

JOINT STANDARDS COMPLAINTS COMMITTEE

Date: 18 September 2013

Venue: East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Time: 7.30pm

Present: Councillor Andy Mercer (East Northamptonshire Council) (Chairman)
Councillor Arthur Whittaker (Yarwell Parish Council) (Vice-Chairman)

East Northamptonshire Councillors:

David Jenney
Gill Mercer

Town and Parish Councillors:

John Greig (Titchmarsh Parish Council)
Fiona Cowan (Collyweston Parish Council)
Derek Lawson (Higham Ferrers Town Council)

Vivienne Barnard – Independent Person
Andrew Sortwell – Reserve Independent Person

164. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Joint Standards Complaints Committee held on 19 June 2013 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

165. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from ENC Councillors Pauline Bradberry JP, Bob Nightingale and Brian Northall; Town and Parish Councillors Mike Clements (Raunds Town Council) and David Coleman (Rushden Town Council).

166. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND QUESTIONS

There were no declarations of interest and no questions had been received under procedure rule 10.3.

167. WELCOME TO MR ANDREW SORTWELL

Mr Andrew Sortwell, the Reserve Independent Person, was welcomed to his first meeting of the Committee. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that Mr Sortwell had carried out the role of the primary Independent Person for one month over the summer period.

168. ACTIVITY REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report outlining activity in relation to the Standards Framework in the period from the last meeting of the Committee in June 2013 to date.

The Monitoring Officer reported that there were 23 outstanding registers of interest for Town and Parish Councillors, representing a 93% return rate. The Monitoring Officer was aware of 16 vacancies in Town and Parish Councils within the District. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that she would be contacting the Clerks to Warrington and Twywell Parish Councils to seek the completion of registers as these two Parish Councils had particularly low rates of returns.

It was noted that there were no direct sanctions available to impose on Councillors who had not returned their register of interest. However, a criminal offence could be committed where a matter was considered in which a Councillor had a disclosable pecuniary interest and had not registered that interest and this would have reputational issues for any elected Member involved.

Since the last meeting of the Committee, 13 enquiries had been made with the Monitoring Officer, mostly in relation to the declaration of interests. No requests for dispensations and no new complaints had been received during this period.

An extract from the report issued by the Committee for Standards in Public Life (CSPL) for 2012-13 relating to the standards arrangements in local government was considered and the CSPL would shortly be gathering evidence with a view to reviewing the current arrangements. Members of the Committee were invited to submit any comments on this to the Monitoring Officer.

The Committee was of the view that under the current standards framework, the frequency of its meetings could be reduced without any detrimental effect on its oversight of the standards regime. However, the Committee would need to ensure that it maintained its profile in the standards framework to promote public confidence in it.

The Monitoring Officer undertook to update Members of the Committee on a current Judicial Review challenging the standards regime's compatibility with Articles 6 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and also on feedback from a Monitoring Officers' Conference she would be attending shortly.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

R.4 RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:

That the Terms of Reference for the Committee be amended to

1. require the Committee to meet a minimum of three times per Council year, in February, July and October, and
2. with the consent of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Joint Standards Complaints Committee, additional meetings of the Committee be convened if required.

Chairman