



**West
Northamptonshire
Council**

Democracy and Standards Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee held at The Jeffery Room, The Guildhall, Northampton on Thursday 16 June 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present Councillor Suresh Patel (Chair)
 Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice-Chair)
 Councillor Mike Warren
 Councillor Danielle Stone
 Councillor Jonathan Harris
 Councillor Andrew Kilbride
 Councillor Cecile Irving-Swift

Apologies Councillor Daniel Cribbin
for Councillor Laura Stevenson
Absence:

Officers Catherine Whitehead, Director of Legal and Democratic (Monitoring
 Officer)
 Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
 Marina Watkins, Committee Officer

27. Declarations of Interest

None advised.

28. Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Democracy and Standards Committee held on 27th January 2022 be approved and signed as a correct record.

29. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Councillors Mike Warren and Danielle Stone to the Committee and thanked Councillors Gareth Eales and Fiona Cole for their work on the Committee.

30. Annual Report of the Democracy and Standards Committee 2021/2022

In response to a query, the Monitoring Officer advised that the four Independent People were carried over from the previous Councils due to time constraints when the Unitary Authority was formed. The previous Councils advertised the roles originally and candidates would have been scrutinised for their suitability for the role.

It was suggested that more diverse appointments could be encouraged in the future, although it was pointed out that it was unlawful to positively discriminate without good reason.

There did appear to be a high number of complaints, however the West Northants area had a very large number of Parish Councils. Awareness needed to be raised amongst parish councils and discussions would be held with purchase order 31400015922 the Chief Executive of NCALC to highlight potential training issues, particularly with regards to behavioural issues.

The recommendations submitted in the report were agreed.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee approves the proposed Annual Report 2021/2022 and recommends it for submission to full Council at its meeting on 30 June 2022.

31. Boundary Review Task and Finish Group

The Monitoring Officer presented the latest submission of the Task Panel. Several meetings had been held with the second part of the process to take place from September.

Councillors encouraged the use of gender neutral language in a bid to encourage the widest group of people possible to stand for election in the future.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee approves the final submission of the Task Panel and endorses its submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission.

32. Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023

Consideration was given to the Parliamentary Boundary Review report which was provided for information only. Consultation was on going.

The recommendations submitted in the report were agreed.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the information contained in the report on the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023.

33. Elections - Scale of Fees and Charges (Update)

Consideration was given to the report detailing proposed changes to the scales of election fees and charges. Polling station staff would be given additional responsibilities, such as checking voter I.D. and there as a need to maintain parity with pay offered by neighbouring councils to assist with staff retention.

It was pointed out that the Returning Officer fee was calculated by reference to the electorate and responsibilities, with the fee often being divided amongst other positions. The role of the Returning Officer was a standalone role, separate from that of Chief Executive and brought with it personal responsibilities and performance standards checked by the Electoral Commission. It was suggested that the role of Returning Officer and the fee it attracted could be better explained. The Monitoring Officer undertook to discuss the matter with the Chief Executive.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- a) approves the increase to Returning Officer fees contained within Appendix B.
- b) approves all other fees and charges within the Scale of Fees at Appendix B.

34. Register of Members' Interests

Consideration was given to the report detailing the register of members' interests. Members were sent regular emails reminding them to keep their registers up to date. A member of the public had a particular interest in the register and identified any discrepancies.

Members were urged to check and update their forms on a regular basis. Group Leaders would be contacted over a small number of members who failed to respond to requests. It was suggested that a large number of members were new to the role and may not be aware of the importance of completion of the register. Members were asked to raise the profile of members' interests within their groups.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the process that is followed for the operation of the Register of Members' Interests.

35. Carried Motions on Notice - Predecessor Councils

Consideration was given to the report on Carried Motions from Predecessor Councils.

The Deputy Democratic Services Manager advised that the Motions had been discussed by the appropriate Scrutiny Committee although each had agreed a different manner of dealing with them. Corporate Scrutiny Committee noted the Motions, whilst Place Scrutiny incorporated any relevant Motions into its work programme. People Scrutiny closed some items to future action and suggested that others were considered for re-adoption by Council.

Following discussion it was agreed that the item be brought back to the next meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee for Members to agree a single approach for the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider the Motions on Notice.

The Committee agreed that in the future, motions are published annually on the Council's website.

RESOLVED:

That the Democracy and Standards Committee:

- a) Agrees that a single approach to the Overview and Scrutiny Committees in dealing with Motions on Notice is appropriate.
- b) That the item on Carried Motions on Notice – Predecessor Councils is considered at the next meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee
- c) Agrees that the Council publishes motion updates annually on its website in future, to provide members of the public and councillors with the facility to access motions that have been passed at Council meetings, without having to go through the minutes of each meeting.

36. Updates to the Constitution

Consideration was given to the report detailing updates to the Constitution.

The Committee discussed the use of the term 'Chairmen'. It was considered that an individual may express a preference for how they wished to be referred to but it was then for others to choose the term they preferred to use on the understanding that it was respectful.

There was agreement that 'Priority Opposition Business' would be preferential to 'Priority Opposition Motions' as it would allow an opportunity to share views and allow the public some insight into the Opposition. The need for a vote was not considered necessary, as it was an opportunity to have a full and robust discussion.

There were some concerns regarding time management, however it was suggested that the main Opposition group could allow another group the opportunity to take 'Priority Opposition Business' for one Council meeting annually.

It was also suggested that the individuals involved are widened to include the Leader, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member. Councillor Danielle Stone agreed to discuss the matter with her Group and report back to the Monitoring Officer with views on Monday.

Subject the above changes, the recommendation of the report were agreed.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the Committee approves the updates to the Constitution as set out in section 5 of the report.
- b) recommends the following additional changes to be considered by the Council at its meeting on 30 June 2022:
 - i) Change 'the holder may decide how they wish to be addressed' to 'the holder may express a preference for how they wish to be addressed'

- ii) 'Priority Opposition Motions' to be changed to 'Priority Opposition Business' and for no vote to be required.
- iii) that the main Opposition Group allow the smaller opposition group 'a turn' each year.
- iv) That the individuals involved in 'Priority Opposition Business' be widened to include 'Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member'.

37. **Constitution Review**

Covered under agenda item above

38. **Review of Committee Work Programme**

Consideration was given to the Committee's work programme.

Further to discussion, the following points were made:

- The Monitoring Officer to put together suggested ways forward to increase the profile of standards issues amongst parish councils, with issues to be discussed with NALC
- That a list of 'ethical indicators' be compiled, to include areas such as Freedom of Information requests, complaints etc, in order to give an indication of trends

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Committee Work Programme is noted.
- ii) That consideration be given to increasing the profile of standards issues amongst parish councils
- iii) That a list of 'ethical indicators' be compiled and submitted to a future meeting of the Committee

39. **Urgent Business**

None advised

The meeting closed at 7.20 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____