

TITLE OF REPORT: ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE AND THE MONITORING OFFICER

COUNCIL PRIORITY: RESPONSIVE AND EFFICIENT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Previously the Annual Meeting of the Council has received an oral report from the Chairman of the Standards Committee outlining the work of the Committee in the preceding civic year. In order to promote the work of the Standards Committee and underline the importance of standards the annual report will now be presented as a written report.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That Council receive and note the Annual Report of the Standards Committee attached at Appendix A.

2.2 That Council notes the issues being reviewed by the Standards Committee in 2017/18.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Trust and confidence in public office holders and institutions are important for the functioning of local authorities. This is particularly true in the case of elected officer holders. Our Councillors are expected to live up to high standards of behaviour and demonstrating that they do so underpins that confidence in local democracy. The Standards Committee has an important part to play in promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1 The previous approach of an annual oral report could have continued, but it was felt by the Monitoring Officer, Deputy Monitoring Officer and Chairman of the Standards Committee that a more formal written report was preferable.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1 The Standards Committee met on 12 October 2016 and 21 February 2017 and considered various matters as set out in the attached report.

6. FORWARD PLAN

6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key decision and has not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 The current standards regime was introduced in July 2012 as a result of changes made by the Localism Act 2011. Under the old standards regime the then Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee provided an annual oral report to the Annual Council meeting. The last of these reports was in May 2012. Since May 2013 the annual report has been delivered by the elected Chairman of the Standards Committee by way of an oral update.
- 7.2 The Standards Committee has the responsibility under the Council's Constitution to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members of the authority.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 The report at Appendix A sets out the work of the Standards Committee and Monitoring Officer during the civic year 2016/17.
- 8.2 Of particular note is the new Guide to the NHDC Code of Conduct, which provides a guide for Members as they carry out their roles and provides a source of reference when considering any alleged breaches. The Guide will be taken into account during any related assessment, investigation and determination of Code of Conduct Complaints (including those relating to Parish Councillors). The Guide can be found on the Council's website at <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-and-democracy/councillors-mps-and-meps/councillors-code-conduct-and-declaration>
- 8.3 Additionally the complaints handling procedures have been reviewed, taking into account lessons learned from dealing with a number of complaints since the introduction of the current standards regime in July 2012.
- 8.4 Looking ahead to 2017/18 it is intended to review the Member Code of Conduct and register of interests forms, to be reported to Standards Committee and then Council if any changes are proposed.
- 8.5 Members are also reminded of, and encouraged to attend, the training session which has been arranged for Wednesday 24 May 2017 at 7pm. The session will include both finance and governance topics, including member behaviour and principles of good decision making.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Although it is not specifically referred to in the Constitution, Full Council has routinely received an annual report on standards issues. There is no legal requirement to have an annual report, however it can be considered good practice and is an approach adopted by a large number of authorities.
- 9.2 The Localism Act 2011 requires Councils to adopt a Code dealing with the conduct that is expected of Members; that the Code be consistent with the seven principles of conduct in public life; that Disclosable Pecuniary Interests be registered; that arrangements must be in place to investigate complaints and make decisions on allegations; and that at least one independent person be appointed in relation to standards matters.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no capital or revenue implications arising from the content of this report.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Appropriate policy frameworks help to ensure food governance of the Council and therefore reduce risk of poor practice or unsafe decision making.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. The Member Code of Conduct includes at 3.2(a) that Members must “carry out your duties and responsibilities with due regard to the principle that there should be equality of opportunity for all people, regardless of their gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age or religion”.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

13.1 The Social Value Act and “go local” policy do not apply to this report.

14. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

14.1 None. The work outlined within the report is within the Monitoring Officer’s caseload.

15. APPENDICES

15.1 Appendix A – Annual Report of the Standards Committee 2016/17

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

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17. BACKGROUND PAPERS

17.1 None.