

Standards Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 18 March 2021

Present: Independent Co-opted Member: N Jackson – In the Chair

Councillors: Andrews, Evans, Kilpatrick, Lanchbury and A Simcock,

Independent Co-opted Member: G Linnell

ST/20/1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 16 January 2020 were submitted for approval.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2020 as a correct record.

ST/20/2. Standards Committee - Annual Report

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that provided an update to members of the Standards Committee on the matters within the remit of the Committee since the October 2019.

The main points and themes within the report included: -

- Providing an introduction and describing the roles of the Standards Committee and the Council's Monitoring Officer;
- Update on matters within the remit of the Standards Committee since its last Annual Report;
- Operation of Codes and Guidance;
- Register of Interests and Gifts and Hospitality;
- Dispensations;
- Councillor training and awareness; and
- Complaints against Councillors.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Noting the impact of Covid, how did the number of complaints against Councillors submitted compare to previous years;
- Noting the importance of reminders to Members to complete their Register of Interests in a timely manner;
- Whether officers were confident that the outstanding complaints which were the subject of investigation would be dealt with within the agreed timescales;
- When dealing with a complaint, who was responsible for determining which provision of the code a Member was alleged to have breached; and
- Clarification was sought regarding the reason for the 'Not Known' entry recorded against a 'Provision of the code alleged to have been breached' case.

The Head of Governance Legal Services responded to questions by advising that the number of complaints against Members received was comparable with previous years and she was confident that the current Investigating officer would deal with the complaints the subject of investigation within the agreed timescales. With regard to the identification of the specific provision of the code alleged to have been breached she advised that the complainant was encouraged to identify the specific element of the code they considered had been breached, adding that the 'Not Known Entry' was as a result of the complaint not being pursued by the complainant and the complaint had not reached the stage where the complainant had identified the provision in question.

She stated that reminders were sent to Members following the May election and then again about six months later, in addition to the information circulated routinely in the ethical guidance which was circulated twice each year.

Decisions

1. To note the report; and
2. The Committee recommend that the Standards Committee - Annual Report should be forwarded to full Council for assurance on standards issues.

ST/20/3. Members' Update on Ethical Governance

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that sought the Committee's comments on and approval of the draft Members' Update on Ethical Governance for March 2021.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Whether Independent Persons and all Co-opted Members would be offered appropriate and relevant training, similar to that which was offered to Councillors.

The Chair noted these comments and suggested this recommendation could inform consideration of the item 'Member Development and Training' that was listed on the agenda.

Decision

To approve the content of the draft Members' Update on Ethical Governance set out in the Appendix for circulation to all members.

ST/20/4. Social Media Guidance for Members Update

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that updated the members of the Standards Committee on the operation and efficacy of the Social Media Guidance for Members ('the Guidance') as well as the provision of training for members on the Guidance.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Welcoming the guidance, in particular in regard to the use of personal and official social media; and
- Recommending that this information be circulated to all Members, candidates and included in the agents' briefing packs in advance of the May election.

The Head of Governance Legal Services acknowledged the comments from the Committee and stated she would take the recommendation up with the elections team following the meeting.

Decisions

1. To note the report.
2. The Committee recommend that the Social Media Guidance be shared with Members and candidates and be included in the briefing packs provided to candidates' agents in advance of the May election.

ST/20/5. Local Government Association (LGA) Model Code of Conduct for Members

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that updated the members of the Standards Committee on the publication of the LGA Model Code of Conduct for Members, noting that the City Solicitor was of the view that in general the new LGA Model code was well set out and relatively straightforward to follow.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Requesting that all relevant information be shared with all political groups for consideration, following the May election so this could be considered and an opinion obtained in advance of the report being submitted to the November meeting; and
- A view was sought as to the appropriateness of the value set at which a gift had to be declared.

The Head of Governance Legal Services stated that it was for this Committee to consider and the Council to agree a figure for the value set at which a gift and hospitality had to be declared.

Decisions

1. To note the report;
2. To support discussions by the Greater Manchester Chief Legal Officers on implementation of the LGA Model Code; and
3. Recommend that a further report be submitted to the November meeting of this Committee on the position, noting the comments above.

ST/20/6. Member Development and Training

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that provided an update on the operation and efficacy of the Member Development Strategy and training delivered since May 2019.

The first section of the report reflected upon the Member Development and Training delivered between May 2019 and February 2020, in line with our Member Development Strategy. The second part reflected upon training held since the start of the Covid pandemic between February 2020 and January 2021 and reported the proposals for the induction programme for new Councillors for May 2021.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Noting the benefits of being able to access events and meetings virtually this approach should continue post Covid;
- Consideration needed to be given to capturing and recording any relevant training obtained by Members and all Co-opted Members outside of the Council;
- Noting the importance of Members attending all training, especially the Carbon Literacy training;
- Recommending that relevant training should be made available to all Co-opted Members; and
- Consideration needed to be given to identifying courses that were mandatory for Members to attend and appropriate sanctions if these were not completed;

The Head of Business Support and Development stated that Member attendance at training courses was generally very good and the levels of attendance was monitored by the Member Development Group. He further advised that non-attendance was followed up and if this was a recurring issue the relevant Group Officer would be informed. He advised that the issue of Mandatory Courses would be an issue for the Member Development Group to determine. The Head of Governance Legal Services commented that the issue of sanctions for non-attendance at training courses had been discussed previously by the Committee and it had been felt that it was not appropriate to pursue at that time however if the Committee were minded this could be revisited if non attendance was identified as an issue.

Decisions

1. To note the report.
2. To recommend that virtual training be continued to be part of the training offer post Covid;
3. To consider how the relevant training completed in other roles be recorded; and
4. To recommend that all relevant training be made available to all Co-opted Members.

ST/20/7. Standards Committee Work Programme

The Committee considered the report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit that invited the members of the Standards Committee to consider its work programme for future meetings and make any revisions.

In addition, a report titled 'The Use of Council Resources Guidance for Members' would be scheduled for the June meeting and the 'Standards Committee - Annual Report' would be scheduled for the March 2022 meeting.

The Head of Governance Legal Services stated that a report on Partnership Arrangements, including guidance on the role of dual hatted Members, would be scheduled for an appropriate meeting in consultation with the Chair.

Decision

To note the report and agree the Work Programme subject to the above comments.