

North Yorkshire County Council

Standards Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Friday 20 September 2019 at 10 am in County Hall, Northallerton.

Present:-

County Councillors Caroline Patmore (Chairman), Andy Paraskos, Peter Sowray and Cliff Trotter, together with

Apologies:-

Apologies for absence were submitted by Independent Persons for Standards Hilary Gilbertson MBE and Louise Holroyd.

There were two members of the public in attendance.

The Chair referred to the death of serving Standards Committee member, County Councillor John Blackie, who had passed away since the last meeting of the Committee. Members stood in silence in tribute to his service to the Committee.

Copies of all documents considered are in the Minute Book

40. Minutes

Resolved -

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 8 March 2019, having been printed and circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

41. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest from Members at this stage of the meeting.

42. Public Questions or Statements

There were no questions or statements from members of the public.

43. Members' Attendance monitoring

Considered -

The report of the Monitoring Officer outlining the record of attendance of Members of the County Council at meetings of the County Council and its Committees for the period 1 April 2018 until 31 March 2019.

The Monitoring Officer outlined that the report provided attendance details for County Councillors in respect of County Council meetings only, and did not account for other meetings outside of the County Council's remit. He noted that in the case of low attendance, previously lower than 60%, Members were contacted with a view to them

providing any mitigating details for this and requesting that some of their allowance be returned, should the mitigation be unacceptable. It was emphasised that there were often genuine reasons behind non-attendance, and these were fully taken account of.

It was explained that the figures were derived from the official attendance sheet circulated at meetings, therefore, it was imperative that Members ensured that they signed this. It was suggested that a separate section be provided on the attendance sheet for Members acting as substitutes.

Members noted that there were some discrepancies with the figures in the published report, therefore, it was suggested that the details be circulated to all Members to allow them to check for accuracy.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) That the details provided be noted;
- (ii) That the figures be circulated to all Members to allow them to check for accuracy;
- (iii) That the report be circulated to Group Leaders for information;
- (iv) That the Monitoring Officer undertake the action outlined above, when the figures had been verified and mitigating circumstances had been taken account of, for those members with less than 60% attendance.

44. Local Ethical Framework Developments

Considered -

The report of the Monitoring Officer updating Members on the development of the Ethical Framework under the Localism Act 2011.

The Monitoring Officer noted that there had been little development on the Committee on Standards in Public Life's (CSPL) Review of Local Government Standards since the Standards Committee had last met, with correspondence currently with Government in relation to that.

The report also provided a summary of the following, with links to the full reports provided:-

- Committee on Standards in Public Life Review – Artificial Intelligence and Public Standards
- Committee on Standards in Public Life – Annual Report 2018-19
- Committee on Standards in Public Life – Report re Intimidation in Public life

Resolved -

That the contents of the report be noted.

45. Complaints Update

Considered -

The report of the Monitoring Officer updating the Committee regarding Ethical Framework complaint activity.

It was noted that there had been six new complaints received since the last complaints update report to the Committee in March 2019.

Details of the complaints were provided including the results of the assessments undertaken. It was noted that four of the complaints had arisen from the same issue, relating to a post on social media, with an allegation of this being of a racist nature. The complaint was dealt with via informal resolution, with the Member issuing a formal apology and undertaking suitable diversity training. The assessment record was published on the Council's website.

A discussion took place on the use of social media by Members and it was noted that numerous briefings had been provided in relation to this. It was noted that, on occasions, Members may not be aware that the phrases they are using could cause offence, or that they were inadvertently sharing material that could be considered to be offensive. The Monitoring Officer recognised this position, and while he considered that Members would become more aware of this, and act accordingly, as the use of social media became more prevalent, he would continue to provide appropriate training and advice. One option would be for Members to undertake the Council's on-line equality and diversity training.

The issue of private social media accounts, and their usage by County Councillors, was discussed and the Monitoring Officer emphasised that it was difficult to distinguish between comments made in a public and private capacity, particularly when the position of Members was known within the local community. He noted that it was being recommended by the CSPL that statements by Members on publically accessible social media should be presumed to be made in their official capacity, however, this had yet to be formally introduced.

It was noted that Members could not be held accountable for comments made on their social media accounts from outside sources, however, if possible, they should remove posts that had attracted offensive comments as soon as possible.

Resolved -

- (i) That the current position on complaints received be noted;
- (ii) That training on the use of social media, coupled with equality and diversity training, continue to be developed and delivered to Members.

46. Annual Report of the Standards Committee

Considered –

The report of the Monitoring Officer presenting Members with a draft copy of the Annual Report of the Standards Committee, for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019, for comments and any suggested amendments.

It was noted that, in line with previous recommendations from the Committee, the Annual Report had been kept as brief as possible.

The following amendments were suggested:-

Paragraph 3.1 – the numbering of items be altered to run from (i) to (viii)

Paragraph 3.1 (i) be altered as follows:-

(i) **The Standards Committee:** The Committee usually meets twice per annum. During the period in question the Committee met on 21 September 2018, 3 January 2019 and 8 March 2019.

The Committee is responsible for:-

- Standards and standards complaints handling issues
- The granting of dispensations
- A role in relation to issues raised by, or in relation to, persistent and/or vexatious complainants.

The Monitoring Officer outlined the role now being undertaken by NYCC staff in relation to the development and implementation of the standards regime at Ryedale District Council.

RESOLVED –

That, subject to the amendments outlined, the Annual Report 2018-19 be approved and submitted to a forthcoming meeting of the County Council.

47. Standards Bulletin

Considered -

The report of the Monitoring Officer presenting to the Committee, for consideration, a draft of the latest Standards Bulletin.

The latest draft of the bulletin was attached at Appendix 1. The Committee was requested to consider whether any alterations were required to the bulletin before this was circulated.

The Monitoring Officer noted that the Bulletin was utilised nationally by many other local authorities, highlighting the pro-active work undertaken by NYCC on standards.

The Monitoring Officer emphasised the importance of the standards regime during this time of national disaffection with politics and politicians. He stressed the importance of maintaining high ethical standards within the County Council as the public often did not differentiate between national and local politics, resulting in difficulties for local elected Members.

Resolved -

That the Bulletin be approved for circulation.

The meeting concluded at 10.30 am.

SL