

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held at Meeting Space, Block 1, Floor 2, County Hall on Thursday, 14 October 2021 at 2.00 pm.

PRESENT

Mr J. Jackson
(Independent Chair, in the Chair)

COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Cessford, T.
Dunn, L.
Flux, B.
Grimshaw, L.

Seymour, C.
Stewart, G.
Wallace, A.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Milner, K.

Independent Person

OFFICERS

Bennett, Mrs L.M.
Masson, N.

Senior Democratic Services Officer
Deputy Monitoring Officer

1 MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Membership and Terms of Reference were noted.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors S. Bridgett, and D. Towns.

3 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on Thursday, 22 April 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

4 APPOINTMENT OF PARISH COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATIVES TO THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Members received a report detailing the progress made in the appointment of the three Parish Council representatives to the Committee.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer reported that the composition of the Standards

Ch.'s Initials.....

Committee included three non-voting Parish Council representatives. NALC had been approached and an advert published. Interest had been received and, in accordance with previous practice, it was proposed to set up a Panel comprising the Chair/Vice-Chair and two Committee Members to carry out interviews.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the position be noted for the appointment process relating to the vacancies for the three Parish Council representatives to the Standards Committee.
- (2) an interview panel comprising the following be set up with delegated authority to make recommendation to Council regarding the appointment of such representatives.

Mr. J. Jackson, Councillors B. Flux and A. Wallace

- (3) the Committee's gratitude be expressed to the recently retired former incumbents of these positions for their contribution to the work of the Committee over the last number of years.

5 **MODEL CODE OF CONDUCT**

Members received a report updating them on the new Model Code of Conduct prepared by the Local Government Association.

Members were informed that a model Code of Conduct had been produced by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. All Local Authorities must adopt either this Code of Conduct or their own. The previous meeting of the Standards Committee had asked for the regional approach to be taken to adoption of the Code, however, following investigation it had been found that each Local Authority was taking its own view. It was felt that there was a great deal of good in the model Code particularly in terms of the narrative relating to bullying, respect and use of social media. A paragraph could be added to the model Code of Conduct in relation to the use of social media if necessary.

In response to queries from Members, the following comments were made:-

- There may be existing policies available with regard to social media issues. It was noted that a recent speaker at a NALC meeting may be able to assist.
- It was noted that, in issues of continual and serious nature, political group leaders had the power to sanction Councillors by removing them from their position and removing their allowances.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted.
- (2) Members' comments be noted prior to production of a tailored Code for the Standards Committee to consider at the next meeting.

6 **CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS - PROGRESS REPORT**

Ch.'s Initials.....

Members received a report on the progress with complaints received by the authority under the new arrangements adopted by the authority for dealing with standards allegations under the Localism Act 2011 on caseloads.

The report presented the current situation with cases in 2020 and 2021. A number of comments were made:-

- There had been a significant increase in the number of complaints over the last couple of years
- An outcome of 'no further action' could be due to a number of reasons including the complaint being resolved informally, being withdrawn, or the subject no longer being a Councillor.
- The Independent Person and Monitoring Officer (or Deputy) operated a triage system to assess new complaints in order to decide whether they should be progressed or not.
- Delays in investigations could have various causes. It was difficult to prescribe a timeframe for dealing with complaints as delays to investigations could be caused by failure of the complainant or subject member in supplying information in a timely fashion.
- A more detailed report could be prepared for the Committee to fully explain the whole procedure of dealing with complaints against Elected Members.
- Whilst understanding that no information which may lead to a complainant or subject member being identified could be provided in the Complaints Register, it was hoped that a way could be found to include a little more detail.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted.
- (2) that a report outlining the complaints procedure be submitted to the next meeting of the Standards Committee.

7 URGENT BUSINESS (IF ANY)

The Chair reported that a review of the position of Independent Chair of the Standards Committee would be the subject of a review in January 2022.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will be held on Thursday, 27 January 2022 at 2 p.m.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.'s Initials.....