

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Ethics Committee held at 10.00 am on Friday, 15 July
2016

Present:

Members: Councillor S Walsh (Chair)
Councillor A Andrews
Councillor L Bigham
Councillor D Gannon
Councillor K Mulhall

Other Members

Present: Councillor G Williams

Employees (by
Directorate): C Bradford, Resources Directorate
H Lynch, Resources Directorate
G Paddan, Resources Directorate
R Sharma, Resources Directorate

Public Business

1. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

2. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 March 2016 were noted and signed.

There were no matters arising.

3. **Code of Conduct Update**

The Ethics Committee received a report of the Executive Director of Resources, which provided an update on national issues in relation to the ethical behaviour of elected members and the local position in Coventry with regards to Code of Conduct issues.

The Committee considered the cases taken from councils which displayed the national picture. In particular the Acting Monitoring Officer drew the Committee's attention to a recent investigation at an authority in the West Midlands and a public interest report published in connection with another local authority. In both cases, officers and members had been criticised in the reports. The Acting Monitoring Officer suggested that it would be good practice for the Council to look at agreeing a new Member/Officer Protocol and a Monitoring Officer Protocol both of which would help to ensure that the roles of officers and members were clear.

In terms of the local picture, the Monitoring Officer had received three new complaints since the date of the last Committee meeting. All complaints had been handled in accordance with the agreed Complaints Protocol. No findings had been made by the Local Government Ombudsman in relation members of Coventry City

Council. No complaints had been received by the Acting Monitoring Officer in respect of Allesley, Finham or Keresley Parish Councils.

The report noted that training had been offered to all three parish councils for their councillors on their Code of Conduct and the Declaration of Interests. Three training sessions have been held for City Councillors on the Code of Conduct and Declarations of Interests during the week beginning 13 June 2016. A total of thirty three councillors attended the training sessions and the Acting Monitoring Officer has arranged an additional session in September for members who were unable to attend.

RESOLVED that:

1. **The report be noted.**
2. **The Acting Monitoring Officer be authorised to draft a Member/ Officer Protocol and Monitoring Officer Protocol for consideration at a future meeting.**

4. **Review of the Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests**

The Ethics Committee received a report of the Executive Director of Resources on the review of the Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. In July 2015 the Committee received a report on the Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests (DPIs) and the exercise to get all members' declarations uploaded onto Modern.gov. A further report was presented to the Committee on how the new system was operating. The report set out information about the Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and updated the Committee on actions taken in the last 12 months to encourage members to keep their declarations up to date and the frequency with which the online register has been viewed.

The report noted that all councillors had been reminded that it was good practice to review and if necessary update their entries on the register. A number of entries were updated and again support was offered to newly elected members who needed advice on how to complete their forms. In addition all members attending the training in June were provided with a copy of their declarations.

Officers had retrieved information from the Modern.gov system which showed the number of times each councillor's entries in the register had been viewed online in the past eleven months. The register was viewed a total of 5139 times in this period with an average of 467 views a month – equating to an average of nine views per councillor per month. The Committee were asked how they wished to review DPIs in the future.

A question was raised on personal safety training; specifically relating to holding surgeries and home visits. This subject was debated following the recent murder of Jo Cox MP. It was felt that training should include how to cope with difficult or threatening circumstances. Members expressed concern regarding personal contact details being displayed on the website within the Register of Interests.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The report be noted.**
- 2. A letter be sent to the Secretary of State in consultation with the Chair; putting forward the recommendation that there needs to be a change to the legislation in respect of displaying/providing personal information in the public domain.**
- 3. The Register of DPs to be reviewed annually.**

5. Review of Gifts and Hospitality Section of Employee Code of Conduct

The Committee received a report of the Executive Director of Resources on the review of Gifts and Hospitality section of the Employee's Code of Conduct. At the last meeting the Committee considered entries in the Register of Gifts and Hospitality for Officers for the previous six months. Members were advised that the format of directorate registers were being revised with a view ultimately to making these available through SharePoint. The Committee had raised concerns that the section in the Employee Code of Conduct dealing with gifts and hospitality no longer reflected common business practice and changing role of employees, particularly senior officers. It was agreed that the Employee Code of Conduct should be reviewed.

A revised register for use by directorates has been produced together with a form for employees to complete when seeking consent to accept gifts or hospitality. It was noted that the Chief Executive's Register of gifts and hospitality was recorded separately and the acceptance of hospitality has been discussed with the Monitoring Officer. The Council's current guidance on Gifts and Hospitality is set out in Appendix 1 to the report. Appendix 2 set out a revised version of the section of the Employee's Code of Conduct on Gifts and Hospitality. This has been expanded to include more information about the general principles and policy underlying the guidance. The section on Gifts is largely unchanged from the current version except that the requirement to obtain a manager's approval for, and to register receipt of minor business gifts. With regard to Hospitality, the revised provisions allow attendance at purely social or sporting functions where these form part of the life of the community or where the Council is to be represented. It was noted that by introducing the forms it would be more transparent.

RESOLVED that:

- 1. The changes to the Employees Gift and Hospitality form be accepted.**
- 2. The proposed changes to the section of the Employee Code of Conduct be approved for consultation subject to :**
 - (a) the requirement to record gifts and hospitality within 28 days of being offered being made clear; and**
 - (b) the section to include a requirement that the Chief Executive should consult the Monitoring Officer before accepting hospitality**

from anyone who is tendering for a contract or has a planning application coming forward

6. Work Programme 2016-17

The Committee received a report of the Executive Director of Resources which suggested areas of work for the Ethics Committee for the Municipal Year 2016/17. Following consideration of the Work Programme, members recommended that the DPs Register be reviewed annually.

RESOLVED that the Work programme for 2016/17 be updated to reflect the approval of reviewing the DPs Register on an annual basis.

7. Any other items of public business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of special circumstances involved

The Committee were advised that Mr Ken Sloan, Independent Person had resigned and an appointment to that position was being advertised. The Committee noted that the Chair had already written to Mr Ken Sloan, thanking him for his work and support to the Ethics Committee.

RESOLVED that a vote of thanks be recorded for Mr Ken Sloan for his support to the Committee.

(Meeting closed at 11.10am)