

Standards Committee

Minutes

10th September 2020 at 6.00 pm

Present:

Councillors: S Saleem (Chair), Waheed (Vice Chair) D. Chapman, M. Hussain, Nicholls, Roche, and Skelpehorn.

Independent Members:

Ms P Brennan, Mrs M. Briggs, J. Jones, Andrew Maslen and Peter Orr.

18. Apologies (Ref: 1)

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors Moles, Petts and Young; and Mr. John Jones, Independent Member.

19. Minutes (Ref: 2.1)

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th July 2020 be taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair in due course.

20. Reports on Mandatory Training for Elected Members of the Council (Ref: 6)

The Service Director, HR and Monitoring Officer submitted the report Ref: 6 regarding mandatory training for elected members of the Council. She stated that at the meeting of the Standards Committee on 11 June 2020, members requested a report detailing all of the mandatory courses elected members were obliged to attend and their attendance records.

She further explained that mandatory training and training in general were areas that members were keen to review. The pandemic, had been a difficult period and had affected most activities of the Council. This Committee had always considered learning and development activities for elected members to be a key activity in promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct.

This objective had, for the last eight years, been underpinned by the award from the Local Government Association of the “Councillor Development Charter”.

The Group Leaders of the three political parties had all endorsed that a number of training courses should be made mandatory for elected members, at least once in every term of office (four years). In addition, the Group Leaders also wanted the Code of Conduct & Standards Framework training to be included in the list of mandatory training. Furthermore, it was stated that elected members sitting on Development Control Committee and/or Audit & Governance Committee must undertake training before attending their first committee.

A member of the committee stated that in future, when producing the member training attendance information, it should include a column to include information, which would identify the mandatory training attended by a member. A clear understanding and clear rules of the training for certain committees especially regulatory committees was essential to ensure the transparency of a councillor's responsibilities. The Service Director, HR and Monitoring Officer also explained that in relation to safeguarding training, some councillors may have undertaken relevant safeguarding training at their various places of work, and as such members of the committee may want to recognise this training as such a councillor could use their transferrable skills for their council role.

A member of the committee stated that some schools would not buy into trainings organised by the council and another member of the committee asked whether in a situation where a councillor had undertaken a similar training at their place of work, would they still be required to undertake the have the same training. The council as a public sector had a statutory role so there was need for clarity of rules around mandatory training for councillors.

In terms of the frequency of training, the Service Director HR and Monitoring Officer advised that for Luton council, the term of office would be 4 years. She stated that in terms of training, there could be similarities in training where the councillor who had the training had a statutory enhanced responsibility. The direction of travel would be welcomed from members of the committee. Members unanimously agreed that the Chair's annual report to council should include the member's mandatory training attendance records to be reported as part of the Chair's annual report.

An independent member stated that some of the columns in the training document presented were blanks, rather than blanks, the columns should be stated as not applicable. Officers agreed to consider this when producing the next Chair's annual report to council.

Resolved: (i) That the report regarding mandatory training for members (Ref: 6) be noted;

(ii) That blank columns in the members attendance training record should be replaced with (not applicable N/A);

(iii) That a list of the mandatory training and the names of elected members who attended mandatory training be included in the Chair's annual report to full council.

21. Complaints against Members – Oral Updates (Ref: 7)

The Service Director, HR and Monitoring Officer gave a verbal update report regarding complaints against the council's elected members. She explained that this had been a difficult time with Covid-19 pandemic, which led to a national lockdown. Consequently, this had been a challenging period to address and deal with some of the allegations and complaints received during this period.

The Service Director further explained that an assessment panel took place in relation to allegations received against some councillors. She said the assessment panel met on 13th August 2020 in relation to numerous complaints received against members. Following that sitting, the Service Director was asked to go away in furtherance of investigation and facts finding. Unfortunately, the scheduled hearing on 21st September 2020 had been cancelled and no date had been agreed but the hearing would take place in the next couple of months.

A member of the committee expressed concerns regarding the involvement of the Chief Executive in an ongoing allegation concerning some members of the council. He questioned why the Chief Executive had issued a press release in regards to this matter, which should be led by the chair of the standards committee. He said such matters should come under the umbrella of the standards committee who should independently carry out such investigations. In response, the Service Director affirmed that although the Chief Executive should not lead on matters around member standard issues, however, this particular matter had been of high interest to local residents and press. She said this could explain why he felt the need to be involved.

Councillor M Hussain suggested that henceforth all statements should be issued on behalf of the chair of standards who must be consulted first instance no matter the interest of the press or public. Another member of the committee stated that when the hearing took place in August, the chair was not available due to other commitments. She said this could explain why she had not be informed of the press release.

A member of the committee also stated that it was essential for people to have ample time to seek representations hence the extension of the hearing date.

Following discussions, members of the committee agreed that press releases in relation to member's hearings and adjudication panel should be cleared with the chair of the panel. There was a consensus whether there was provision in the council's constitution to ensure consultation with the chair of adjudication panel or chair of the standards committee in relation to press releases.

Members of the committee further requested that a report regarding press releases by the standards committee be included in the committee's work programme.

Resolved: (i) That the report (Ref: 7) regarding complaints against members, be noted.

(ii) That a report regarding press releases in matters relating to the standards committee Adjudication Assessment Panels be included in the committee's future work programme.

22 Standards Committee Work Programme 2020/21 (Ref: 8)

Members considered the committee's work programme and agreed that a report regarding press releases be included in the committee's future work programme and be reported to the 4th February 2021 standards committee meeting.

Resolved: That the report (Ref: 8) be noted and that the Service Director, HR and Monitoring Officer be requested to submit a report regarding standard's committee press releases to a future meeting of the committee on 4th February 2021.

(Note: The meeting ended at 19.00)