

## STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE - 15/01/26

### STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE

15th January, 2026

Present:- Councillor Clarke (in the Chair); Councillors T. Collingham, Hall, Harper and Monk, Parish Councillors T. Griffin and M. Senior and Mr. P. Beevers (Independent Person) and Mrs. A. Bingham (Independent Person).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Beck, Keenan and Lelliott, Mrs. K. Penney (Independent Person) and Mr. D. Roper-Newman (Independent Person).

#### 20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

#### 21. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

**Resolved:-** That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for (Minute Nos. 27 and 28 (Whistleblowing and Complaints) on the grounds that the appendices to those reports involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

#### 22. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 11TH SEPTEMBER, 2025

**Resolved:-** That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2025 were approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

#### 23. STRENGTHENING THE STANDARDS AND CONDUCT FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND - CONSULTATION RESULTS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented a report outlining the Government's consultation (December 2024–February 2025) on strengthening the standards and conduct framework for local authorities, together with the published Government response.

The report highlighted that the Government intended to introduce a series of legislative changes aimed at improving consistency and transparency across all local authority tiers. These measures included the introduction of a mandatory national Code of Conduct for all local authorities, the requirement for principal authorities to establish formal Standards Committees, and the provision of support to complainants and Councillors involved in standards investigations.

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The Government also proposed a statutory right of review for complainants and subject members, new powers for councils to suspend Elected Members for up to 6 months for serious misconduct, and the creation of a national appeals function to operate following completion of local review processes.

The Committee made several observations and noted that whilst standards cases had been relatively infrequent in recent years, changes to the Code and process could initially lead to an increase in case numbers. Concerns were expressed about the potential impact on resources, particularly given the introduction of additional appeal rights.

The Committee also emphasised the importance of timely decision-making, noting that delays in concluding cases or determining appeals could undermine confidence in the Standards framework. Given the far-reaching nature of the proposed sanctions and the significance of the decisions to be taken, the Committee also expressed the view that the chairing of Standards hearings should be undertaken independently.

The Committee expressed broad support for the proposals and agreed to receive further updates as the legislation progressed.

**Resolved:** That the content of the report be noted, and that further updates be submitted to the Standards and Ethics Committee as the legislation progresses.

### 24. DEBATE NOT HATE WORKING GROUP - VERBAL UPDATE

The Deputy Monitoring Officer reported that the Working Group had held its initial meeting in November 2025, at which the arrangements and overall action plan were agreed.

The Working Group would provide an open forum for discussion and idea-sharing to support both Borough and Parish Councillors to operate safely within an increasingly challenging political environment. It was noted that the Group would work through each of the 5 sections of the LGA *Debate Not Hate* toolkit, with the intention of focusing on one section at each meeting.

Two positive and productive meetings had been held to date, during which an excellent programme of work had been developed. At the second meeting, the Group had considered the theme of creating supportive environments and discussed the arrangements currently in place. It had been acknowledged that a significant amount of supportive practice was already established.

A list of suggested measures for the Council to implement, covering both immediate improvements and longer-term actions, would be brought forward for consideration at the next meeting of the Working Group. The next meeting would also include a focus on safety and risk assessments.

**Resolved:-** That the update be received and noted.

**25. REVIEW OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE HEARING PROCEDURE**

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the procedural report, which formed part of the Committee's agreed work programme. It was noted that forthcoming changes in national standards legislation were expected, and therefore a full review of the entire complaints process would not be appropriate at this stage. Instead, a light-touch review of the existing Sub-Committee Hearing Procedure had been undertaken.

Members were advised that the current procedure was in accordance with the principles of natural justice and the Subject Member's rights under Article 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, and aligned with the Local Government Association's guidance on complaint handling. The Monitoring Officer was satisfied that the procedure remained fit for purpose and did not consider that any amendments were required unless Members wished to propose changes.

During discussion, the Chair queried whether the process clarified the position regarding right of appeal. It was confirmed that there was no right of appeal under the current arrangements, and that the procedure could highlight that the Sub-Committee hearing represents the final stage of the Council's process.

**Resolved:-** That the Sub-Committee Hearing Procedure be approved, subject to the inclusion of wording which clarifies that the Sub-Committee hearing is the final stage of the Council's process.

**26. APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT MEMBER**

Consideration was given to a report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer recommending the appointment of an Independent Member following a recruitment and interview process.

Following 2 resignations last year, a recruitment exercise was undertaken, resulting in one application. The candidate, Ruby Wright, was interviewed by the Deputy Monitoring Officers and considered suitable for the role.

The Committee also noted that Peter Edler, a long-serving Independent Member, had stepped down due to health reasons. With 2 Independent Member vacancies remaining, the Committee agreed to undertake a further recruitment exercise to fill these positions.

**Resolved:-** (1) That Council confirm the appointment of Ruby Wright as a co-opted Independent Member of the Standards and Ethics Committee until the Annual General Meeting of the Council in 2029.

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(2) That formal thanks be recorded to the outgoing Independent Member, Peter Edler, for his service and contribution to the Committee.

### **27. A REVIEW OF CONCERNS RAISED PURSUANT TO THE WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY**

Consideration was given to the report and appendix presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, which provided an overview of the Whistleblowing cases which have been received over the past year.

Particular reference was made to the appendix to the report which set out clearly the description of the concerns received and action taken. Members were advised that there were no identifiable trends to highlight.

**Resolved:-** That the Whistleblowing concerns raised over the previous two years and the actions taken to address these matters be noted.

### **28. REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS**

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, detailing the progress with the handling of complaints relating to breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members and Town and Parish Councillors. The report listed the current cases of complaint and the action being taken in respect of each one.

Reference was made to each related case and recommended outcomes/actions identified were highlighted.

**Resolved:-** That the report be received and the contents noted.

### **29. URGENT BUSINESS**

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Committee's consideration.