

Standards Committee Minutes

The minutes of the Standards Committee meeting of Wyre Borough Council held on Thursday, 7 November 2019 at the CivicCentre, Poulton-le-Fylde.

Standards Committee members present:

Councillors Catterall, Gerrard, Swales and Orme

Apologies for absence:

Councillor Sir R Atkins.

Other councillors present:

None.

Officers present:

Liesl Hadgraft, Head of Business Support and Monitoring Officer;
Barry Parsonage, Independent Person;
Roy Saunders, Democratic Services and Scrutiny Manager;
Duncan Jowitt, Democratic Services and Councillor Development Officer.

No members of the public or press attended the meeting.

8 Membership of the Committee

The Chairman (Cllr Catterall) welcomed Cllr Swales to her first meeting of the Committee, following her appointment to the Committee (in place of Cllr Beavers) at the Council meeting on 3 October 2019.

9 Declarations of Interest

None.

10 Minutes

Agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

11 Current Complaints: Summary

The Monitoring Officer submitted a schedule summarising complaints of alleged breaches of the Council's code of conduct, which were currently being

processed or which had been completed since the last meeting of the Committee.

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

2019/08 and 2019/09

The Monitoring Officer explained that, as reported at the last meeting, complaints 2019/08 and 2019/09 were very much interlinked and therefore they had been dealt with simultaneously.

An investigation had now been concluded, the outcome of which had been considered by the Independent Person who had agreed with the proposed findings. With regard to both complaints, no breach of the code had been found. However it was clear from the details of both complaints that there were issues which, if addressed, would benefit the particular Council in question and the individuals involved. Therefore, a recommendation had been made to both the complainants and the subject members, that training be arranged by the Parish/Town Council and that all those involved attend, to prevent similar situations in the future.

The Monitoring Officer informed that Committee she had received an email at 4.15pm that afternoon from the complainant in Ref 2019/08, who was also the subject member in complaint Ref 2019/09, expressing their “displeasure” at the way the complaints had been dealt with and asking that the contents of the email be reported to the Committee.

In order to consider the new information submitted, the Committee then resolved:

That the public and press be excluded from the meeting whilst complaints 2019/08 and 2019/09 were considered, on the grounds that their presence would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in category 1 (Information relating a particular individual) of Part 1 of Schedule 12(a) of the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Variation Order 2006 and, that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

Whilst in confidential session, the Committee discussed the contents of the email submitted by the complainant/subject member and an explanation by the Monitoring Officer of the issues referred to in the complaints. When they had done so, the meeting continued in public session.

2019/10

The Monitoring Officer said that it had not yet been possible to move this complaint forward because she had not had the chance to speak with the subject member. A meeting had now been arranged for the middle of November. Hopefully, once that meeting had taken place, the complaint could

be resolved.

2019/11

The Monitoring Officer reported that, as with the previous complaint, this also involved inappropriate comments on social media. She said that these types of complaints were often difficult to address, particularly when considering whether or not a member was acting in their capacity as a councillor. This was because the member of the public saw comments they believed were inappropriate. As they were aware the individual making those comments was a councillor, they felt they should “know better” than to make them. In Wyre’s Social Media Policy for Councillors, this was referred to as “blurred identity” because it was often difficult to distinguish between them. The Monitoring Officer said that, in this case, both she and the Independent Person had had the opportunity to speak with the subject member regarding this complaint to gain a better understanding of the background behind the comments made. Taking information from both parties into account, it had been concluded that, whilst the subject member had not necessarily made the best choices with regards to comments made on social media, on this occasion no breach of the code had occurred. During the meeting with the subject member both the Independent Person and herself had been able to highlight some of the key do’s and don’ts around social media and had also strongly recommended that the subject member attended social media training which was being planned for Wyre councillors the new year.

2019/12

The Monitoring Officer said that, sometimes complaints were received which were difficult to decipher and the substance of the complaint was unclear and this case fell in to this category. In their submission, the complainant, had promised to provide more information which, up to now, had not been forthcoming. If no further information was received, the likelihood was that no further action would be taken. She said that an update would be reported to the next meeting of the Committee.

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.
2. That, with regard to complaints 2019/08 and 2019/09, the conclusions of the investigation be noted and, that the actions recommended by the Monitoring Officer be endorsed.
3. That the intention to provide a training session for Wyre Councillors on social media, which would include reference to the Council’s Social Media Policy, in the New Year be welcomed and supported.

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Date of next Meeting

Noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Committee was at 6pm on 12

March 2020.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and finished at 6.40 pm.

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