

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Ethics Committee held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 12
September 2019

Present:

Members: Councillor S Walsh (Chair)
 Councillor A Andrews
 Councillor P Hetherton
 Councillor D Welsh

Independent Persons: S Atkinson, A Barton, R Wills, P Wiseman

Employees (by
Directorate):

Place: S Bennett, C Bradford, J Newman

Apologies: Councillor J Mutton

Public Business

9. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

10. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 June, 2019 were agreed and signed as a true record.

There were no matters arising.

11. Committee on Standards in Public Life: Annual Report 2018/19

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which outlined matters raised in the Annual Report for 2018-2019 of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) and which informed the Committee of relevant matters of concern in their work area on a national level.

In particular, the CSPL had undertaken and been involved in the following 4 key pieces of work, details of which were contained in the report:-

- Local Government Ethical Standards: Report published in January 2019
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Public Standards: Launch of AI review in March 2019
- Intimidation in Public Life: Follow up work with political parties and The Jo Cox Foundation; and
- MP's outside interests: report published in July 2018

The CSPL had also been keeping a close watching brief on bullying and harassment in Westminster, reviewing responses and holding meetings with parliamentary authorities.

The Committee outlined their concern regarding the increased intimidation in public life and outlined their support for the work undertaken by the CSPL in this regard. The Independent Members of the Committee asked Members of the Committee about their personnel experiences and sought and received assurances in relation to duty of care and support for Councillors experiencing intimidation and harassment from both the City Council and the political groups.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

(1) Notes the content of the report;

(2) Requests the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer to continue to monitor the national picture as regards standards and report back on any issue which may be of relevance to the Council on a local level; and

(3) Requests the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer to investigate providing training/guidance for Members in dealing with hostile or abusive comments on social media.

12. Six Monthly Review of Officers' Gifts and Hospitality

The Committee considered the regular six-monthly update report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which set out the entries in the Register of Officers' Gifts and Hospitality for the period 1 January to 30 June, 2019. Minute 13/19 below also refers.

13. Six Monthly Review of Members' Declarations of Gifts and Hospitality Registers

Further to Minute 12 above, the Committee considered the regular six-monthly update report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which set out details of declarations of gifts and hospitality made by Members for the period 1 March to 31 August, 2019.

RESOLVED that the Monitoring Officer be requested to investigate relaunching the process and protocols around Officer and Member Gifts and Hospitality, including:-

1) Providing appropriate publicity for officers and Members

2) Providing public confidence in the process and protocols for gifts and hospitality by raising the profile of the Ethics Committee and the work undertaken by the Committee in this regard.

14. Code of Conduct Update

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which updated the Committee on national issues in relation to the ethical behaviour of elected Members and the local position in Coventry regarding Code of Conduct issues, including training provided for Parish Councils.

Further to Minute 7/19, as part of its work on incorporating the Best Practise Recommendations on Standards in Public Life into its own practices, the Committee had agreed to amend the Complaints Protocol to include a requirement to consult an Independent Person when the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer and Chief Executive were deciding whether to have a formal investigation into a complaint. A revised Protocol was appended to the report which now requires the involvement of an Independent Person in all cases at Stage 1.

The Committee questioned the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer on aspects of the report, particularly in relation to the timescales involved in investigating a complaint. The Committee noted that a number of complaints received locally and nationally related to social media issues.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- (1) Notes the cases determined under the Standards regime nationally;**
- (2) Notes the local position relating to the operation of the Council's Code of Conduct and delegates any actions arising from these to the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, following consultation with the Chair of Ethics Committee;**
- (3) Approves the amendments to the Complaints Protocol as appended to the report;**
- (4) Requests the City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer to update the Complaints Protocol to include timescales for dealing with complaints, including investigations;**
- (5) Requests that a copy of the Social Media Policy be circulated to all Members of the Committee, including the Independent Persons.**

15. Work Programme for the Ethics Committee 2019/20

The Committee considered the 2019/20 Work Programme, which detailed proposed topics for the Committee's consideration and the Best Practice work programme which set out the best practice recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The Committee noted that next year was the 25th anniversary of the publication of the Nolan Principles, the 7 principles of public life, which are the basis of the ethical standards expected of public office holders.

RESOLVED that the Committee:-

(1) Notes the Work Programme and progress on the best practise recommendations.

(2) Requests a report to be submitted to a future meeting on possible work to be undertaken by the Committee in relation to the 25th Anniversary of the Nolan Principles.

16. Any Other Items of Urgent Public Business

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at Time Not Specified)