

Standards Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 19th March, 2024.

Present:-

Elected Members:-

Councillors Tomar (Vice-Chair, in the chair), I. Ahmed (until 7.50pm), Ajaib, Dauti and W. Sabah (from 6.55pm)

Independent Person:-

Mr R Tomkinson (Observer)

Attending under Rule 30:-

Councillor Iftakhar

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Satti and Naveed,
Parish Councillor Mubashir Ahmed (Wexham Court)
and Parish Councillor Preston Brooker (Britwell)

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

2. Minutes of the Meeting held on 10th October 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th October 2023 be approved as a correct record.

3. Member Survey

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny introduced a report that detailed the results of the survey of SBC councillors.

It was the second year the survey had been carried out and the first since the whole council elections held in May 2023 with the new intake of elected members. The headline results on issues such as member development, standards and member/officer relations were summarised.

The survey questions were aligned to the LGA Councillor Census to enable comparison to national trends where possible. The Committee was invited to comment on the survey results and provide a steer on how the council should respond to the data. The Corporate Governance Working Group would review the data for specific actions that could be taken in response to issues raised in the survey and incorporated into the Democratic Governance Action Plan.

(Councillor W Sabah joined the meeting)

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Members queried the reasoning behind and wording of some of the specific questions, particularly those in the section titled 'councillors' motivations and attitudes to the role'. In response, it was noted that these questions were identical to those in the LGA census so that comparisons could be made between Slough and national data. The strongest motivations to be an elected member were to serve the community and represent residents views and three-quarters of SBC Members said they would recommend being councillors. This figure was slightly below both the previous year and national average. Other notable changes in the SBC results year on year was a significant increase in the number of councillors from the new intake that were in full time employment. The figure had risen from 20% in the 2022 survey to 58% in 2023. The average time spent by councillors in their role as an elected representative was largely unchanged on the previous year at 19.4 hours a week.

There had been positive progress in some areas, for example the percentage of Members expressing confidence in SBC senior officers and in relationships between Members and officers had increased on the previous year. There was also a higher level of satisfaction with IT support to members and on the importance of the scrutiny process. However, the Monitoring Officer commented that there had been a reduction in the level of confidence that if a complaint was lodged against a councillor it would be dealt with effectively. Whilst this could be attributed to the large increase in new councillors over the past year further consideration would be given to any practical steps to strengthen the confidence of members in the councillor complaints process.

The Committee asked that the results be shared with other councillors and the Head of Governance & Scrutiny agreed to place an item in the Members' Weekly Bulletin to highlight the results. Other suggestions from the committee included some practical training on the use of Teams and Microsoft Office for councillors, which would be considered by the Member Development Working Group, and producing a 'jargon buster' for members. It was noted the Members' Handbook contained a glossary that may be useful as a reference document.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- (a) That the results of the previous Member Survey, and plans for the use of these by officers to inform future action, be noted; and
- (b) That the feedback of the committee to officers on potential actions to be taken in response to the survey be noted.

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4. Member Induction and Member Development Working Group

The Head of Governance & Scrutiny introduced a report that summarised the Member Induction and Development Programme in 2023/24 which was the first year of the new 4-year municipal cycle following the whole council elections in May 2023. It was recommended that the Member Development Working Group, which had been previously agreed to be established in principle, be convened to review the proposed outline of the programme for 2024/25. The report also sought re-endorsement of the principles for the member development programme.

The 2023/24 year had been split into three phases. The first phase was mandatory courses as part of the initial induction, followed by skills development on how to be an effective councillor. The latter phase of the year focused on subject matter knowledge at relevant moments for example ahead of major decisions or changes in legislation.

The Member Survey results showed a significant improvement in satisfaction with member development. Overall 77.4% of councillors agreed or strongly agreed that they had had the training opportunities they needed during the year and the induction programme had been well received. One of the barriers to attendance at training was that not all sessions were online and this would be an important operational consideration for next years programme.

A Member commented that the report demonstrated the stronger commitment to the training provided to councillors in recent years, prior to which the programme had been weak and there was too little engagement with councillors on the production of the programme. It was suggested that further improvements could include recording all training and make greater use of webinars to increase access; strengthening training records so that Members could self-evaluate; and consider putting in place buddying arrangements for councillors. Members welcomed the involvement of the LGA in training and agreed this should continue for appropriate sessions. In response to question about the member training budget it was noted that most sessions were arranged in house or with the support of the LGA. There was a training budget available and requests from Members for specific paid for training or courses should be made via their group leader in the first instance.

There was a discussion about the possibility of seeking Member Development Charter status which several authorities had obtained and would provide some external assurance of the quality of the programme. Members were generally supportive of the principle, however, the Head of Governance & Scrutiny stated that whilst it was a worthy goal for the future it was not considered that resources were available to support the required level of investment in the next year. It could be an aim over the course of the four-year municipal cycle.

The Committee supported convening the Member Development Working Group. It was proposed to have five members with two from the Conservative

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Group, two Labour and one Liberal Democrat member. Councillors Tomar, Sabah and Ajaib volunteered to be part of the group. One of the suggested areas of development for the next year was an LGA sessions on community pressures. It was also suggested that more bitesize training sessions be put on next year. In response to a question it was stated that recordings of sessions held to date were available via links in the Members' Bulletin.

At the conclusion of the discussion the recommendations were agreed.

Resolved –

- (a) That the feedback of the committee on the induction programme for new councillors in 2023/24, in light of the member survey be noted;
- (b) That the ongoing Member Induction and Development Plan 2023/24 (Appendix A) be welcomed and endorsed;
- (c) That a 'Member Development Working Group' of councillors and officers be convened to advise the Monitoring Officer on the outline Member Development Plan 2024/25 set out in this report; and
- (d) That the principles for member development set out in section 3 of the report be endorsed again for the ongoing member development programme.

5. Whistleblowing Annual Report

The Monitoring Officer introduced a report that provided an annual update on the Council's whistleblowing arrangements and activity.

The whistleblowing policy and process had been publicised during the year to raise awareness, particularly amongst Council staff. The Whistleblowing Code had last been amended in 2022. It had been reviewed and it was not recommended that any further changes be made to it. The Council's former internal auditors, RSM, had conducted a follow up audit in 2022/23 that had reported in February 2023 and the findings were summarised.

In 2023/24 no complaints had been raised under the Whistleblowing Code to date, which compared to four received in the previous year. The Committee discussed the potential reasons why none had been received during the current year. It was recognised that there were multiple routes to raise complaints about certain issues including the corporate complaints process and exit interviews with departing staff. A number of complaints and issues were received through these processes but did not fall under the definition of Whistleblowing and were therefore outside the scope of the Code.

The Committee agreed the importance of continued awareness raising of the Code amongst staff. A Member commented that cultural issues in the organisation could be a factor and it was important employees had the

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confidence to report any whistleblowing concerns. The general view of the committee was that the senior management at the Council should not be complacent about the low levels of whistleblowing reports and consideration should be given to any further actions to raise awareness and promote confidence in the system. The Monitoring Officer indicated that the reason for the follow up audit was to seek assurance that the Council's processes were strong and confirmed that the situation would continue to be closely monitored.

The report was noted.

Resolved – That the contents of the Whistleblowing Annual Report be noted and endorsed.

(Councillor Ahmed left the meeting at this point)

6. Schedule of Code of Conduct Complaints - Update

The Monitoring Officer introduced a report that updated the committee on activity under the Councillors' Code of Conduct in 2023/24.

There had been 10 formal complaints received under the Councillors' Code of Conduct since May 2023 and the schedule in the appendix to the report provided further detail on the nature and status of each complaint. One complaint had been referred for investigation; two had been withdrawn by the complainant; and the others were at various stages of determination by the Monitoring Officer. The Independent Person was consulted on each case.

Members asked how quickly the Monitoring Officer determined each complaint, given the fact some remained open after several months. The Monitoring Officer stated that he aimed to resolve complaints as soon as possible, but it often took some time to conclude them, if for example further information was required. A Member expressed the view it took too long to finalise complaints and asked for clearer timelines to speed up the process. The Independent Person explained his role in advising the Monitoring Officer on individual complaints and provided assurance that Slough's process was carried out in accordance with the relevant code and protocols to reach fair determinations.

Queries were raised about several of the individual complaints of which anonymised details were in the appendix to the report. The Monitoring Officer responded to the questions where he was able to add more information, noting that the report was a high level overview of activity.

The report was noted.

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

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7. Annual Update on Members' Register of Interests and Gifts & Hospitality 2023/24

The Monitoring Officer introduced a report that provided the annual update on Members' register of interest and declarations of gifts and hospitality in the 2023/24 municipal year.

One of the key issues over the past year had been the increased number of sensitive interests, which were not included in the published register due to the potential risk of violence or intimidation against a member. A Member could make a request to the Monitoring Officer that details, such as their home address, be withheld from the public register. Ministerial guidance had encouraged Monitoring Officer's to take a sympathetic view of such requests given the increase in abuse and threats nationally against elected representatives. It was emphasised that the interests were still registered and it was a Members' responsibility to keep their register up to date, but that the details could be withheld from the public version of the register if there was good reason.

In relation to gifts and hospitality it was noted that one declaration had been made during the municipal year. Whilst the figure was broadly consistent with previous trends, the Committee requested that the Monitoring Officer take sufficient steps to raise awareness of Members' responsibilities to declare any gifts and hospitality.

The report was noted.

Resolved – That the annual update on Members' Register of Interests and Gifts & Hospitality 2023/24 be noted.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.45 pm and closed at 8.15 pm)