

# **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

At a Meeting of **Standards Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 11 March 2022 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor J Nicholson (Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Atkinson, L Mavin, D Stoker, T Stubbs, F Tinsley (Vice-Chair) and C Varty

### **Co-opted Member:**

Parish Councillor R Harrison

### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Abley, A Savory, T Smith and Mr T Batson.

### **2 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **3 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2021 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

### **4 Town and Parish Co-opted Members of the Standards Committee**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer to formalise the arrangements for the appointments of Town and Parish Council co-opted representatives to the Standards Committee (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

**Resolved:** (i) That the Standards Committee agreed the process to take effect upon a vacancy for co-opted Parish Councillor or following a local election as follows:

- a) Invite CDALC to seek expressions of interest from its entire membership to be a co-opted member of the Standards Committee for a term of office of four years.
- b) Where there are greater number of expressions of interest than vacancies CDALC will ballot its membership on the nomination.
- c) CDALC will formally notify the County Council in advance of its annual general meeting of the nomination for the Town and Parish Council representative providing details of the process undertaken.
- d) The Town and Parish Council representatives will be nominated for appointment at the County Council's annual meeting or in the case of a mid-term vacancy at the next convenient meeting of the County Council.

(ii) That the Monitoring Officer works with CDALC to prepare information on the role of the Standards Committee and co-opted Parish Council Member to share with Town and Parish Council's prior to expressions of interest being requested.

## **5 Review of Social Media Toolkit**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Service and Monitoring Officer to invite members to review the social media toolkit for members following its implementation in 2021 (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Governance Lawyer was in attendance to present the report.

Members discussed the report and in response to a question regarding reference in the toolkit to "blocking social media", the Head of Legal and Democratic Service and Monitoring Officer suggested that the wording could be reviewed to clarify that it is a reference to individual's being blocked from a Member's social media page rather than blocking the use of social media altogether. She advised Members that she would review the wording for this point to make it clearer.

**Resolved:** (i) That the contents of the report be noted.

(ii) That the Social Media toolkit remains fit for purpose and to conduct reviews on a biennial basis subject to the review of the wording in relation to blocking individuals on social media.

## **6 Standards National Picture Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer which informed Members of the national picture on standards issues affecting Local Government (for copy, see file of minutes).

**Resolved:** That the report be noted and Officers monitor the progress of the matters referred to and keep the Committee updated.

**Councillor F Tinsley left the meeting at 10.00 am**

## **7 Local Assessment Procedure Update**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Service and Monitoring Officer that provided Members with the proposed revisions to the Local Assessment Procedure complaint form (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Governance Lawyer was in attendance to present the report and provided Members with a demonstration of the online complaints form that allowed complainants to complete the form through the Council's website. The online form would also allow the Complainant to submit a complaint and request that it be considered confidentially.

In addition to the form being made available through the corporate website, customer services staff were able to support in person or on the telephone to assist with the completion of the form.

In response to questions the Governance Lawyer indicated that copies of the complaints form could be made available in larger font and confirmed that the complaints form could be completed online using a mobile device.

Members discussed the complaints form in particular that complainants could submit a form confidentially. The Head of Legal and Democratic Service and Monitoring Officer indicated that the identity of the complainant would only be withheld under exceptional circumstances.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Service and Monitoring Officer read out the confidentially part of the complaints form and suggested that this wording be included in the local assessment procedure.

**Resolved:** (i) That the submission of the Member Code of Conduct complaints via the Council's website be approved.

(ii) That complaints could be submitted via the Council's website with effect from 1 April 2022 be agreed.

(iii) That the confidentiality wording contained in the complaints form be included in the local assessment procedure.

(iv) That arrangements be made for the complaints form to be made available in large print.

## **8 Code of Conduct Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer which provided an update on the activity since the last meeting in respect of complaints received by Durham County Council against Councillors (for copy of report, see file of Minutes).

The Governance Lawyer presented the report and advised Members that training had been delivered to Esh Parish Council on the Member Code of Conduct, follow up training would be arranged on the topic of interests and Member Officer protocol.

**Resolved:** That the contents of the report be noted.