

(These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting of the Standards Committee to be held on 19 June 2014)

Standards Committee

6 March 2014

Present: Councillor D Corkey (Chair)
Councillors J Allan, B Caithness, M J Huscroft, C Johnson,
F Lott and L Spillard.

Also Present: Councillor Janet Hunter, Chair of Council
Councillor T Mulvenna, Deputy Chair of Council
Councillor J McLaughlin, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Mr G Clark (Independent Person)
Mrs S Gardner (Independent Person)

SC10/03/14 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J O'Shea and P Mason.

SC11/03/14 Appointment of Substitute Members

Pursuant to the Council's Constitution, the appointment of the following substitute member was reported:

Councillor B Caithness for Councillor J O'Shea.

SC12/03/14 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

There were no declarations of interest reported.

There were no dispensations in relation to registerable personal interests reported.

SC13/03/14 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 5 December 2013 be confirmed, subject to a minor correction to the wording in Minute SC03/12/13 with reference to Councillor Corkey, to replace the word 'her' with the word 'his'.

SC14/03/14 Invited Speakers

Further to Minute SC05/12/13, the Chair of Standards Committee welcomed the Chair of Council, Councillor Janet Hunter, the Deputy Chair of Council, Councillor T Mulvenna, and the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor J McLaughlin, to the meeting to engage in discussions on ethical standards by Elected Members and Co-opted Members of the Council in relation to the Code of Conduct for Members'. The respective Group Leaders, Directors/Heads of Service, and the Chair of Planning Committee would also be invited to future meetings to contribute to the discussion.

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The Committee and invited speakers considered the local arrangements for dealing with allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct for Members and Co-opted Members.

Following discussions, it was proposed that an examination of the local arrangements should be undertaken, with particular focus on the local resolution stage in avoiding the necessity for a hearing. The examination would take into consideration the recent discussions with the Council's Independent Persons on the effectiveness of the current local arrangements and the comments received by Members at this meeting.

Members were of the view that complaints needed to be dealt with in a timely manner, particularly in the case of formal investigations leading on to a hearing, that laid down timescales should be adhered to; and for the process to not continue indefinitely. It was suggested that measures should be put in place to achieve an early resolution, or, the process shortened, if possible, for the benefit of all concerned.

The Committee and invited speakers referred to Members' behaviour at Council meetings, in that the attitude and behaviour by some Members on occasion was inappropriate e.g. text messaging, tweeting, talking, eating etc., which could be off-putting to others during debate and decision making.

Following discussions, it was proposed that the Monitoring Officer research the feasibility of the use of video cameras at Council meetings to include the arrangements in place by other authorities.

It was also proposed that as a part of the Committee's duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the Elected Mayor, Councillors and Co-opted Members, the Monitoring Officer, in conjunction with the Chair and Deputy Chair of Standards Committee, the Council's Independent Persons and the Group Leaders, meet to consider the use of video cameras at Council meetings as a means of improving Member behaviour.

The Chair thanked Councillor Janet Hunter, Councillor Mulvenna and Councillor Graham for their attendance and contribution to the discussion.

Resolved that (1) the Monitoring Officer undertakes an examination of the administration of the local arrangements for dealing with allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct for Members and Co-opted Members;

(2) the Monitoring Officer in conjunction with the Chair and Deputy Chair of Standards Committee, the Council's Independent Persons and the Group Leaders be authorised on behalf of the Standards Committee to research the feasibility of the use of video cameras at Council meetings;

(3) the Monitoring Officer researches the feasibility of the use of video cameras at Council meetings; and

(4) a report be submitted to the next meeting of the Standards Committee.

SC15/03/14 Action Plan and Work Programme

Further to Minute SC06/12/13, the Committee received an update report on the Action Plan and Work Programme for 2013/14.

The Standards Committee was responsible for the Authority's statutory duty for promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members of the Council. The action plan/work programme would be monitored by the Committee at each meeting and the progress of the identified actions would be reported in the Annual Report in May 2014.

The on-line training via the Learning Pool was available to all Members in relation to the requirements of the Code of Conduct, declaring interests, dispensations and the use of social media. A report on Training was considered later on the agenda.

The first meeting of the Regional Forum for local authority Standards Committee Chairs and Monitoring Officers was held on 25 June 2013.

A second regional forum meeting was held on 31 January 2014, and Councillor Johnson, Deputy Chair of Standards Committee, who was in attendance, reported that he found the meeting useful in sharing information on how other authorities operated their processes, including approaches to the use of social media, and the function of Independent Persons in their involvement in the work of committees, which was a wide ranging approach.

It was reported that the next regional forum meeting was due to take place in July 2014.

A training forum for Independent Persons was held on 20 January 2014. The forum was used to exchange information, compare different approaches and learn from each others experience. The function of the Independent Persons was also discussed at this event.

It was reported that 7 out of the 9 authorities attended the training event, including North Tyneside Council's Independent Persons, Mr Clark and Mrs Gardner, who both contributed to the training on an item covering 'Mediation Skills/Dealing with Difficult Situations'.

Resolved that the position on the Committee's work programme and action plan be noted.

SC16/03/14 Training Update

Further to Minute SC07/12/13, a report was received which advised the Committee of the Member training events recently organised and the attendance of Members at those events.

Training was an important feature of the Committee's Action Plan/Work Programme and of its duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the Elected Mayor, Councillors and Co-opted Members. At the last meeting, Members were advised of recent training that had been made available to Members

Under the Action Plan/Work Programme, training in relation to the use of social media by Members was a requirement/task to be delivered this year. In addition, the Committee requested that training be delivered to assist Members deal with difficult and potentially confrontational situations.

Face to face sessions for the social media training and for dealing with difficult situations had been arranged and advertised to Members, however both were subsequently cancelled. The training for dealing with difficult situations had been postponed due to a

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clash with the budget setting meetings and would be rescheduled early this year. The social media training was however cancelled due to the lack of take up.

A social media on-line training package had also been developed and was available to all Members via the Learning Pool. To date, only 2 Members had completed the course although a couple of Members had fed back that they were having difficulty accessing the course. As a result the look and feel of the Member Development Section in the Learning Pool had been re-organised to help with navigation. The module would be promoted again with Members.

At its meeting in December, the Committee had expressed concern at the cancellation of training events due to a lack of take up and that only two Members had accessed the social media training on the Learning Pool; and had therefore requested details of the attendance of Members at training events arranged to be reported to this meeting.

Details of training events and attendance at events over the last two years were set out in Appendix A to the report, the headline information contained:

- The average attendance at the 53 events offered to members is 4.8 delegates per course;
- The average attendance at regulatory committee training (including planning, licensing, regulation & review and appeals & complaints) events offered to members is 5 delegates per course;
- The average attendance at constitutional training (equality & diversity, code of conduct, safeguarding, corporate parenting) events offered to members is 7.5 delegates per course;
- The average attendance at general member development events offered throughout the year is 4.5 delegates per course;
- Average attendance at events during 2012/13 was 9.2 delegates per event and in 2013-14 it decreased to 4 delegates per event;
- 18% of events offered have been cancelled; and
- 50% of induction events offered in 2012 were cancelled.

The Committee was requested to consider how to increase Members engagement on training.

During discussions, the Committee examined the attendance figures and the reasons for poor attendance at training events. Members were of the view that further consideration was needed on the type, method and delivery of future training events for Members e.g. online, face-to-face, other methods, taking into account Members' preferences.

It was proposed that a survey of all Members' should be carried out regarding their views on the apparent lack of interest in attendance at training events and to put forward ideas on the way forward. It was suggested that initial consultations would be via the Members Support Group.

Resolved that (1) the position on Members attendance at training events be noted; (2) the Member Development Advisor carries out a survey of all Members in respect of Members' attendance at training events initially via the Members Support Group; (3) the Member Development Advisor gives further consideration to the type, method and delivery of future Member training events; and (4) a report be submitted to the next meeting of the Standards Committee.

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SC17/03/14 Social Media Guidance

Further to Minute SC07/12/13, a report was received which informed the Committee of the development of guidance and policies in relation to the use of social media by Members, Officers and Service Areas.

At the last meeting, the Committee requested that policies and guidance be developed in relation to the use of social media by Members.

Social media was a collective term used to describe easy ways to create and publish on the internet. People generally use the term to describe how organisations and individuals share content, text, video and pictures, and create conversations on the web. It was transforming the way that companies did business and individuals interacted with each other. It was providing a voice for those who weren't well heard before.

Social media was also changing the way that Councillors' and Councils interacted with local people. The Committee considered that the Authority needed to develop guidance and policies to assist with the use of social media. Guidance on good social media use and information on the legal considerations, as well as potential Code of Conduct issues, that arose from the use of social media had been developed to assist Members in their roles as Councillors.

The Committee was requested to consider the Guidance for Members document as set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and its circulation to all Members and publication on the Councillors Intranet page.

Members welcomed the Guidance for Members overall but requested further consideration to be given to the differences between political licence and when the Code of Conduct for Members' applied prior to circulation to all Members.

Policies were in the process of being developed and finalised in relation to the use of social media by Officers and Service Areas. The Employee Policy as set out in Appendix 2 to the report was still in draft and was subject to consultation with the trades unions before being implemented. The advice to Service Areas would take the form of web pages on the Authority's Intranet. These would be published in the near future.

Resolved that the Guidance and Policies being developed in relation to the use of social media be noted.

SC18/03/14 Code of Conduct for Members – Public Engagement

Further to Minute SC08/12/13, a report was received which informed the Committee of the development of a public engagement process in relation to the Code of Conduct for Members and Co-opted Members.

At the last meeting, the Committee requested a public engagement exercise to be undertaken in relation to the Code of Conduct for Members and Co-opted Members. The purpose of the engagement exercise was to gauge the perceptions of the public with respect to the behaviour of Members and whether the Code of Conduct for Members met those expectations as a regulatory tool.

The Committee had suggested that the 'Residents Panel' could be used to facilitate the community engagement process. Subsequently, Officers had consulted upon the best

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process to deliver public engagement which would produce feedback that the Authority could use in discussions on the operation of the Code of Conduct.

It was proposed that Resident Panel Members would be invited to Focus Group meetings to discuss the Code of Conduct and its operation. The Head of Law and Governance would be represented at the Focus Group meetings to provide technical detail, but the sessions would be led by Officers from the Engagement Team. Invitations to Members of the Residents Panel would be issued to assess the level of interest from the Panel Members to join a Focus Group in dealing with this matter.

It was also proposed that the same engagement process was used in respect of engagement with the Young Mayor and Young Cabinet to seek their feedback on the Code of Conduct for Members.

Following discussions, the Committee endorsed the proposed approach to engagement with respect to the Code of Conduct for Members'.

Resolved that the proposed approach to public engagement with respect to the Code of Conduct for Members' be noted.