

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Ethics Committee held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 10
January 2019

Present:

Members: Councillor S Walsh (Chair)
Councillor A Andrews
Councillor L Bigham
Councillor J Mutton
Councillor M Mutton (named substitute for Councillor D Gannon)

Independent Persons S Atkinson
A Barton
R Wills
P Wiseman

Employees (by Directorate):

Place: S Bennett, C Bradford, S Harriott, J Newman
S Bennett, C Bradford, C Bradford, Place Directorate
J Newman, Resources Directorate
S Harriott, J Newman

Apologies: Councillor D Gannon

Public Business

24. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

25. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 November, 2018 were agreed and signed as a true record, subject to a typographical error in Minute 16, where the word "eights" was replaced by the word "rights".

The Committee reiterated their thanks to Ruth Wills for Chairing the meeting held on 6 November, 2019 for the two matters relating to Complaints (Minutes 15 and 16 refer)

26. Code of Conduct Update

The Committee received and noted 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 respect of Code of Conduct issues.

27. **Committee on Standards in Public Life - Annual Report for Members for 2017-18**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which outlined matters raised in the Annual Report for 2017-18 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:-

- A review of intimidation in public life with particular reference to the experience of Parliamentary candidates at the 2017 General Election
- MP's outside interests
- The continuing importance of Ethical Standards for public service providers
- Local Government Ethical Standards

RESOLVED:-

(1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Monitoring Officer be requested 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 including the proposed review of local standards by the Committee for Standards in Public Life.

28. **Review of Ethical Standards in Parish Councils**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which provided a review of ethical standards in the three parish Councils in the City, Allesley, Finham and Keresley.

The report outlined the status and functions of parish councils and with regard to the three Coventry parish Council's, provided the following information in relation to each:-

- Number of seats on Council
- Number of Councillors (as at 20/11/18)
- Members' or Chair's allowance (where appropriate)
- Funding for 2018/19
- Precept charge per Band D property

The role of the Monitoring Officer and of the City Council itself in the operation of parish councils is limited. The Monitoring Officer is required to publish the register of interest of parish councillors and to deal with complaints about parish councillors under their code of conduct. In all other areas of ethical standards and governance the Monitoring Officer, and the City Council, can only advise parish councils on good practice and cannot require them to take a particular course of action. How the parish council operates is a matter for the parish council. As the

information provided by the parish clerks about their governance arrangements does not vary much from year to year, the Monitoring Officer has conducted a table top exercise to check what information is available to the public on the parish websites.

The report detailed each parish councils' ethical standards in relation to the following, together with the Monitoring Officer's conclusions and recommendations on this matter:-

- Adoption of the Code of Conduct
- Completion and Review of Register of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests
- Declaration of Interests at meetings
- Standing Orders
- Publication of meeting dates, agendas, reports and minutes on websites
- Complaints about parish councillors
- Public engagement with parish councils

In addition the report indicated the situation in relation to Keresley Parish Council where, as a result of the resignation of a number of parish councillors and the clerk to the parish, the City Council had made an Order under Section 91 of the Local Government Act 1972 appointing Councillor R Weaver as a temporary Councillor until such time new councillors could be elected. Councillor Weaver, Chair of the Meriden Parish Council, worked with the remaining parish councillors and City Council officers to get the parish council into a position where it was able co-opt three new Councillors. The Clerk to Meriden Parish Council, Barbara Bland, acted as locum clerk to the parish council. Councillor Weaver has continued to work with and mentor the members of Keresley Parish Council and her help in establishing and executing the remedial action needed to be taken to get the parish council back on track has been invaluable. Mrs Bland had also agreed to carry on as locum clerk and it was hoped that the parish council would be able to appoint to this vital role in the near future.

RESOLVED:-

- (1) That the report be noted**
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be requested to continue to offer any suggestions to the parish clerks on where their good practice on ethical standards might be further improved; and**
- (3) That the Committee places on record it's appreciation for the work carried out by Councillor Weaver and Mrs Bland in helping and advising Keresley Parish Council.**

29. **Review of Guidance on Gifts and Hospitality for Members**

Further to Minute 9/18, the Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which set out the current guidance for elected members on the acceptance of gifts and hospitality. The guidance, which was appended to the report, had been in place since 2014. The Committee commended the Draft Quick Guide to Gifts and Hospitality, which was also appended to the report, which they felt was extremely helpful and user friendly.

In particular, the Committee were asked to consider whether:-

- a. It wishes to alter the financial threshold for the declaration of gifts and hospitality (currently £25)
- b. The register of declarations should be made available on line
- c. Members should be required to declare offers made but not accepted
- d. Members should be required to seek the approval of the Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer before acceptance of the gift or hospitality.

The Committee discussed this matter, noting the comparative information provided in the report in relation to the financial threshold with other West Midlands/Warwickshire Councils.

In relation to c) and d) above, the Committee decided not to consider these options further. In relation to a) above the Committee requested further information on financial thresholds, including an analysis of what is currently being declared. With regard to b) above the Committee indicated that providing an on line register of the acceptance of gifts and hospitality would be consistent with the register of declarations of interest which is currently provide on line.

RESOLVED that the officers be requested to submit a report to the next meeting reviewing the rules for acceptance and declaration of gifts and hospitality, to include the information requested by the Committee as detailed above.

30. **Review of Guidance on Declarations of Interest**

Further to Minute 21/18 the Committee considered a report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services which outlined work being undertaken on revisions to the online FAQs on the registration of interests by elected members and on the registration of interests, together with a step by step guide to the declaration of interests. It is intended that the new guidance will be available for the start of the 2019/2020 Municipal Year and will be incorporated into training provided for newly elected and existing Councillors.

RESOLVED that the Monitoring Officer be requested to bring a draft step by step guide to the declaration of members' interests and revised FAQs on the registration of interests to the next meeting of the Committee.

31. **Work Programme for the Ethics Committee 2018-19**

The Committee noted their Work Programme for 2018/19.

32. **Any Other Items of Public Business - Members' Training**

The Committee's views were sought in relation to suggestions for Members' training.

The Committee discussed the Social Media Protocol which they had previously approved (Minute 4/18 refers) and indicated that this should be launched to all current Members and candidates for the May local election in February 2019 and should also be included in the training for all newly elected Councillors later in the year.

(Meeting closed at 10.40 am)