

Standards Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 14 March 2024

Present:

Nicolé Jackson, Independent Co-opted Member – In the Chair
Councillors Andrews, Connolly, Evans, Lanchbury and Simcock

Councillor O'Donovan, Ringway Parish Council

Geoff Linnell, Independent Co-opted Member

Apologies: Councillor Good

ST/24/01 Interests

Councillors Andrews, Lanchbury and Simcock each declared a personal interest in respect of Minute number ST/24/03 - Consideration of Request for Granting of a Dispensation, for the reason that they are a member of Unite the Union.

ST/24/02 Minutes

A Member referred to minute number ST/23/18 (Update report of the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for Elected Members), that had been scheduled for the March 2024 meeting but was not on the agenda.

The Monitoring Officer reported that following the previous meeting, officers had made progress to encourage Members still to undertake a DBS check.

The Committee was reminded that there would be a meeting on 11 April 2024, and an update on DBS checks for Elected Members would be provided then.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2023 as a correct record.

ST/24/03 Consideration of Request for Granting of a Dispensation

Consideration was given to the report of the City Solicitor concerning a request for a dispensation to Councillor Wheeler, that would allow him to ask a question at the meeting of the Council on 20 March 2024, on a matter in respect of which he has a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest (DPI).

The proposed question relates to the delivery of Employment Rights and Responsibilities Training by Unite the Union to apprentices on the Our Town Hall Project. Councillor Wheeler had declared as a DPI in his entry in the Register of Members' Interests that he had been in receipt of sponsorship from the Unite the Union.

The report referenced the relevant part of the Council's Constitution (Code of Conduct for Members) as it related to Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. In addition, the report provided an opinion from both the Independent Person and the Monitoring Officer.

The Monitoring Officer reported that the dispensation related to a submitted question to be asked at a meeting of the Council to an Executive Member after a question had been answered, the Constitution allowed the Councillor to ask a supplementary question of which no notice was required to be given.

The Committee was invited to comment on the request.

Members of the Committee indicated they were not minded to grant the dispensation given position regarding the sponsorship that had been received and considered this could be a precedent.

The Committee acknowledged it was an important question and suggested that someone else could raise the question and the Monitoring Officer suggested that Councillor Wheeler might instead raise the question with the Chair of the Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee.

The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that she would inform Councillor Wheeler of the Committee's decision not to grant a dispensation to ask the question at the meeting of the Council.

Decision

The request for a dispensation to Councillor Wheeler to ask a question at Council on 20 March 2024, is not granted, for the reasons outlined.

ST/24/04 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 February 2023.

The report provided an overview of the Member Development Strategy 2022-24. The updated Strategy was included and set out proposed minor changes.

The report provided details of the New Member Induction 2023 and gave a breakdown of the three sessions provided for newly elected Members and the attendance for each. Members had provided feedback following the sessions and this was reflected in the proposed changes for the updated New Member Induction. The report also set out details of member training and development held during February 2022 - January 2023; the training programme for May 2024 – April 2025 and details of the budget to provide training for Elected Members.

The Chair invited questions from the Committee.

In relation to Members' Induction, Members made the following comments:-

- It was suggested all returning Members should be invited to the induction.
- That completion of cyber security training was important as was carbon literacy training.
- New Members should be advised that induction would be extended to allow for completion of cyber-security training during the induction session so they could plan accordingly and if Members could not stay beyond a certain time, alternative dates were put in place for completion of important cyber-security e-learning.
- As there was a lot to take in, offer new Members the opportunity to revisit areas a few months down the line.
- Sought confirmation that completion of Register of Interests forms were picked up at Induction.

The Head of Business Support and Development confirmed that an invitation to attend the induction could be made to returning Members and that last year one existing Member did attend the induction. In addition to Cyber e-learning, new Members would be requested to bring to the Induction paperwork required to complete DBS checks and that Human Resources staff had been asked to attend to support completion of DBS paperwork. He also confirmed that Members were encouraged to complete their Register of Interest forms during the induction with staff on hand to provide support. All newly elected Members were advised on the training timetable and the time required to complete each session. The extended session from the Neighbourhoods Directorate reflected that this was an area where new Members were likely to need information early on. He also indicated that new Members were invited to attend a complementary induction programme delivered by the North-West Employers organisation.

A Member referred to guidance provided by the Home Office concerning the safety and security of Councillors and Members of Parliament to provide contact details of a dedicated named police contact for raising concerns and liaising on security, expanding the existing Operation BRIDGER network (Policy Paper – Defending democracy policing papers (Published 28 February 2024)). Officers were asked if this proposal could be followed up for Members to be informed of the GMP contact.

With reference to Elected Members safety and security, it was reported that safety devices had been issued to Elected Members last year.

The Monitoring Officer reported that she would raise the matter with the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) to determine the dedicated named police contact and that security of Members was a priority, during the period leading up to an election and all other times.

The Monitoring Officer made reference to cyber training and explained that the priority of the training is to protect the Council and equip Elected Members with the skills to be able to identify emails that are from a reliable source and those that are not and to take action accordingly.

Decisions

The Committee:

1. Noted the report on training delivered since February 2023.
2. Approved the proposed changes to the Member Development Strategy.
3. Support the proposed changes to the New Member Induction.
4. Requested officers to note the comments provided by the Committee concerning Member Induction arrangements.

ST/24/05 Standards Committee – Annual Report

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that updated members of the Committee on matters within the remit of the Committee, since February 2023.

A Member referred to complaints against Councillors in the context of the item in the Ethical Guidance Update relating to Bristol Council and asked officers if a complaint against a councillor in Manchester had ever been upheld.

It was reported that there was a complaint hearing held during 2020 and a sanction imposed. Any complaint made against an Elected Member was considered on its merits .

Decisions

1. To note the matters reported.
2. To refer the report to Council to provide an assurance on standards issues.

ST/24/06 Social Media Guidance for Members update

The Committee considered the report of the City Solicitor that provided an update on the operation and efficacy of the Social Media Guidance for Members ('the Guidance').

The Committee had previously considered a report on Social Media Guidance in March 2023. A review of the guidance in 2023 did not consider that further revision of the guidance was required.

Members referred to the list of social media applications and websites and requested officers to ensure that the list was maintained, and social media brand names were current, for example amend 'Twitter' to 'X' and to include 'WhatsApp'. It was suggested that it may be useful to refer in the guidance to 'social media applications such as ' so that the list was not considered to be exhaustive.

Decisions

The Committee:

1. Note the report.

2. Support the circulation of the Social Media Guidance to Members.
3. Request that the Social Media Guidance is re-circulated to all Members.

ST/24/07 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 2024.

Decision

To approve the contents of the draft Members' Update on Ethical Governance, for March 2024, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, for circulation to all Members.

ST/24/06 Work Programme for the Standards Committee

Consideration was given to the report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit that presented the Work Programme for the Committee. The Committee were invited to approve or amend the Work Programme as appropriate.

The Committee was reminded that there will be a meeting of the Committee on 11 April 2024 at 10:30am.

Decision

The Committee note and approve the Work Programme.