

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Ethics Committee held at 11.00 am on Thursday, 9
January 2025

Present:

Members: Councillor S Nazir (Chair)
 Councillor P Hetherton
 Councillor G Lloyd (Substitute for Councillor N Akhtar)
 Councillor P Seaman (Substitute for Councillor L Bigham)
 Councillor E M Reeves

Independent Members: R Wills, P Wiseman

Employees (by Service Area):

Customer Services: K Kanebi, A Le Cras

Law and Governance: J Newman (Director), S Bennett, A West

Apologies: Councillors N Akhtar, L Bigham and S Atkinson

Public Business

16. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

17. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September, 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record subject to the inclusion of the following in Minute 8 relating to "Declarations of Interest"

"The Committee noted that Councillor G Lloyd had made an entry in the Member's Gifts and Hospitality Register referred to in Minute 11 below."

18. Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman 2023/24

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive, which had been considered by the Cabinet Member for Policy and Leadership (Minute 9/24 refers) and which would also be considered at the meeting of Audit and Procurement Committee on 29th January 2025, and which set out the number, trends and outcomes of complaints to the LGSCO relating to Coventry City Council in 2023/24. It focused on upheld complaints, compliance with Ombudsman's recommendations, where the Council had provided a satisfactory remedy before the complaint reached the LGSCO, and how the Authority compared to previous years and other local authorities.

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) was 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 was a free service that investigated complaints in a fair and independent way and provided 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 could complain to the Council, as well as how the Council would handle their compliments, comments and complaints. The Council also informed individuals of their rights to contact the LGSCO if they were not happy with the Council's decision once they had exhausted the Council's complaints process.

The LGSCO issued an annual letter to the Leader and Chief Executive of every Council, summarising the number and trends of complaints dealt with relating to that Council that year. The latest letter, issued 17 July 2024, covered complaints to the LGSCO relating to Coventry City Council between April 2023 and March 2024 (2023/24).

The Committee also received a comprehensive and informative presentation at the meeting, for which the officers were commended.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1) Notes the contents of the report**
- 2) Notes the Council's performance in relation to complaints to the LGSCO**
- 3) Notes the Council's updated complaints process and guidance**
- 4) Request that officers raise the comments now made by the Committee with the LGSCO in relation to the making their website more user friendly.**

19. Ending Abuse in Public Life Council Self-Assessment Toolkit - Outcome of Evidence Gathering Exercise

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Law and Governance which indicated that in July 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) issued a publication called "Debate Not Hate: Ending Abuse in Public Life for Councillors" which outlines how Councils can better support Councillors to prevent and handle abuse. External consultants worked with Councils and relevant partners to inform the report, which includes principles for Councils to consider, top tips and good practice case studies. The key findings of this report were reported to Ethics Committee on 28th September 2023 (Minute 14/23 refers).

Further to that report, a self-assessment toolkit has been developed by the LGA to support the work within Councils to address abuse of Councillors. The toolkit acknowledges the distinct roles and responsibilities held by Councillors, Councils and police in addressing instances of abuse and intimidation. It is crucial to acknowledge and understand the diverse spheres of influence within which each

entity operates and that there are limitations in their ability to address certain issues alone. By understanding their unique sphere of influence and collaborating with other stakeholders, Councils can work towards meaningful solutions for many of these challenges. As such, this toolkit is designed to be realistic and flexible in its implementation.

The toolkit was developed by a specialist abuse and harm reduction consultancy organisation, who worked closely with the LGA, a sounding group of Council officers and consulted with several national police colleagues. The toolkit is structured around the five principles outlined in the “Debate Not Hate: Ending Abuse in Public Life for Councillors” report, offering a practical approach to implementing these principles.

The five principles are as follows:

1. Creating supportive and informed spaces
2. Creating a risk-led approach
3. Creating an infrastructure
4. Creating new connections
5. Creating a culture of safety and respect

An initial assessment of the tool kit has been completed and a summary of which, together with a subsequent forward plan for Coventry, was appended to the report with the intention of creating a baseline as a starting point for this work. The report indicated that the next step will be to gather feedback from Councillors as part of the self-assessment to further inform the forward plan.

Work already delivered which contributes to this work includes information provided on the Members intranet webpages in a section called “Well-being and your safety”, which sign-posts Members to where advice and support can be found. These webpages provide links to all of the LGA materials from the Debate Not Hate campaign, as well as support offered through the Council’s Occupational Health Service. These webpages also provide a link to the “Personal Safety Guidance for Elected Members” document, as well as how to deal with online abuse and how to report harassment and intimidation.

Other actions already in progress are linking with the police on Operation Ford to identify a single point of contact, as well as a programme of personal safety workshops delivered by the police for Councillors in the New Year. A number of personal safety and awareness raising training sessions have been arranged for Councillors this municipal year, including one specifically on safety whilst election campaigning, and sessions delivered by the LGA on online abuse and harassment. 27 Councillors have accessed these sessions.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1) Notes and welcomes the work undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) on their Debate Not Hate campaign, including the self-assessment tool**
- 2) Notes and endorses the initial self-assessment and subsequent forward plan as appended to the report**

20. **Code of Conduct Update**

The Ethics Committee considered a report of the Director of Law and Governance which provided an update on national issues in relation to the ethical behaviour of Elected Members and the local position in Coventry regarding Code of Conduct issues.

The Committee also noted the position in relation to the local parish Councils and their Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED that the Ethics Committee:-

- 1) Notes the position with regard to matters concerning local authorities nationally.**
- 2) Notes the local position in relation to the operation of the Council's Code of Conduct and delegates any actions arising from these to the Director of Law and Governance in consultation with the Chair of the Ethics Committee.**

21. **Work Programme for the Ethics Committee 2024/25**

The Committee considered and noted a report of the Director of Law and Governance, appended to which was the Committee's Work Programme for the 2024/25 Municipal Year.

22. **Any Other Items of Urgent Public Business - Government Consultation on the Standards and Conduct Framework for Local Authorities**

The Committee considered a presentation which outlined the key points raised in a Government Consultation on the "Standards and Conduct Framework for Local Authorities". The Consultation seeks views on introducing measures to strengthen the standards and conduct regime in England and ensure consistency of approach amongst Councils investigating serious breaches of their Member Codes of Conduct, including the introduction of the power of suspension.

The Committee's views were sought and given in relation to the following issues addressed by the consultation exercise including:-

- The introduction of a mandatory minimum code of conduct;
- A requirement for all Councils to have a formal Standards Committee to make decisions on code of conduct breaches;
- The introduction of the power for all local authorities to suspend Councillors or Mayors found in serious breach of their code of conduct and, as appropriate, interim suspension for the most serious and complex cases that may involve police investigations;
- A new category of disqualification for gross misconduct and those subject to a sanction of suspension more than once in a 5-year period;

- A role for a national body to deal with appeals;
- How to empower victims affected by Councillor misconduct to come forward and what additional support would be appropriate.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) The Committee's views now outlined be incorporated into a corporate response to the Consultation.**
- 2) Elected Members and Independent Members be invited to a workshop to further consider the issues raised by the consultation;**
- 3) The Council's draft response be shared with Ethics Committee Members prior to it being signed off.**

NOTE: The Chair of the Committee agreed that this item of business should be considered as an urgent item of public business, the reason for urgency being the need to seek the Committee's views on the Consultation to inform the Council's response before the deadline for responses on 25 February, 2025.

(Meeting closed at 12.30pm)