



Democracy and Standards Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee held at Holding Room, The Guildhall, St Giles Street, Northampton, NN1 1DE on Tuesday 12 September 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Suresh Patel (Chair)

Councillor Daniel Cribbin
Councillor Jonathan Harris
Councillor Nigel Hinch
Councillor Andrew Kilbride
Councillor Cecile Irving-Swift
Councillor Wendy Randall
Councillor Cathrine Russell

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Andrew Grant

Officers:

Sarah Hall, Deputy Director Law and Governance
Paul Hanson - Head of Democratic and Elections
Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Marina Watkins, Committee Officer

90. **Declarations of Interest**

None advised.

91. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Democracy and Standards Committee held on 15th June 2023 be approved and signed as a correct record.

92. **Chair's Announcements**

Following a concern raised by Councillor Nigel Hinch that the register of interests were not accurately recorded, the Deputy Director Law and Governance undertook to look into the matter.

93. Community Governance Review

The Head of Democratic and Elections presented the report. It was good practise to carry out a Community Governance Review following the competition of a Local Government Boundary Review.

Following a discussion, the following points were made:

- A large number of parish councils had expressed an interest in becoming involved in the review. The parish councils would be contacted to ascertain whether they wished to propose changes to any boundaries, or simply wished to be kept informed of the review
- The Terms of Reference would be submitted to Council on 28th September 2023 for approval, following which the Council would be required to complete the review within 12 months.
- The three former district councils had completed CGRs shortly before the formation of the unitary Council.
- The Committee was asked whether it wished to form a task and finish group to oversee the operation of the review.
- The Committee were of the opinion that a task and finish group was not required to oversee the project.
- NCALC (Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils) had been, and would continue to be involved in discussions
- A meeting would be held with the Communication team later in the week to discuss the consultation process
- Following the completion of the CGR, a review of polling districts and stations would be undertaken.
- Councillors were aware of a number of parish councils who had expressed interest in the review but it was understood that they did not wish to propose any changes. It was likely that interest was expressed due to the tight deadlines involved. Parish councils would be contacted to ascertain their views.
- Councillors offered to discuss the matter with parish councils within their ward.

RESOLVED:

The Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Reviewed the Terms of Reference for a community governance review of parishes in West Northamptonshire, as set out at Appendix 1 of the report and recommended the document to Council for approval.
- b) Did not consider it necessary to establish a task and finish group of the committee to provide democratic input and to oversee the operation of the review but instead requested ward councillors be involved in the development of proposals on a local level.

94. Proposed amendments to the Constitution

The Head of Democratic and Elections outlined the report, which detailed proposed changes to the Constitution.

- Proposed changes included updates regarding exceptions property and legislation outlining new duties for social housing landlords.
- Further suggested amendments had been received following publication of the report and a revised report was circulated at the meeting.
- With regards to the £500,000 figure set with regards to acquisitions, it was noted that the figure was set by the Chief Financial Officer and considered to be reasonable. It also provided consistency across the Constitution.

Councillor Harris raised an issue with regards to Motions referred to Scrutiny Committees, and proposed that the referrer of the matter takes responsibility for the review process and documentation. The item should also be referred to the next meeting of the appropriate Scrutiny Committee. The Head of Democratic and Elections noted that the proposed changes were not subject to the report under discussion. However, the desired changes could be achieved by alterations to the scrutiny framework, which had been left deliberately fluid to allow for any necessary changes. The proposed changes would be put to the Triangulation Committee for consideration.

RESOLVED:

The Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Noted and approved the updates to the Constitution as set out in Section 5, and
- b) recommended the updates to Council for approval

95. Statistics - Code of Conduct Arrangements- Six monthly update

The Deputy Director Law and Governance outlined the report in relation to the Member Code of Conduct complaints. There were currently six live complaints. A senior paralegal had recently been recruited to the team which had allowed the majority of complaints to be closed down.

In response to an issue raised regarding a parish council, the Deputy Director Law and Governance advised that the Council only had powers to deal with complaints against a parish council. The parish council had powers similar to Council Chairs where they can refuse to engage with vexatious complainants and pause and suspend meetings which are disrupted. It was suggested that NALC may be able to assist.

In response to questions, it was considered that where training was offered in regards to a common issue, e.g. aggressive behaviour, the training was shown to be effective. It was noted that on occasions aggressive behaviour was more likely political challenge and robust discussion.

An additional column would be added to the document, detailing the source of the complaint, e.g. parish council, councillors, member of the public.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee noted the statistics in relation to the number of complaints received and dealt with, in respect of the WNC Members' Code of Conduct and of Codes of Conduct adopted by Town and Parish councils within West Northamptonshire.

96. **Councillor Development Programme 2023 -2025 - Progress report**

The Deputy Democratic Services Manager outlined the report. Councillor development was mostly focused on planning and scrutiny training during the current year.

- Cabinet had asked the Centre for Public Scrutiny to provide a suite of training which would take place over the coming months.
- Planning training was provisionally booked for 19th October to provide soft skills such as questioning.
- Training for Audit Committee members was being arranged.
- The Monitoring Officer was planning to provide training for the Democracy and Standards Committee on standards hearings.
- The feedback form (Appendix A) should rank from 1 to 4 (rather than the current 1 to 5)
- Training requests would be decided by the Chair of the Democracy and Standards Committee in conjunction with the Head of Democratic and Elections. Should any request be refused and considered unreasonable, the request could be referred to the Monitoring Officer
- The Head of Democratic and Elections held responsibility for the members training budget. Planning and Scrutiny had been prioritised this year and therefore taken up most of the budget, therefore other training needed to be prioritised
- Should a number of councillors wish to attend a particular course, officers could consider whether it would be beneficial to make arrangements for the course/seminar to be provided at the Council by an external trainer or in house.
- Consideration would be given as to how members training could be listed on the website for each councillor

RESOLVED:

The Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Noted the further progress undertaken on developing a Councillor Training Programme for 2023/24.
- b) Considered other potential opportunities to deliver and promote learning and development opportunities for Councillors.
- c) Confirmed that training for all Members of the Democracy and Standards Committee on the process for Hearing sub-Committees is scheduled as soon as possible and delivered by the Monitoring Officer.
- d) Approved the Councillor Training Session Feedback form, at Appendix A, with the feedback rating amended to 1 to 4.
- e) Approved the Proforma for Members' attendance at external conferences, seminars and courses at Appendix B.

97. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

Consideration was given to the Democracy and Standards Committee Work Programme.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee Work Programme is noted.

98. **Urgent Business**

None advised.

The meeting closed at 6.55 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____