

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Ethics Committee held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 15
December 2022

Present:

Members: Councillor S Nazir (Chair)

Councillor L Bigham

Councillor P Hetherton

Independent Members: R Wills

Employees Present:

Customer and Business Services I Ahmed, E Sanderson

Law and Governance: J Newman (Chief Legal Officer), S Bennett, S Harriott

Apologies: Councillor D Welsh and S Atkinson, A Barton, P Wiseman
(Independent Members)

Public Business

25. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

26. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 29 September, 2022 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Further to Minute 24, the Committee noted that a letter had recently been sent to Councillor G Ridley, Leader of the Conservative Group, in relation to cross party representation on the Committee.

27. Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman 2021/22

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive which indicated that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) is the final stage for complaints about Councils, all adult social care providers (including care homes and home care agencies) and some other organisations providing local public services. It is a free service that investigates complaints in a fair and independent way; and provides a means of redress to individuals for injustice caused by unfair treatment or service failure.

Coventry City Council's complaints policy sets out how individual members of the public can complain to the Council, as well as how the Council handle

compliments, comments and complaints. The Council informs individuals of their rights to contact the LGSCO if they are not happy with the Council's decision after they have exhausted the Council's own complaints process.

Every year, the LGSCO issues an annual letter to the Leader and Chief Executive of every Council, summarising the number and trends of complaints dealt with in each Council that year. The latest letter, issued 20 July 2022, covers complaints to Coventry City Council between April 2021 and March 2022 (2021/22) and was appended to the report.

The report set out the number, trends and outcomes of complaints to the LGSCO relating to Coventry City Council in 2021/22. It focuses on upheld complaints, service areas with a high number of complaints, compliance with Ombudsman's recommendations, learning from complaints, and how the Council compare to previous years and other local authorities.

The Committee noted that the report will also be considered by the Cabinet Member for Policy and Leadership and the Audit and Procurement Committee.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1) Notes the Council's performance in relation to complaints to the LGSCO, in particular complaints that were upheld**
- 2) Notes the Council's complaints process and guidance**

28. Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship Update

Further to Minute 18/22, the Committee received a report of the Chief Legal Officer which provided an update on the local response to work being undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) programme around Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship. This work is in response to the increasing concern about intimidation and toxicity of debate and the impact that this has been having on the democratic processes.

The report covered:-

- Work undertaken by the LGA including a new toolkit to help combat abuse of Councillors, aimed at putting an end to the increasing intimidation being reported by Councillors. The toolkit is being reviewed by officers in line with local activity
- Work undertaken locally including a "Debate Not Hate" campaign launched in September 2022, which was open to all Councillors and Council staff and which discussed civility and respect and how people treat each other at work.
- A face to face training session for Councillors held in October 2022 on Personal Safety Awareness which was delivered by the LGA and which was well received

The Committee raised concerns regarding behaviour at recent Council meetings.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1. Notes the work undertaken by the Local Government Association on their “Debate Not Hate” campaign;**
- 2. Notes the work that has been undertaken locally in respect of the Council’s “Debate Not Hate” Campaign promoting Civility in Public Life and Digital Citizenship**
- 3. Requests that training for Councillors regarding Council Meetings be investigated, including specific training for Lord Mayors regarding chairing Council meeting: and**
- 4. Requests that this item remains on the Work Programme of the Ethics Committee for continued review and updates**

29. Member/Officer Protocol Review

Further to Minute 13, the Committee considered a report of the Chief Legal Officer which indicated that the Member/Officer Protocol has been reviewed in respect of Elected Members when they are dealing with matters that relate to their own personal interests that need to be raised with the Council. This followed a request by the Committee in light of a Standards Hearing on 8 July, 2022.

The report indicated that at the Standards Hearing, the Committee noted that it is challenging for Elected Members when they are dealing with matters that relate to their own personal interests and to raise these matters with the Council.

Following a review of the Member/Officer Protocol, it is proposed that the following additional paragraph is added under the heading of “Expectations” as follows (with subsequent paragraphs being re-numbered):-

- (j) Members may occasionally find that they have a personal interest in a matter that needs to be raised with Officers. Members should be clear about their personal interest and use appropriate language when contacting Officers in this instance. Close personal familiarity between individual Members and Officers can damage the relationship of mutual respect and prove embarrassing to Members and Officers. Members and Officers are encouraged to contact the Monitoring Officer for advice if they are concerned about this;**

The Committee noted that, as the Member/Officer Protocol forms part of the Constitution, the additional wording would need to be recommended to the Constitutional Advisory Panel and the Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities prior to consideration by the Council.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1. Approves the proposed revisions to the Member / Officer Protocol as detailed above and in the report as a result of the Committee’s**

observations at the Standards Hearing on 8 July 2022 in respect of Elected Members, when they are dealing with matters that relate to their own personal interests that need to be raised with the Council; and

2. Recommends to the Constitutional Advisory Panel that it approves the additions to the Member/ Officer Protocol and that it recommends to the Cabinet Member for Policing and Equalities and full Council that they approve to its being included in the Protocol within the Constitution.

30. **Code of Conduct Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Legal Officer which provided an update on national issues in relation to the ethical behaviour of Elected Members, together with the local position in Coventry with regard to Code of Conduct issues.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

1. Notes the position with regard to matters concerning local authorities nationally; and
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 Chief Legal Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Ethics Committee.

31. **Work Programme for the Ethics Committee 2022/23**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Legal Officer, appended to which was the Work Programme for the remainder of the Municipal year 2022/23.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee Work Programme 2022/23 be noted.

32. **Any Other Items of Urgent Public Business**

There no items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 10.50 am)