

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

At a remote meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on Thursday, 16 July 2020 at 2.00pm.

PRESENT

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

COUNTY COUNCILLORS

Armstrong, E.
Dungworth, S.
Gallacher, B.
Homer, C.

Murray, A.H.
Swinburn, M.
Webb, G.

PARISH COUNCILLORS

A Tebbutt

A. Wallace

IN ATTENDANCE

Milner, Mrs K.

Independent Person

OFFICERS

Henry, L.
Bennett, Mrs L.M.

Monitoring Officer
Senior Democratic Services Officer

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor L.J. Rickerby

16. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on Thursday, 10 June 2020, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

17. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

1. Local Government Association Consultation on draft Members' Code of Conduct

Members received details of the consultation by the Local Government Association on its draft Model Members' Code of Conduct. (Report attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A.**)

The Monitoring Officer introduced the reports and made the following comments:

- The Code was very similar to the existing code of conduct and not all of the recommendations made had been addressed.
- The model code attempted to create consistency regardless of geography or tier of authority.
- The new code of conduct was a template which could be adopted, amended, or the current code retained.
- The model code
 - Applied to members when they were acting in, or claiming or giving the impression they are acting, in their capacity as a member or representative of the Council. This was a subtle but important change to the current code.
 - Applied to all forms of Member communication and interaction and there was a rebuttable presumption that a councillor's behaviour was in their official capacity
 - Recommended the adoption of a social media code. A social media code was already in existence, but required updating.
 - Introduced requirement for 'civility' which was defined as 'politeness and courtesy in behaviour, speech and in the written word'.
 - Defined bullying and harassment
 - Introduced requirements around gifts and hospitality, however, the Council already had a discrete policy.
 - internal resolution procedure
- There was no strengthening of the sanctions available and legislative change would be required to allow for suspension or disqualification from office.
- There was a subtle change to members' interests and two tables had been introduced relating to disclosable pecuniary interests and other registrable interests.

The Monitoring Officer reported that he had prepared a draft response for Members' consideration.

The following comments were made:-

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- The creation of consistency was welcomed and the document was quite easily understandable. Clarity regarding communications was welcomed and was essential.
- The Council’s social media policy should be updated.
- Induction training for members should be encouraged, although it was noted that previous attempts to offer it had not always been well attended.
- Face to face training was unrealistic in Northumberland but online induction training could make it more easily available and could need to be completed within a certain timescale. This could be a more time and cost effective method. This training should also be available to Town and Parish Councils.
- NALC had an excellent record with training
- The new code needed to contain clear rules rather than just broad principles.
- The increasing number of unitary authorities would result in Monitoring Officers having to deal with large numbers of councillors.
- The requirement to always act as a councillor at all times was important as it was vital to consider how others perceived you not just how you perceived yourself.
- The standards system still had a ‘lack of teeth’ and this point should be made strongly in the response to consultation.

RESOLVED that Members’ comments on the draft Members’ Code of Conduct be noted and incorporated into the response to the LGA’s consultation process.

2. Code of Conduct Complaints – Progress Report

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. (Report attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix B**).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

18. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To be arranged.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....