

Standards Committee Minutes

The minutes of the Standards Committee meeting of Wyre Borough Council held on Thursday, 19 November 2020 by Remote access, via WebEx.

Standards Committee members present:

Councillors Catterall, Sir R Atkins, Gerrard, Swales and Orme

Apologies for absence:

Councillor B Birch

Officers present:

Liesl Hadgraft, Head of Business Support and Monitoring Officer
Duncan Jowitt, Democratic Services Officer
Emma Keany, Democratic Services Officer
Marianne Unwin, Assistant Democratic Services Officer

No members of the public or press attended the meeting.

1 Declarations of Interest

None.

2 Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

3 Model Code of Conduct

The Monitoring Officer provided an update on the preparation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) following the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review published in January 2019. She explained that the report made a number of Best Practice Recommendations for Local Authorities to consider in advance of any overarching review and more specific recommendations for the LGA to take on board when considering a wider review of the code of conduct.

Mrs Hadgraft talked about the workshops and surveys that the LGA had held with Local Authorities and the general support that had gathered for the MCC and the issues that had arisen.

The Monitoring Officer responded to questions from members relating to the adoption of Wyre Council's Code of Conduct by Parish/Town Councils.

Decision

The committee noted the current progress of the Model Code of Conduct and agreed that a further report to consider a possible update to the council's Code of Conduct be taken to a subsequent meeting of the Standards Committee, following approval of the MCC by the LGA board on 3 December 2020.

4 Best practice recommendations progress update

The Monitoring Officer provided a verbal update detailing the council's response to a questionnaire from the Committee on Standards on Public Life (CSPL), which asked Local Authorities to provide an update of their progress with the Best Practice Recommendations made in the CSPL's January 2019 report.

Mrs Hadgraft reported that Wyre Council had submitted its response, which confirmed that the majority of the recommendations were already in place, and suggested that there might be further changes following approval of the LGA Model Code of Conduct.

The committee noted the council's response to the best practice recommendations.

5 Current Complaints: Summary

The Monitoring Officer submitted a schedule summarising complaints of alleged breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct, which were being processed or had been completed since the last meeting of the Committee.

She explained that members should be aware that in light of the pandemic it had been agreed to put all work on investigating complaints on hold, due to the practicalities of carrying out investigations and also that officers usually involved had been deployed elsewhere to work in areas directly linked to the pandemic itself.

The July Standards Committee had also been cancelled and as a result of that, there was a slight backlog with some of the earlier complaints.

She provided further information on each of the complaints referred to in the schedule, as follows:

2020/01

The Monitoring Officer said this complaint was dealt with fully before the start of the first lockdown, however, there has only just been the opportunity to report on it. The complaint had come from a member of the public, who

alleged that a Parish/Town councillor had brought their council into disrepute when organising an event. The member of the public had been interviewed to provide more detail surrounding the complaint.

The subject member had been interviewed and co-operated fully. They had provided very comprehensive documentation to defend the allegation. The Monitoring Officer explained that after taking all of this information into account, it was the view of the Independent Person and Monitoring Officer that no breach of the code had occurred and the matter should be concluded.

2020/02

The Monitoring Officer reported that a number of councillors had made a complaint against a Wyre councillor regarding comments made at a council meeting. The Monitoring Officer and Independent Person had now listened to the recording of the meeting and had concluded that a breach of the code had occurred.

The subject member had been asked to discuss an appropriate remedy with the Monitoring Officer and Independent Person but as yet this conversation had not taken place. Therefore, the complaint was not concluded.

2020/03

The Monitoring Officer said that similar to the above complaint, a number of councillors had made a complaint about a Wyre councillor at a council meeting. Again, the recording had been listened to by the Monitoring Officer and Independent Person who had both concluded that a breach of the code had not occurred.

This matter was, therefore, concluded.

2020/05

The Monitoring Officer explained that a member of the public had complained about a Wyre councillor. The accusation was one of bullying, intimidation and failure to subsequently declare an interest at a meeting. This case had moved on since the publishing of the papers for this meeting and the Monitoring Officer explained that if upheld, it would be a serious allegation.

The Monitoring Officer and Independent Person had undertaken work to gain an understanding of the issues relating to the case and help put the matter into context. The Monitoring Officer said that they had spoken to the appropriate officer and had taken the opportunity to speak with the subject member. The case was in the final stages and should be concluded very soon.

2020/06

The Monitoring Officer reported that a complaint had been made by a member of the public against a Parish/Town Councillor. She explained that

there were two parts to the complaint and that further information had been requested and the investigation was ongoing.

Agreed:

1. That the summary of complaints submitted by the Monitoring Officer and her verbal update on each of the complaints referred to be noted.

6 Date of next Meeting

Noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Committee is due to be held at 6pm on Thursday 18 March 2021.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 6.32 pm.

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