

Audit, Governance & Standards Committee

Thursday, 31 October 2019

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor John Fisher (Chair), Councillor Mark Shurmer (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Salman Akbar, Peter Fleming, Nyear Nazir, Yvonne Smith and David Thain

Also Present:

R Percival

Officers:

Andy Bromage, Jayne Pickering and David Riley

Committee Services Officer:

Jess Bayley

28. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETHICAL STANDARDS

The Principle Solicitor presented a report which outlined proposed changes to the Members' Code of Conduct. These changes had been proposed in response to findings in a review of standards in public life that had been conducted by a House of Commons Select Committee. As in previous years the Monitoring Officers for all of the Councils in Worcestershire had collectively reviewed the joint Code of Conduct for the county and the changes presented for Members' consideration had already been agreed by a number of other local authorities. Two changes had been proposed by other Councils to the draft joint code; the inclusion of trolling behaviour as an example of bullying and harassment and agreement that gifts and hospitality should be declared when valued at £15 or over.

Following the presentation of the report Members noted that reference had been made to Bromsgrove District Council in the document rather than to Redditch Borough Council. Officers explained that this was a typographical error and the code remained

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Chair

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applicable in Redditch as it was a joint code for the whole of Worcestershire.

Members questioned the reasons for inclusion of a reference to trolling behaviour within the code of conduct and concerns were raised that the subject was subjective and open to interpretation. Officers explained however, that trolling behaviour was considered to be critical and personal comments about somebody else on social media. This type of behaviour had already been reported to the Monitoring Officer, particularly in relation to comments that had been posted on Facebook. In cases where the Monitoring Officer received reports of trolling behaviour this would be investigated like all other complaints and the context would be taken into account as part of this process.

The Committee also discussed arrangements for Members declaring gifts and hospitality. The £15 threshold for declaring gifts and hospitality had been requested by other local authorities in the county. All gifts and hospitality of this value or above would need to be declared and registered with the Monitoring Officer.

Members noted that the report made reference to the role of the Independent Person. This role had been introduced in the Localism Act 2011. The Independent Person was consulted in relation to complaints and had a key investigative role in cases where a breach of the Council's Code of Conduct was found to have taken place.

RECOMMENDED that

the changes to the Code of conduct to reflect the CSPL Best Practice Recommendations be approved and that authority be delegated to the Head of Legal, Equalities and Democratic Services to update the constitution accordingly.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.40 pm