

## **Standards Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 10th October, 2023.**

### **Present:-**

#### **Elected Members:-**

Councillor Satti (Chair), Councillors Tomar (Vice-Chair), I. Ahmed, Ajaib, Dauti and Naveed (from 6.48pm)

#### **Parish Councillor Representatives:-**

Parish Councillor Preston Brooker (Britwell)  
Parish Councillor Naveed Rana (Colnbrook with Poyle)  
Parish Councillor Mubashir Ahmed (Wexham Court)

#### **Independent Person:-**

Mr R Tomkinson (Observer)

**Attending under Rule 30:-** Councillors Dhillon, Iftakhar and Smith

**Apologies for Absence:-** Councillors Gill and W. Sabah

### **PART 1**

#### **1. Declarations of Interest**

No declarations were made.

#### **2. Standards Committee Terms of Reference**

As it was the first meeting of the committee in the 2023/24 municipal year the Monitoring Officer summarised and terms of reference and ways of working as set out in Article 9A of the Constitution. The primary purpose of the Standards Committee was to promote and maintain high ethical standards and core functions included matters such as the Councillors' Code of Conduct, advising on aspects of the Ethical Framework, whistleblowing and the Members' register of interests. The Committee noted the terms of reference.

**Resolved –** That the Standards Committee terms of reference as set out in Article 9A of the Constitution be noted.

#### **3. Minutes of the Meetings held on 19th July 2022 and 6th April 2023**

**Resolved –** That the minutes of the meetings held on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022 and 6<sup>th</sup> April 2023 be approved as a correct record.

## Standards Committee - 10.10.23

### 4. Meeting with the Leader of the Council and with the Chief Executive

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive were welcomed to the meeting for a discussion on matters relating to the Council's ethical governance framework and issues of probity and conduct.

The Monitoring Officer summarised an Ethical Audit Desktop Analysis that had been prepared to provide background for the discussion. The document set out key information held by the Council on areas such as councillor and officer codes of conduct, procedure rules and other protocols along with details of the current situation to assist the committee in identifying any particular areas for review or further action.

In his opening remarks to the Committee the Leader confirmed the commitment of the new administration to seek to uphold the highest standards of behaviour including adherence to the Nolan Principles of standards in public life. He stated that he wanted to promote and embed a culture of accountability, transparency and empowerment across the Council and that he had written to staff and communicated these priorities widely. High standards of conduct and behaviour were expected of all councillors and he indicated that he had spoken to other group leaders who shared the desire to focus on ways of working constructively together in the future. The ethical audit prepared by the Monitoring Officer was welcomed and set out how the Council already had relevant and up-to-date policies and procedures covering all main areas of the ethical framework. The Chief Executive highlighted that high standards and good Member-Officer relations were an important part of the Council's recovery and this was a particular focus following the May 2023 elections with a change in political administration and the fact that over half of the Members elected were new to the Council.

*(Councillor Naveed joined the meeting)*

The Committee welcomed the stated priority to promote high standards of conduct and behaviour. Members expressed support for the principles of accountability and transparency and encouraged the group leaders to work together and seek to improve conduct, including at Council and committee meetings. It was recognised that there would be political disagreements amongst elected members and groups and there should be the opportunities to hold decision makers to account in a constructive and civil manner.

A question was asked about whistleblowing procedures and whether a previous concern that some employees did not feel confident about coming forward had been addressed. The Monitoring Officer responded that there had been an internal audit of whistleblowing during the year. The actions included measures to raise awareness of the policy to employees and a staff survey would be carried out in the future which would ask about awareness of and confidence in the system. The number of whistleblowing cases remained low but that was not considered to be due to a reluctance of staff to come forward.

## **Standards Committee - 10.10.23**

In relation to the Employee Code of Conduct, Members raised the issue of the standards of behaviour and responsiveness that residents could expect to receive in their interactions with Council officers. The Leader recognised the concern raised and indicated that improving customer service was a priority. The Chief Executive explained some of the steps being taken to improve external communications and staff training.

The Monitoring Officer was asked if he considered the Councillors' Code of Conduct to be adequate in relation to social media activity, including the accuracy and appropriateness of statements or comments made. He responded that he believed the Code was adequate and no recent formal complaints about social media activity had been made. The LGA had also issued social media guidance. However, in light of the issue raised by the Committee the Monitoring Officer would give further consideration as to whether the current approach was sufficient and encouraged Members to highlight any specific issues or omissions in the code or other policies relating to councillors use of social media.

A number of other issues were raised during the course of the discussion including the publication of the register of gifts and hospitality and the application of the code to parish councils.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee thanked the Leader and Chief Executive for their contribution to the meeting and the Ethical Audit Desktop Analysis was noted. Recommendation (b) to the report asked Members to recommend any actions that the Committee felt would support continued improvement in the Council's approach to ethical governance.

Members agreed these issues to be high standards of customer care and responsiveness for residents under the Officer Code of Conduct, potentially including further staff training; and Member behaviour at Council and committee meetings, which the Monitoring Officer would discuss further with group leaders.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the opportunity for a discussion on standards and ethical issues with the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive be welcomed and matters discussed noted.
- (b) That the actions the committee felt would support continued improvement in the Council's approach to ethical governance be customer care in interactions with residents and Member behaviour at Council and committee meetings.

## **5. Member Survey**

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny introduced a report on the results of the first Member Survey carried out in January/February 2023 and invited views on the survey questions relating to Member conduct ahead of the next survey scheduled for October 2023.

## **Standards Committee - 10.10.23**

The Member survey carried out in earlier in the year had been the first recent such exercise for elected Members in Slough. Many of the questions mirrored those asked in the LGA national census conducted of councillors so the data would be comparable. A repeat of the survey would be carried out in October 2023 and annually thereafter to provide regular information about Members' perceptions and opinions including about conduct and standards issues. The results would help identify issues, ensure adequate Member support and inform specific areas of work such as the Member development programme.

Members felt that the survey was well structured and the questions were relevant. Further information was requested about the purpose of the survey and use of the information provided, including whether the data on casework had been fed back to the service area. The Head of Governance & Scrutiny commented that it was good practice to carry out a Member survey and it helped improve awareness of councillors views and opinions which would help inform a range of activities and plans. The data had been reviewed by the Corporate Governance Working Group and fed into the Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Action Plans; shared with scrutiny members and the annual review workshop and included in the 2022/22 scrutiny annual report; and circulated to the Corporate Leadership Team and Directorate Leadership Teams for potential lessons to learn in each service area.

At the conclusion of the discussion the results of the first Member Survey were noted and it was generally agreed that the survey was well structured and the questions were relevant.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the results of the previous Member Survey be noted.
- (b) That the feedback of the Committee that the survey was well structured and that the questions remained relevant be noted ahead of the next survey in October 2023.

## **6. Member Induction and Member Development Working Group**

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny introduced a report on the 2023 Member Induction Programme; sought endorsement of the principles for the ongoing Member development programme; and support for an informal Member Development Working Group.

Plans for the Member induction programme for councillors after the May 2023 whole Council elections had been put in place early in the year. There had been a significant change in the composition of the Council as more than half of the Members elected in May 2023 were new. The induction programme was therefore adjusted to reflect the cohort of Members elected. The induction programme had been delivered and the appendix to the report summarised the sessions held, which had been well attended. In terms of the future delivery of the Member development programme the Committee was

## **Standards Committee - 10.10.23**

asked to endorse the principles set out in section 3 of the report. The first stage of the programme during the induction period focused on mandatory courses to meet required legal and constitutional requirements, for example code of conduct, planning and licensing training. It was proposed that the balance shift towards more subject matter knowledge delivered at the appropriate time in advance of decisions on such topics.

Members gave their feedback on the induction programme since May and the majority of comments were that it had been very informative and comprehensive. The short and concise sessions which allowed time for questions and answers were considered to be the most effective format. The Committee discussed various aspects of the programme, including the relative benefits of in-person and online training; and the potential ways that participation in Member development sessions could be incentivised. This was something that could be considered. The Committee agreed in principle that Member Development Working Group be established and proposed that Group Leaders be asked to nominate members to join the group when it was ready to commence its work.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted that he had written to the clerks of the three parishes offering assistance in relation to any matters under each Parish Council's Code of Conduct and that Britwell Parish Council had recently responded positively to the offer and he hoped the other parishes would do so soon. Parish Council representatives agreed to raise this offer with their clerks and commented on some of the training provided to their members to date. The Monitoring Officer highlighted that it was important that the parish clerks kept records of training and had an appropriate programme in place.

### **Resolved –**

- (a) That the feedback on the induction programme for new councillors in 2023 be noted;
- (b) That the principles for Member development set out in section 3 of the report be endorsed for the ongoing Member development programme; and
- (c) That the committee endorses the creation of a small, informal 'Member Development Working Group' of councillors and officers to advise the Monitoring Officer on member development issues.

## **7. Schedule of Complaints - Update**

The Monitoring Officer introduced a report that provided Members with an update in relation to the activity under the Councillors' Code of Conduct. A revised version of the Appendix was tabled that included details of one further complaint that had been dealt with in 2022/23.

The Monitoring Officer summarised the complaints in the Appendix and indicated that the level of formal complaints received under the Code was not

## **Standards Committee - 10.10.23**

particularly high in comparison to other authorities. He highlighted that a relatively high proportion of the complaints received were submitted by other councillors rather than residents compared to other areas.

Members of the Committee asked questions about the position regarding several of the individual complaints listed in the Appendix. The Monitoring Officer stated that it would not be appropriate to comment on the details of individual complaints received but assured the Committee the process for dealing with complaints as set out in the Councillors' Code of Conduct would be followed properly and the Independent Person was consulted. In relation to point 2(f) of the Committee's terms of reference that stated that one of the core functions was to determine written complaints made about councillors, a Member asked about the role of the Committee in individual complaints and what recourse Members had if they did not agree with a decision taken by the Monitoring Officer not to refer a complaint to the Committee. The Monitoring Officer responded that the Councillors' Code of Conduct clearly set out the staged process and criteria by which complaints would be dealt with, and the circumstances in which a complaint would come to the Committee. The agreed Code stated there was no right of appeal against a decision of the Monitoring Officer in relation to a complaint and that their duty was to apply the process detailed in the agreed scheme in a non-political way. It was noted that the Council could review the complaints process as set out in the Code in the future if it wished to do so.

Various other issues were raised during discussion including how trends were monitored to identify any repeated breaches or issues, and the Monitoring Officer confirmed that records of complaints were kept to see if any patterns emerged. There was provision in the Code for the Monitoring Officer to discuss with the Independent Person any instances of repeated minor breaches of the Code made by a Member.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

**Resolved –** That the outcome of complaints under the Code of Conduct as set out in Appendix 1 to the report be noted.

### **8. Date of Next Meeting - 19th March 2024**

The date of the next scheduled meeting was confirmed as 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.15 pm)