



Democracy and Standards Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee held at The Jeffrey Room - The Guildhall, Northampton, NN1 1DE on Wednesday 15 November 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Suresh Patel (Chair)
Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Daniel Cribbin
Councillor Jonathan Harris
Councillor Nigel Hinch
Councillor Andrew Kilbride
Councillor Cecile Irving-Swift
Councillor Wendy Randall
Councillor Cathrine Russell

Officers:

Cath Whitehead, Director of Legal and Democratic
Stuart Timmis, Executive Director Place & Economy
Sarah Hall, Deputy Director Law and Governance
Paul Hanson - Head of Democratic and Elections
Nicki Agalamanyi, Head of Legal (Corporate)
Mark West, Electoral Services Manager
Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Marina Watkins, Committee Officer
Quentin Loeber La' Grue, Democratic & Elections Trainee

99. **Declarations of Interest**

None advised.

100. **Minutes**

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Democracy and Standards Committee held on 12th September 2023 be approved and signed as a correct record.

101. **Chair's Announcements**

None advised.

102. Proposed amendments to the Constitution

The Head of Democratic and Elections presented the report and outlined the proposed changes, which included updates to the financial procedure rules and alterations to address the secondment of the Executive Director Corporate to Children's Services.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Noted and approved the recommendations to Council relating to updates to the Constitution as set out in Section 5 of the report; and
- b) Delegated to the Monitoring Officer the power to make these amendments and any consequential amendments that may be necessary.

103. Changes to Planning Committees - Six Month Review

The Head of Democratic and Elections outlined the report, which detailed the changes made to the Planning Committees earlier in the year. Members were asked to indicate the information and timescales required to carry out a review of the new structure.

Councillor Phil Bignell, Chair of Strategic Planning addressed the Committee and asked that the Chairs of the Planning Committees be included in the review. Consideration should be given to Call ins and whether they were successful or not. Evidence should be gathered on the number of speakers at meetings as an indicator of public engagement, and whether the 6pm start times were appropriate.

The Executive Director advised that a commitment had been made to return to the Committee to review the new Planning Committee arrangements. Members could indicate the statistics required and an appropriate time scale.

The Committee considered that the following points should be taken into account:

- It is currently too premature to take a decision. Further data is required
- Call-ins should be reviewed.
- How many meetings have been cancelled and why? Is it due to delegated powers?
- There were no concerns about the number of committees. Two appeared to be sufficient.
- Start times of committees had been discussed at length at Council and it was advisable not to revisit the matter.
- There were some problems with the technology during earlier meetings, but the issues had now been resolved
- The role of the Planning Policy Committee should be considered as part of the review.

- The Chairs of the Planning Committees and the Planning members should be canvassed during the review.
- The March meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee should be brought forward to enable the review to be reported to Council on 21st March.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Considered the changes adopted by the Council and determined that a review should be undertaken and reported to Council on 21st March 2024.
- b) Considered that further evidence and information was required in order to conduct a review, including statistical data regarding application numbers and the number of speakers. The role of Planning Policy Committee should also be considered during the review.

104. Proposed amendments to the Member Complaints Procedure

The Deputy Director Law and Governance outlined the report in relation to proposed amendments to the member complaints procedure, which included:

- The initial assessment criteria had been clarified
- All complaints would be discussed with an Independent Person
- Timeframes had been added where appropriate
- The complainant would only remain anonymous in extreme circumstances
- Hearings would generally be held in public, with parts of the report or process taking place in private session where appropriate
- The timeframe of the investigation would be discussed and agreed with the Investigating Officer

Councillor Phil Bignell addressed the Committee and considered the proposed changes to be beneficial, particularly the arranging of a pre-hearing and the provision of an end date for the process. Naming contacts to provide advice and well-being support was very positive.

Councillor Bignell considered that the Monitoring Officer presiding at the Hearing should have no knowledge of the case. The Monitoring Officer advised that she was not involved in the details of the case but was present to apply process. The Independent Investigator was enlisted to look into the detail of the complaint.

Councillors welcomed the changes. It was suggested that the new process should be communicated to the parish councils.

With regards to criminal matters being referred to the Police, the Monitoring Officer advised that the vast majority of issues would be very minor in nature, with the Police unlikely to investigate. e.g. the failure to register an interest.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee approved the amendments to the revised draft Arrangements at Appendix 2 and referred them to full Council for approval.

105. Community Governance Review - Update

The Head of Democratic and Elections outlined the report which provided an update on the Community Governance Review.

Consultation was due to commence shortly, with an online questionnaire to be produced. There would be engagement with ward councillors for any areas under review. Work had been ongoing with NCALC (Northamptonshire County Association of Local Councils) to run an on line briefing for affected areas.

Councillors were encouraged to discuss the review with their parish councils and residents.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee agreed the Consultation Plan for the community governance review of parishes in West Northamptonshire, as set out at Appendix 1 of the report

106. Election Fees and Charges

The Electoral Services Manager outlined the report, which proposed to update the fees for election staff and to ensure that the fees were aligned to the limits set by the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLHUC).

The Elections team had met colleagues from North Northamptonshire Council in order to match the fees proposed across both authorities. This had been accepted by North Northamptonshire councillors.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee approved all the changes to the fees and charges within the Scale of Fees at Appendix B to the report.

107. Review of Committee Work Programme

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

The Deputy Democratic Services Manager advised of two items requested by Councillor Nigel Hinch:

- 'Is there a reason why the declaration councillors complete, and sign is not simply uploaded in the format submitted without the need for it to be transcribed by Democratic service which could and has led to errors occurring.'

The Monitoring Officer advised that this could be done, but would require a new form each time a change was made. The majority of Councillors were content to send an email detailing the change, which was then made to the forms. It was noted that the errors had been identified and corrected.

- 'I also recall a discussion regarding increasing the value for report of gifts received from £10 to a higher figure.'

The Monitoring Officer was content to increase the value of reporting of gifts received to £25. Human Resources (HR) would be contacted to ensure consistency across officers and councillors.

It was noted that the *offer* of a gift should be reported, even if that gift is declined.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee Work Programme is noted.

108. **Urgent Business**

None advised.

The meeting closed at 7.30 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____