

STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES - 22 APRIL 2025

Present: Councillor ;
Councillors Edwards (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Ayub, Eden, Keane, Keeping, Mitchell and Williams

Apologies: Councillors Cross, Gavin and Moore

1. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

2. ADSO REPORT ON POLITICAL PROPORTIONALITY AND MEMBER ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION MAKING

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report on the outcome of a review into the application of Political Proportionality rules within the Council.

The review had been commissioned following the Annual Council Meeting in May 2024, where the main opposition group did not take up its full allocation of seats on the Policy Committee, resulting in an underrepresentation on that Committee.

The Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) had been engaged to assess the Council's systems and processes for allocating members to Committees. The review concluded that while the Council broadly operated within the statutory framework, there were areas for improvement.

The report outlined several recommendations for consideration, including:

- Reviewing the arrangements for the allocation of seats on Committees and Sub-Committees.
- Introducing a clear scheme of substitution for Committees.
- Considering a reduction in the size of strategic and policy Committees, balanced by increasing the size of Planning and Licensing Committees.
- Exploring the creation of a smaller overarching strategic policy Committee, comprising Chairs of service Committees, to enhance cross-cutting policy development.
- Reviewing the Members' Allowances Scheme (noting that this had already been completed by the Independent Remuneration Panel in January 2025).
- Encouraging all Members to engage with the LGA's "Effective Opposition" workbook, potentially through a workshop and peer mentoring.
- Considering further options to secure greater Member engagement and participation.

The Committee noted that any changes could be implemented at the Annual Council Meeting in May 2025, with further work to be considered at the June 2025 meeting if required.

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The Committee discussed the report and the following points were noted:

- Regarding changing the mechanism to calculate the appointment on sub-committees, it was explained that sub committees were not done on proportionality, and it would not be beneficial to change the current process.
- It would not be beneficial to reduce the size of the standing committees, and these provided a good representation of groups and enhanced scrutiny.
- Regarding substitutions it was noted that substitutes would not work on standing committees due to the expertise and experience needed and gained on the committees. However, on smaller non-frequent committees such as Standards and Personnel this was beneficial.

The Committee noted the report and the recommendations in 3.1 of the associated report for future consideration if necessary.

Resolved –

- (1) That the outcome of the Political Proportionality Review report be noted;**
- (2) That the recommendations outlined in the associated report be considered in the future if necessary.**

3. PLANNING CODE OF CONDUCT

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report outlining a new draft Planning Code of Conduct, attached to the report as Appendix 1, for the Committee to consider.

The draft Code was developed following updated guidance from the Local Government Association (LGA), including the 2019 publication *Probity in Planning: Advice for councillors and officers making planning decisions*, and the LGA's model code of conduct published in January 2024. The draft incorporates adaptations to reflect Reading Borough Council's specific arrangements and replaces the previous version adopted in 2015 and updated in 2019.

The Committee noted that the LGA model code of conduct published in January 2024, which with adaptations to reflect Reading Borough Council's arrangements, would provide an up-to-date code focussing on expected councillor behaviour to replace the current version, which was a mixture of advice and a description of procedure. The details of procedures were set out in Part 4 of the Council's Constitution.

The Committee noted that the draft Code was based on best practice and aimed to ensure clarity and legal robustness in planning decisions.

It was suggested that Planning and Legal officers provide examples to support training on the new code. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that training would be provided and information to support the understanding of the new code would be made available to all councillors.

Resolved –

That the new Planning Code of Conduct attached as Appendix 1 to the associated report be endorsed.

4. INDEPENDENT PERSON AND INDEPENDENT CHAIR

The Committee considered a report by the Monitoring Officer seeking approval to begin the recruitment process for a new Independent Person (IP) and an Independent Chair of the Standards Committee, following the resignations of Mr David Comben and Mrs Tina Barnes.

The report explained that under the Localism Act 2011, the Council was required to appoint at least one Independent Person to advise on complaints about Members. Given the low number of complaints received by Reading Borough Council, the Monitoring Officer proposed exploring a shared arrangement with other Berkshire unitary authorities to establish a panel and share Independent Persons. This would involve joint advertising, a memorandum of understanding, and coordinated appointments.

The report also noted that Article 9 of the Council's Constitution required the appointment of an Independent Member to Chair the Standards Committee. The Monitoring Officer sought approval to advertise for a new Independent Chair and proposed that the Monitoring Officer, Deputy Monitoring Officer, and Vice-Chair of the Committee conduct interviews.

The Committee discussed the report and it was noted that as the Independent Person currently received a Special Responsibility Allowance any changes in the SRA would be referred back to the Remuneration Panel for consideration.

Resolved –

- (1) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to consider arrangements with other Berkshire Councils to establish a Panel and share Independent Persons;**
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to recruit an Independent Chair for the Standards Committee;**
- (3) That the Monitoring Officer report back to Council to make the appointments.**

5. INVESTIGATION OF COMPLAINTS 2023/2024

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report outlining the number, type, and disposal of complaints made by members of the public and councillors against councillors during the financial year 2023/2024.

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Annex A to the report contained a list of seven complaints received in the financial year 2023/2024. It was noted that none of the complaints progressed beyond Stage 0, meaning that either the Code of Conduct was not engaged or the complaint was found to be misconceived.

Of the seven complaints set out in Annex A:

- 3 complaints were judged not to engage the Code of Conduct and were rejected at the initial stage.
- 2 complaints were found to be misconceived, with no evidence to support the allegations.
- 1 complaint resulted in informal resolution with words of advice offered.
- 1 complaint was not pursued by the complainant.

It was also noted that two complainants requested anonymity, but these requests were declined as they did not meet the “exceptional” criteria outlined in the Council’s Arrangements for Dealing with Complaints. The Monitoring Officer advised that these decisions did not affect the outcome of the complaints.

The Committee was informed that the level of complaint activity remained low and did not indicate any systemic issues. The Monitoring Officer concluded that councillors generally maintain good relations with the community.

Resolved –

- (1) That the Member Complaints received in the financial year 2023/2024 be noted.**
- (2) That any further work which might be necessary to promote high standards of conduct in public life in the Council be considered.**

(The meeting started at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.11 pm)