be included within the Constitution.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Sean Nolan
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Ian Mantle

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- Training could be provided on this as part of the next Code of Conduct training session for Members. This would help to understand requirements of any specific appointment, but the guidance document included practical examples to simplify the overall process for Members.
- Members should contact the Monitoring Officer with any specific questions on interests related to Outside Body appointments.
- If there was a potential conflict identified, then this would be addressed with the Member. It was important that Members understood when they were able, or not able, to take part in Council business related to Outside Bodies.
- The guidance would apply to appointees of charities and charitable organisations, and this was detailed in the document.

- Information regarding the position of the appointed Member on an Outside Body could be included within the paperwork completed ahead of the Annual Council meeting.

The Independent Person noted that he commended the document for adoption and that it would support with the assessment of complaints received and understanding any potential conflict of interests.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RECOMMENDED TO FULL COUNCIL: That Full Council approve and adopt the updated guidance for Councillors.

REASONS FOR REFERRAL:

- (1) The Council's current guidance to Councillors on Outside Bodies was last updated in 2016.
- (2) A full review of the guidance to Councillors on outside bodies has been necessary to ensure:
 - a. Councillors are aware of their liabilities based on the type of organisation which they are appointed to and the risks associated with these appointments both to the Councillor and the Council.
 - b. That the guidance available to Councillors aligns with the updated statutory position and also best practice.

8 ADOPTION OF THE MONITORING OFFICER PROTOCOL

Audio recording – 20 minutes 06 seconds

The Monitoring Officer presented the report entitled 'Adoption of the Monitoring Officer Protocol' and advised that:

- In recent years there had been more of an emphasis placed on ethical conduct, and this document sought to formalise how this worked at North Herts Council and outlined how the roles can be carried out effectively and independently.
- It would help to ensure that the role of the Monitoring Officer was understood by all, including Members, Officers and the public, and would embed the 'Golden Triangle' of roles within the Constitution.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Ian Albert

In response to questions, the Monitoring Officer advised that:

- The term 'reportable instances' related to something which was reportable to the Monitoring Officer, which would cover Councillor Complaints, as well as other areas such as whistleblowing and safeguarding.
- If a complaint was received in relation to a politically charged matter, it may be best to refer the matter out to a neighbouring authority to ensure that there was a level of independence in the assessment of the complaint. This was allowed under the Complaints Handling Procedure.

- The Monitoring Officer role was appointed under the 1989 Act and the role was required to ensure all decisions of the Council were made lawfully. The Monitoring Officer should review and approve all decisions before being taken and no other Officer is able to do that within their role. Therefore, the Monitoring Officer role was described as 'front and centre' so that colleagues understood the oversight role of the Monitoring Officer within the decision making process of the Council.
- There were clear examples from other authorities where the role of the Monitoring Officer in decision making was unclear and the consequences this can have on the authority.
- The Monitoring Officer was not required to have oversight of decisions taken at Parish level.
- However, the Monitoring Officer was responsible for complaints made against Parish Councillors. The Complaints Handling Procedure outlined the need to assess and investigate complaints relating to Parish Councillors, and whilst a local resolution would be sought in the first instance, if this was not possible the normal criteria would apply for assessing these complaints.
- Should a complaint be received against a Parish clerk, this would be an employee matter as the clerk is not an elected position and therefore not covered by the Code of Conduct, and the Monitoring Officer would not be involved in these matters.
- The adoption of this Protocol into the Constitution would be for Full Council to consider and approve before formal incorporation.

As part of the debate, Councillor Ralph Muncer suggested that additional clarity should be added to make it clear what a 'reportable incident' was and that examples of when neighbouring authorities may be required to assist in assessments of complaints received should be included in the Protocol document.

Ahead of the vote, the Independent Person noted that there were small errors on pages 41 and 42 of the reports pack, including that complaints would be assessed prior to any investigation and reference to the Independent Member, rather than Independent Person.

In response to points raised, the Monitoring Officer thanked Members for their comments and suggestions to help ensure this was appropriate for both Members and Officers to understand. These amendments could be incorporated into the updated report which would be presented to Full Council, alongside the referral from this meeting.

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed and Councillor Keith Hoskins seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the guidance attached at Appendix 2 titled 'The Golden Triangle: Governance Roles and Responsibilities'.

RECOMMENDED TO FULL COUNCIL: That Full Council approve and adopt the Monitoring Officer Protocol into the Constitution, subject to the comments and changes put forward by the Standards Committee.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION:

- (1) The role of the Monitoring Officer has expanded over recent years. Monitoring Officers are also required to act as consultants to anyone within the Council on matters of legality, maladministration, and impropriety.
- (2) It is therefore considered that it would be good practice for the Council to introduce an appropriate Protocol.

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- (3) In August 2025, Lawyers in Local Government (LLG), the Chartered Institute for Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Society for Local Authority Chief Executives & Senior Managers (SOLACE) collaborated to produce a new guide: 'The Golden Triangle: Governance Roles and Responsibilities' (attached at Appendix 2). Members are invited to give consideration to this guidance to enhance their overall understanding of the interwoven nature of the roles of the three statutory officers within the Council.

The meeting closed at 8.05 pm

Chair