

FULL COUNCIL
13 July 2023

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

TITLE OF REPORT: ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

REPORT OF MONITORING OFFICER

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE, CLLR RUTH BROWN

COUNCIL PRIORITY: PEOPLE FIRST/SUSTAINABILITY/ A BRIGHTER FUTURE TOGETHER

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This is the Annual Report in relation to ethical standards for the last year. It covers the work of the Committee as well as the issues that have arisen locally and nationally on ethical standards matters.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That Council receives and notes the Annual Report.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 In line with recommended good governance practice to report the work of Standards Committee to the full Membership, to promote and maintain high standards of conduct and to demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical values.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The Alternative would be not to produce an annual report, but this would be contrary to the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2019 recommendations.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the Chair and Vice Chair during the year, on the topics within this report; and where relevant/ applicable with the Standards Committee as part of their deliberations on the topics detailed. Group Leaders are also kept informed of any relevant developments as part of their monthly briefings with the Monitoring Officer. Quarterly meetings are also scheduled between the Monitoring Officer, Deputies, Chair, Vice Chair with the Independent Persons, to discuss standards matters.

6. FORWARD PLAN

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

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1 Since 2017 a written Annual Report has been presented to the Membership, with an address by the Chair of the Standards Committee for the relevant civic year. This is in line with best practice recommendations.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

National standards matters

- 8.1 In terms of Local Government, Members will be aware that this year has had a number of national standards issues, which the Committee on Standards in Public Life ('CSPL') has been focused on. This included pursuing a reasoned response to the CSPL Report on Local Government Ethical Standard (issued in January 2019 which can be found [HERE](#)). A Government response was released in March 2022 (which was reported through to the Standards Committee and can be found [HERE](#), with notation). Those highlighted yellow on the linked document were for potential further consideration by Government / action. One, Members will note, flagged for further action related to Members Disclosable Interests and home addresses; nothing has been tabled yet. The Chair of the CSPL expressed his frustration with the Government's response, as noted in the exchange of correspondence [[CLICK HERE](#)].
- 8.2 Otherwise, the CSPL published its 'Leading in Practice' report in January 2023 [[CLICK HERE](#)], which looked at the seven principles of Public Life, and how to embed that culture into a public sector organisation. It will be worth looking at this during this civic year.

Local ethical standards

The Committee

- 8.3 The Standards Committee has met once since the last Annual Report in September 2022. It considered and included lively debate on Standards Matters, a review of the Complaints, Complaints Handling Procedure, training and related issues.

Training

- 8.4 Training has long been an important aspect of the support offered to Members – both to inform and offer protection in terms of their roles and duties. Code of Conduct training is mandatory for all new District Councillor and has been completed by all those newly elected Councillors in 2022 and 2023 (who attended online, in person or via a recorded version on Growzone, which monitors those who log in and finish the session).
- 8.5 As indicated, training was offered again post-election, this time only real time virtual in May to District and local Councillors. A recorded version is also available on Growzone and the slides were sent to all Parish/ Town and Community Councils post session.
- 8.6 Separately, the 3 Independent Persons have also attended annual training, which was discussed internally, with the aim of comparing our local procedures and best practice with others.
- 8.7 Training will continue to be reviewed and is available year-round, to District Members via Growzone. New recorded and more interactive ways will be considered for post 2024 all out election May sessions.

Complaints Handling Procedure

- 8.8 The Procedure was reviewed again by the Committee in June 2022 and in March 2023, after the updated version had been in place (post LGA Code adoption) for 18 months, to ensure it had sufficient time to 'bed in'. The review took account of the complaints experiences during that period and also followed a report from the LGO on a flawed procedure that Teignbridge District Council was said to have followed. The LGO raised a number of issues regarding the case, many specific to the case concerned; however, any recommendations that the Council were not currently following were considered and incorporated (see paragraph 8.3-8.5 of recommendations and North Herts responses [CLICK HERE](#)). The updated Procedure can be found on the Council's website.¹

¹ <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/complain-about-councillor>

North Hertfordshire complaints

- 8.9 During the 2022-2023 calendar year the Council continued to receive a noticeable number of complaints - 30, albeit down from the previous year when the number reached 52. It has, nevertheless been a resource intensive year when comparing with historic data of 6 in 2020 and 18 in 2019. A summary of those complaints and recorded outcome as at the *date of that report* [CLICK HERE](#) Whilst all have been through Stages in the Procedure, one remains ongoing from 2022 and two from 2023.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Full Council receives an annual report as per 4.4.1 (ee). Whilst there is no overriding legislation that requires an annual report, this was introduced as part of Full Councils remit, following the CSPL report, as it is good practice to report such matters to membership as a whole.

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 good 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. There are no direct equalities implications from this report.
- 12.2 Good governance and high ethical standards of conduct ensure that local government decisions are taken in the public interest.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 The Social Value Act and “go local” policy do not apply to this report as this is not a procurement or contract.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 There are no financial implications to this report.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 None other than again highlighting the ongoing resource implications for the complaints received.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 None.

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

- 17.1 Jeanette Thompson Service Director: Legal and Community (& Monitoring Officer):
Jeanette.thompson@north-herts.gov.uk ext. 4370

18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 None other than those referred to/ linked above.