

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Standards Committee** held in Committee Room 1A , County Hall, Durham on **Friday 8 September 2023 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor K Rooney (Vice-Chair) In the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Atkinson, L Mavin, E Peeke, A Savory, G Smith, F Tinsley and C Varty

Co-opted Members:

Parish Councillor A Doig

Also Present:

Mr C Hugill – Independent Person

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Nicholson and T Stubbs.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

4 National Picture

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).

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer advised Members that since the publication of the papers a section 114 notice had been issued for Birmingham City Council earlier this week. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer would keep the Committee updated on section 114 notices.

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

5 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 complaints received by Durham County Council under the Code of Conduct for Members since the last meeting on 8 June 2023 (for copy see file of minutes).

In response to a question from Councillor Tinsley, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer indicated that they had not seen an increase in vexatious complaints although they were currently dealing with a complaint that they were minded to treat as vexatious but they do not arise very often. Her perception was that there had been an increase in complaints from Members against another Member.

Councillor Mavin asked if there had been an increase in the number of complaints. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer responded that her recollection from the Annual report was that there was a slight increase in the number of complaints but there was no significant change in complaints been progressed.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer indicated that the Code of Conduct Report for the next meeting would include an analysis of complaints for the next meeting.

Councillor Peeke asked if there was a cost breakdown to show the cost of complaints to the Council.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer indicated that Officers in the legal team working on complaints recorded their team and so we could run a report to indicate time spent by the legal team on complaints. This would not include the time spent by Subject Members, Democratic Services Officers or the Independent Persons. They also kept a record of any external disbursements spent on investigations, which were largely outsourced. The Council bears such costs as there is no power to recover costs from Town and Parish Councils. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer indicated that a indicative cost of

complaints would be included in the Code of Conduct Report for the next meeting.

In response to a question from Councillor Atkinson, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer confirmed that the Committee would always be advised of the outcome of a complaint.

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

6 Local Government Association "Debate Not Hate" Campaign

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer which informed the Committee of any developments in relation to the Local Government Association (LGA)'s Debate Not Hate campaign (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer spoke on the third recommendation and asked if this could be amended so that a report would be brought to a future meeting of the Standards Committee as it was an important piece of work and she would like to engage with Officers and a wider Member cohort. It was unlikely that this could be completed in time for the next meeting but if it could be, it would be presented then. If not, it will come to a later meeting.

Councillor Tinsley referred to a zero-tolerance approach to abuse and indicated that a lot of abuse was through social media and the authority's ability to influence this was limited. He stated that he was pleased that this was going to be a substantial piece of work and indicated that the protection of people of office with social media companies needed to be achieved through the LGA.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer responded that this was linked into the LGA's first recommendation and indicated that the Council could have a conversation with the LGA on how best they feed in and collate the information, in particular on abuse on social media and advised that this would be picked up as an action.

In response to a question from Councillor Atkinson, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer advised that if Member Support were unable to assist a Member, they would always signpost the Member to where they would receive assistance.

Resolved: (i) That the report be noted.

(ii) That the Head of Legal and Democratic Services outlines a proposal to implement the LGA's recommendations to a zero-tolerance approach to abuse in relation to debates.

(iii) That a report be brought to a future Standards Committee meeting to consider and agree to adopt that proposal.

7 Extension of the Term of the Independent Person

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer that provided details of the proposal to extend the term of the current Independent Person (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved: That the term of Alan Fletcher as Independent Person be extended for a further 2 years with effect from 22 September 2023.

8 Such Other Business

Mr C Hugill, newly appointed Independent Person was in attendance at the meeting and provided Members with details of his background and indicated that he hoped to make a valuable contribution over the next two years. The Committee welcomed Mr Hugill.