

## Standards Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Standards Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **3<sup>rd</sup> February 2020**.

### **Present:**

Cllr. Mrs Bell (Chairman);  
Cllr. Shorter (Vice-Chairman);

Cllrs. Knowles, Link, Ovenden, Pickering.

Mrs C Vant – Independent Person  
Mr D Lyward – Parish Council Representative.

### **Apologies:**

Cllrs. Chilton.

### **Also Present:**

Monitoring Officer, Deputy Monitoring Officer, Member Services Manager (Operational).

## **292 Minutes**

### **Resolved:**

**That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2019 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## **293 Annual Report of the Council's Monitoring Officer 2019**

The Monitoring Officer introduced his Annual Report for the calendar year 2019, which would be presented to the Council on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The report assessed activity in probity and related governance matters, in particular in relation to formal complaints about alleged breaches of protocols and codes of conduct by Borough and Parish Councillors. These related to the calendar year 2019.

In addition, the report included data on Ombudsman complaints as these were also handled by the Monitoring Officer and his staff. The relevant period for these related to the most recent data provided by the Ombudsman, namely 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019.

With regard to Code of Conduct Complaints, a series of complex formal complaints from the previous period had been concluded during 2019. A number of further

complaints had arisen during 2019 involving both Borough and Parish Councillors. These were detailed at Table 1 on Page 11 of the report.

In terms of governance issues, 2019 had seen: - the adoption of a new Social Media Guidance Note for Councillors in time for the new Council elected in May 2019; the approval of a completely revised protocol on Councillor/Officer Working Relationships; and the commencement of a review of the current Arrangements for handling code of conduct complaints to ensure they remained fit for purpose and reflected current best practice. The latter of these is the subject of ongoing work and would be the subject of a further report later in the year. In relation to the review of the Local Government Ethical Standards system by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), the Monitoring Officer reminded the Committee that had been published in January 2019, making 26 formal recommendations to the Prime Minister and 15 'Best Practice' recommendations. The Government response to those recommendations had been delayed due to other priorities, but it was hoped that these would now be picked up and responded to later in the year.

In relation to Ombudsman Complaints, the Monitoring Officer advised that there had been 19 received by the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) which was a slight increase from 16 in the previous year. Only one of these however had been upheld.

In response to questions about training, the Monitoring Officer advised that Parish, Town and Community Councils had been invited to the Code of Conduct training put on by ABC in June 2019, and indeed a number had attended. There did seem to be ongoing issues in terms of conduct, bullying and offensive comments on social media across Local Councils and it would be important to ensure that such training was kept up-to-date and offered to all. There was a wider discussion on the difficulties of encouraging the right Members to attend such training sessions. The Chairman of the Member Training Panel was present and said that he would take this whole topic up for discussion at a future meeting.

The Chairman of the Committee pointed out that the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) also ran a comprehensive programme of training for Local Councils and this did include some reference to the code of conduct, although not at the level of detail offered by ABC. On-line training may also be an option.

**Resolved:**

- That (i) the Annual Report of the Monitoring Officer for 2019 be received, noted and forwarded to Full Council for approval.**
- (ii) the Monitoring Officer report to future meeting(s) of the Standards Committee in relation to the recommendations of the CSPL Report and the review of Arrangements.**

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