

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

At a Meeting of **Standards Committee** held in Committee Room 1A, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 3 February 2017 at 9.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor K Shaw (Chairman)**

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

Councillors J Clark, M Dixon, B Graham, G Holland, B Kellett (Vice-Chairman), M Nicholls and B Stephens

#### **Co-opted Members:**

Parish Councillor R Harrison and Town Councillor T Batson

#### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Huntington and J Lindsay.

#### **2 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Shaw declared an interest in item 6 on the Agenda which provided an update on Code of Conduct complaints. Councillor Shaw's interest related to complaint ref: COM 089.

#### **3 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2016 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

#### **4 Exclusion of the Public**

##### **Resolved:**

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

## **5 Code of Conduct Complaints**

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer which provided an update in respect of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct since the last meeting (for copy see file of Minutes).

In discussing the report Members noted that the volume of complaints had increased and that some members were the subject of more than one complaint against them. Members appreciated that sanctions were limited and in some cases did not deter repeat behaviour. The Governance Solicitor informed Members that the North East Monitoring Officers Group had written to the Committee on Standards in Public Life regarding the lack of effective sanctions, and she understood that the standards regime was being kept under review.

The Governance Solicitor explained that some complaints against Councillors were petty, and that only a minority of Councils were the subject of complaints.

The suggestion was made by Town Councillor T Batson that more information on the role and responsibilities of Councillors should be available for members of the public and those who may be interested in standing as Parish or Town Councillors. He suggested that CDALC be asked to consider publishing an article in County Durham News which would raise awareness and may help to reduce the number of Code of Conduct complaints in future. Councillor Clark made the point that information was available on CDALC's webpage for those interested in standing for election.

Following a question from Councillor Dixon concerning complaints received about the use of social media, the Governance Solicitor advised that this was a difficult issue to address. Some posts had been made on personal Facebook pages and the subject Councillors had been acting in a private capacity. That said the content of a posting could potentially reflect badly on the Councillor and the Council by bringing it into disrepute. It would be useful if a provision regarding 'disrepute' could be included in the NALC Code of Conduct and it was suggested that this be raised through the Executive of CDALC. Social media would form part of the training for Parish and Town Councillors following the elections.

In response to a further question from Councillor Dixon, the Governance Solicitor confirmed that Councillors would continue to be subject to the Code of Conduct during the period of purdah before the local elections.

Members were provided with an update regarding the decision notices in respect of Code of Conduct complaints refs: COM 048, COM 057-060 and COM 070, which had recommended that it would be beneficial for the two subject Councillors and their Parish/Town Councils to undergo Code of Conduct training.

### **Resolved:**

That the report be noted.