

Report to: **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

Relevant Officer: Mark Towers, Director of Governance and Partnerships / Monitoring Officer

Date of Meeting: 19 April 2022

STANDARDS UPDATE REPORT

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To consider an update report from the Monitoring Officer on standards issues and training held since the last meeting.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To consider the update report and note the issues raised to date

2.2 To support the repeat of the two training areas as part of the induction process for new councillors following the 2023 elections.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To make Standards Committee members aware of the type of issues raised and seek support for training for elected members.

3.2a Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.2b Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? Yes

3.3 Other alternative options to be considered:

None, this is an update report.

4.0 Council Priority:

4.1 This report covers all of the Council's priorities.

5.0 Background Information

- 5.1 The Monitoring Officer has been appointed as Proper Officer to receive allegations of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct regarding elected members and co-opted members. The Monitoring Officer has delegated authority, after consultation with an Independent Person, to determine whether an allegation of a member's misconduct requires investigation and to arrange such an investigation.
- 5.2 However, the Monitoring Officer should seek resolution of complaints without formal investigation wherever practicable and has the discretion to refer matters to the Standards Committee where they feel it is inappropriate to take a decision on a referral for investigation. They should also periodically prepare reports for the Standards Committee on the discharge of this function.
- 5.3 It should be noted that there are a number of stages in dealing with reported matters. Some matters are brought to the attention of the Monitoring Officer without merit. In instances where a breach may have been considered to arise and in line with agreed procedures, wherever possible the Monitoring Officer should seek the resolution of complaints without the need for formal investigation.
- 5.4 Periodic reports to the Standards Committee show all the matters which have been brought to the attention of the Monitoring Officer for review, in order that members of the Standards Committee have an appreciation of all matters arising.

Update on standards issues raised

- 5.5 The schedule below sets out the issues raised on a category basis since the last report to the Committee in December 2020.

Failure to register gifts – one councillor. Initial assessment undertaken and independent investigation completed (January/ February 2021). Hearing held in May 2021. Censure action taken – report to Council (Sept 2021).

Conflict of Interest - one Councillor. Dispute over a constituency issue, initial assessment undertaken and Independent Person consulted – No conflict of Interest and no action taken. (January 2021).

Bringing office into dispute – two councillors and a covid-19 complaint – not on council business and also not breaking covid-19 rules. (March 2021)

Bringing office into disrepute – one councillor social media post complaint – posting removed – advice given (December 2021).

5.6 At the last meeting of the committee, it was agreed that a programme of training be held covering social media training and dealing with conflict situations, both areas being provided by North West Employers.

5.7 Social Media training was held over 2 sessions in June 2021 with 18 attendees. The Session covered:

Identifying and finding your audience

Posting on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and using hashtags and tagging

Developing your messages

Building your brand online

A brief overview of algorithms

Building a social network

5.8 Feedback received from the sessions was disappointing from both sessions and no further sessions were arranged. It is recommended that as this is a key area, another provider be sought and this be commissioned as part of a future training programme. Councils in the North West are to be contacted to seek recommendations of a preferred trainer. This could be run following the local elections in 2023.

5.9 Conflict Management training, was held in July 2021 and February 2022 with 15 attending. This was again commissioned via North West Employers.

The session covered:

Identify the causes of conflict and difficult behaviour experienced by Councillors

Understand why conflict exists and how to overcome this

Identify the emotional responses and how they affect outcomes

Understand how to avoid and deflect from possible conflict situations

Identify ways to protect yourself from intimidation

Be able to use positive language and verbal skills to diffuse situations online or face to face

5.10 Feedback from both sessions has been very positive, in terms of content covered and delivery style and indicates that the aims of session were met. It is proposed that this session be run again in the future and would especially be useful for any new councillors following the elections in 2023.

Whistleblowing process

5.11 There have been no accepted allegations submitted under the whistleblowing process.

5.12 Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

5.13 **List of Appendices:**

5.14 None.

6.0 **Legal considerations:**

6.1 None.

7.0 **Human Resources considerations:**

7.1 None, this is an update report.

8.0 **Equalities considerations:**

8.1 None, this is an update report.

9.0 **Financial considerations:**

9.1 Costs of training are covered via the Member Training budget.

10.0 **Risk management considerations:**

10.1 The Council has an agreed complaints handling procedure and code of conduct which sets out the standards expected and the process to be followed with regard to complaints received. Training on code of conduct issues also mitigates any potential breaches in the future.

11.0 **Ethical considerations:**

11.1 None.

12.0 **Internal/ External Consultation undertaken:**

12.1 Yes – on two standards complaints, Independent Persons were consulted and advice sought.

13.0 **Background papers:**

13.1 Exempt.