

6 March 2024

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STANDARDS SUB-COMMITTEE

You are summoned to a meeting of the Standards Sub-Committee which will be held in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB on **Friday, 15 March 2024 at 10.00 am.**



Giles Hughes
Chief Executive

To: Members of the Standards Sub-Committee

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt, Andrew Beaney, Joy Aitman, Michele Mead, David Jackson; and Andrew Colling (Independent Person)

Recording of Proceedings – The law allows the public proceedings of Council, Executive, and Committee Meetings to be recorded, which includes filming as well as audio-recording. Photography is also permitted. By participating in this meeting, you are consenting to be filmed.

As a matter of courtesy, if you intend to record any part of the proceedings please let the Democratic Services officers know prior to the start of the meeting.

AGENDA

1. **Election of Chair**
For the Sub-Committee to elect a Chair for the remainder of the municipal year.
2. **Apologies for Absence**
To receive any apologies for absence.

Apologies received from Councillor Poskitt.
3. **Declarations of Interest**
To receive any declarations from Members of the Committee on any items to be considered at the meeting.
4. **Minutes of Previous Meeting (Pages 5 - 8)**
To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2023.
5. **Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules (Pages 9 - 16)**
Purpose
To note the Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules to be followed at this meeting, which form Part 5E of the Council's Constitution.
6. **Exclusion of the Press and Public**
Purpose
For the Sub-Committee to hear any representation and agree whether or not to enter into private session before determining the allegations of breaches of a Town Council Code of Conduct.

If the Sub-Committee wishes to exclude the press and the public from the meeting during consideration of any of the items on the exempt from publication part of the agenda, it will be necessary for the Sub-Committee to pass a resolution in accordance with the provisions of Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that their presence could involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in specific paragraphs of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. The Sub-Committee may maintain the exemption if and so long as, in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.
7. **Determination of Allegation of Breach of the Code of Conduct by Town Councillor #1 (Pages 17 - 104)**
Purpose
To provide the Sub-Committee with the Investigating Officer's report and all associated evidence to enable them to sit as a Local Hearing Panel, to determine the allegation that a Town Councillor breached the Town Council's Code of Conduct for Members.

Recommendations
The Standards Sub-Committee is recommended to follow the Local Hearing Panel Procedure Rules approved for use at this meeting, consider all evidence before them, and:
 1. Determine whether the Town Councillor has breached the code of conduct;

2. If the Sub-Committee determine a breach of the Code, to consider and determine any sanctions that should be imposed upon the Town Councillor and any other appropriate action to be taken.

8. **Determination of Allegation of Breach of the Code of Conduct by Town Councillor #2**
(Pages 105 - 184)

Purpose

To provide the Sub-Committee with the Investigating Officer's report and all associated evidence to enable them to sit as a Local Hearing Panel, to determine the allegation that the Town Councillor breached the Town Council's Code of Conduct for Members.

Recommendation

The Standards Sub-Committee is recommended to follow the Local Hearing Panel Procedure Rules approved for use at this meeting, consider all evidence before them, and:

1. Determine whether the Town Councillor has breached the Woodstock Town Council Code of Conduct;
2. If the Sub-Committee determine a breach of the Code, to consider and determine any sanctions that should be imposed upon the Town Councillor and any other appropriate action to be taken.

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WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards Sub-Committee

Held in the Committee Room 2, Witney at 2.00 pm on **Wednesday, 22 February 2023**

PRESENT

Councillors: Elizabeth Poskitt (Vice-Chair), Andrew Beaney, Norman MacRae MBE and Ruth Smith.

Officers: Susan Sale (Monitoring Officer), Kate Seely (Investigation and Enforcement Manager), Max Thompson (Democratic Services Manager) and Michelle Ouzman (Democratic Services Support Officer).

Other Councillors in attendance: Ben Woodruff - Subject Councillor

Independent Person in attendance: Andrew Colling.

13 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2022 were approved and signed by the Chair.

14 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Luci Ashbourne and Councillor Andy Graham.

Councillor Ruth Smith substituted for Councillor Luci Ashbourne.

Councillor Elizabeth Poskitt who was Vice-Chair, Chaired the meeting in Councillor Luci Ashbourne's absence.

15 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

16 Exclusion of the Press and Public

The Committee **Resolved** that:

- I. In view that the content to be discussed was in, or had been in the public domain, the public were not excluded from the meeting for the remaining business.

17 Determination of Allegation of Breach of the West Oxfordshire District Council

Code of Conduct by a West Oxfordshire District Councillor

The Committee, sitting as the Local Hearing Panel, considered the reports of the Monitoring Officer and the Investigating Officer to determine allegations that the Subject Councillor had breached the West Oxfordshire District Council's Code of Conduct for Members.

The Members of the Standards Sub-Committee followed the Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules approved for use at the meeting.

The Chair introduced the Committee, Independent Person and Officers to all attendees.

The Council's Monitoring Officer outlined the scope of the meeting, and laid out the order of the hearing, and stated that the posts themselves have not been denied by the subject Councillor.

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The Council's Investigating Officer Kate Seeley, outlined the report and explained each social media post which was being discussed as a breach of the Councillors Code of Conduct. Some of the posts were not original posts from the subject Councillor but were a share/re post of content from elsewhere. Posts that had been reposted and shared without a reason, were left open to misinterpretation as no context has been placed on the reposted shared content. The Investigating Officer concluded that overall findings were that these posts and sharing of posts highlighted that the subject Councillor had a lack of awareness, of offending others,

The subject Councillor requested information regarding when the complaints arrived and if they were of a similar nature. The subject Councillor believed he was being politically targeted, and that the hearing was a waste of council time and money.

The Investigating Officer confirmed there were four complaints from different email addresses that arrived in September 2023, and that a further complaint was received in October from another completely separate person. The investigating Officer advised that only one complaint of this nature needed to be reported in order to investigate a breach, and therefore the number that had been received was deemed irrelevant.

Following the Investigating Officers summary, the Chair opened up the meeting for a full discussion, plus questions from the subject Councillor and his supporting person, the Investigating Officer, the Independent Person and the Councillors on the Sub-Committee.

The Monitoring Officer advised those present, that she was there to be able to provide advise if appropriate, and to ensure that the meeting was transparent..

After discussions and questions the Chair asked all those present if they had any more questions or clarifications. All those in attendance requested no further clarification.

The Chair asked all those present except for the Committee, Independent Person and the Monitoring Officer to leave the room, so that they could begin deliberation.

The meeting adjourned for 45 minutes, at the end of which, the panel had reached a verdict.

The Council's Democratic Services Officer informed all those that had left the room that the Sub-Committee had deliberated, reached a conclusion, and could return to the meeting.

The Chair informed those present that Sub-Committee had considered all the evidence laid out in the original documentation report, and listened to the subject councillor's statement.

The Sub-Committee concluded that the Subject Councillor had breached the provisions of the Member's Code of Conduct.

The Sub-Committee determined that sanctions should be imposed.

The Sub-Committee **Resolved** that the subject Councillor had breached the Members Code of Conduct and that the following sanctions should be imposed:

- The subject Councillor is to attend a training session on Equality and Diversity Awareness within three months of the hearing;
- The subject Councillor is to attend a training session on the use of social media within three months of the hearing;
- The subject Councillor should exercise caution and consider wider, potential implications before posting, or reposting or sharing anything on social media; and
- Recommend that the Council's Audit and Governance Committee adopts a Social Media Policy.

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- Recommend to the Audit and Governance Committee that Equality and Diversity awareness training, plus training on the use of social media training, should be held for all Councillors annually, with the first training session held within three months following the upcoming elections in May 2023.

The Meeting closed at 4.40 pm

CHAIR

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5E Standards Sub-Committee Procedure Rules

These procedure rules apply to meetings of the Standards Sub-Committee, or the Audit and Governance Committee, when sitting to hear and determine a member code of conduct complaint referred to it by the Monitoring Officer.

1.0 DEFINITIONS

Complainant(s)	The person/people making the complaint.
Subject Councillor	The Councillor, co-optee, or Town or Parish Councillor against whom an allegation has been made.
Appointed representative	The Subject Councillor may be represented or accompanied during the meeting by a Solicitor, Counsel or, with the permission of the Standards Sub-Committee Members, another person.
Standards Sub-Committee	<p>A Sub-Committee of the Audit and Governance Committee in accordance with the provisions of the <i>Local Government Act 1972</i>.</p> <p>A meeting of the Standards Sub-Committee will consider whether the Subject Councillor has breached the Code of Conduct.</p> <p>A Sub-Committee of the Audit and Governance Committee, in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972.</p> <p>Comprising 5 members of the Audit and Governance Committee, appointed by the Audit and Governance Committee.</p>
Independent Person	An Independent Person will be invited by the Monitoring Officer to attend the Standards Sub-Committee as a Member of the Sub-Committee. Their views are sought and taken into consideration before the Sub-Committee takes any decision on whether the Subject Councillor's conduct constitutes a failure to comply with the Code of Conduct, in accordance with the provisions of the

	<i>Localism Act 2011</i> , and as to any action to be taken following a finding of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct
Investigating Officer	The person appointed by the Monitoring Officer to undertake a formal investigation on behalf of the Monitoring Officer. This person may be another Officer of the Council, an Officer of another Council or an external third party investigator appointed for the purpose.
Investigating Officer's report	The report of the Investigating Officer to the Monitoring Officer, setting out their findings and recommendations in respect of the allegation.
Legal Advisor	The Officer responsible for providing legal advice to the Standards Sub-Committee. This may be the Monitoring Officer, another legally qualified Officer, or an external third party legal advisor appointed for the purpose.
Chair	The Chair of the Standards Sub-Committee elected by that Sub-Committee to chair meetings for the municipal year.
Code	The Members' Code of Conduct for the relevant Authority formally adopted by it at the relevant time.
The Monitoring Officer	The Officer designated as such by West Oxfordshire District Council in accordance with <i>section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989</i> .
Exempt Information	As defined in <i>Section 100A and Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972</i>

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Where the Monitoring Officer considers that it is in the public interest for a complaint to be considered by the Standards Sub-Committee, a Sub-Committee meeting will be convened, to determine whether the Subject Councillor has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer will seek to convene the Sub-Committee meeting within 25 working days of receipt of the final Investigator's report or as soon as practicably possible thereafter. The Standards Sub-Committee will comprise 5 members appointed to that Committee by the Audit and Governance Committee, plus an Independent Person allocated to each meeting on a case by case basis by the Monitoring Officer, to act as a co-opted member of that Sub-Committee. For a meeting of the Standards Sub-Committee to be quorate and proceed, a minimum of three elected members of the Standards Sub-Committee plus an Independent Person must be present.

3.0 PRE-HEARING PROCESS

The Monitoring Officer may invite the Subject Councillor to give a response in writing to the Investigator's report. This is done to establish what is likely to be agreed and what is likely to be in dispute at the hearing.

The Standards Sub-Committee, taking account of the advice of the Monitoring Officer, may issue directions about the way in which a Determination Hearing will be conducted, for example agreeing the number and identity of witnesses. Such directions may be given either before or at the Sub-Committee meeting, and may be decided at a pre-meeting or by correspondence involving all members of the Standards Sub-Committee.

Any pre-meeting to deal with pre-hearing process issues will be held in private without the Complainant or the Subject Councillor present.

4.0 DOCUMENTATION

Standards Sub-Committee meetings are subject to the normal rules for publication of Council Agendas and Access to Information.

The Agenda papers for the Standards Sub-Committee will include:

- Complaint form and documentation
- Subject Councillor's written response
- Investigating Officer's report
- Monitoring Officer report
- For reference: Code of Conduct, Standards Committee Local Hearing Panel Procedure Rules

The Agenda and documents will be published under the Council's rules for exempt information. Prior to the Sub-Committee meeting, any documentation issued or exchanged during the process must be treated by all recipients as confidential unless and until the Sub-Committee resolves that the press and public should be excluded from the meeting at which the allegations are going to be heard.

If the Sub-Committee agrees that the meeting should be held in public, the Investigating Officer's report will be made available to the press and public in attendance at the meeting. The Chair may, at their discretion, allow a short adjournment of the meeting to enable them to read the report.

5.0 DETERMINATION HEARING PROCEDURE

5.1 The Standards Sub-Committee will follow usual Committee procedures for apologies, and declarations of interests. The meeting shall be chair by the elected Chair, or their

deputy in their absence. In the absence of both the Chair and the Deputy, the Sub-Committee will elect a Chair for that particular meeting.

- 5.2 The quorum for a Sub-Committee meeting will be 3 elected Members. Substitute Members are allowed only from the membership of the Audit and Governance Committee Members will only be able to sit on the Standards Sub Committee for a Determination Hearing if they have undertaken standards training.
- 5.3 The Sub-Committee will be assisted on matters of law and procedure by the Legal Advisor. The Sub-Committee may take legal advice, in private, if necessary, from the Legal Advisor at any time during the hearing or while they are considering the outcome. The substance of any legal advice given should be shared with the Subject Councillor and the Investigating Officer.
- 5.4 The hearing will normally be held in public. However, the Sub-Committee will consider, having regard to any representations made by the Investigating Officer and / or by the Subject Councillor and advice from the Legal Advisor as to the public interest, whether to hear the matter, after the passing of a resolution to exclude the press and public from the meeting. Any such resolution may only be passed on the grounds set out in *Section 100A and Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972*.
- 5.5 The Subject Councillor may be represented or accompanied by Counsel or a Solicitor or, with the permission of the Sub-Committee, any other person.
- 5.6 Normal hearing rules will apply in terms of providing opportunities to question witnesses and test evidence, subject to the principles of natural justice and the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 5.7 If the Subject Councillor (or their appointed representative) is not present, then the Sub-Committee will consider whether to proceed and hear the case and make a decision in absence, or whether to adjourn the hearing to another time or date. If the Subject Councillor has indicated that the hearing should continue in the absence of the Subject Councillor, this will normally happen.
- 5.8 The Chair will introduce the Members of the Sub-Committee, the Independent Person, the Legal Advisor, the Investigating Officer, the Subject Councillor and any other persons present.
- 5.9 The Legal Advisor will give a brief outline of the allegation before the Sub-Committee, namely that the Subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, and outline the procedure to be followed and confirm that those present understand it.
- 5.10 The Investigating Officer will present the report into the allegation against the Subject Councillor including any findings of fact and make representations to substantiate the conclusion that the Subject Councillor has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct.
- 5.11 The Subject Councillor (or their representative) may question the Investigating Officer.
- 5.12 The Sub-Committee Members may question the Investigating Officer.

- 5.13 The Investigating Officer may call such witnesses as necessary (which may or may not include the Complainant).
- 5.14 The Subject Councillor (or their appointed representative) may question any witnesses called by the Investigating Officer.
- 5.15 The Sub-Committee Members may question any witnesses called by the Investigating Officer.
- 5.16 The Investigating Officer may ask further questions of any witnesses in order to clarify any point brought out in questioning of the witness by the Subject Councillor or the Sub-Committee.
- 5.17 The Subject Councillor (or their appointed representative) will present the case in relation to the Investigating Officer's findings and make representations about why the Subject Councillor considers that they did not fail to comply with the Code of Conduct. If the Subject Councillor admits that they breached the Code of Conduct the Sub-Committee may move to paragraph 5.32 below.
- 5.18 The Investigating Officer may question the Subject Councillor.
- 5.19 The Sub-Committee may question the Subject Councillor.
- 5.20 The Subject Councillor may call any witnesses.
- 5.21 The Investigating Officer may question any witness called by the Subject Councillor.
- 5.22 The Sub-Committee may question any witness called by the Subject Councillor.
- 5.23 The Subject Councillor may ask further questions of any witness in order to clarify any point brought out in questioning of the witness by the Investigating Officer or the Standards Sub-Committee.
- 5.24 The Independent Person may ask questions of the Investigating Officer, the Subject Councillor and any witness called by either of them, after such persons have been questioned by the Standards Sub-Committee.
- 5.25 The Investigating Officer will sum up the case in relation to the findings in their report.
- 5.26 The Subject Councillor (or their appointed representative) will sum up the case in relation to the findings in the Investigating Officer's report of whether there has been a breach of the Code.
- 5.27 The Independent Person will give their views to the Sub-Committee and these will be recorded in the Minutes of the meeting.
- 5.28 The Sub-Committee will then retire with the Legal Advisor. If the hearing has been in public the Committee will need to pass a resolution under *Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972* to exclude the public from the meeting. The Sub-Committee must take into account the views of the Independent Person before reaching a decision. Decisions will be determined by a simple majority of those Members present and voting; the Independent Person does not have a vote. Where there are equal

numbers of votes for and against the Chair will have a second casting vote and there is no restriction on how the Chairman chooses to exercise a casting vote.

- 5.29 The Sub-Committee will announce their decision as to whether there has been a breach of the Code in the presence of all parties, and this will normally be after passing a resolution that the public should no longer be excluded from the meeting. The Sub-Committee will provide reasons for their decision and will explain any reasons why any advice from the Independent Person has or has not been followed in giving its decision.
- 5.30 If the Sub-Committee decide that the Subject Councillor has not breached the Code, they shall dismiss the complaint and take no further action. However, they may still make general recommendations to the Council, its Audit and Governance Committee, the Monitoring Officer, or the Town or Parish Council, on any remedial actions, if it considers necessary to address the issues raised.
- 5.31 If the Sub-Committee decide that the Subject Member has breached the Code then the following paragraphs will apply.
- 5.32 The Sub-Committee may request, or allow, the Complainant, whether or not called as a witness, to make a statement in relation to the effect on the Complainant of any conduct of the Subject Councillor which is the subject of the breach. Such a statement may be made in person to the Sub-Committee or may be submitted in writing, but if submitted in writing, will be shown to both the Investigating Officer, the Subject Councillor and the Independent Person. A Complainant who makes such a statement may be questioned by the Sub-Committee, but may not be questioned in relation to the statement by the Investigating Officer or the Subject Councillor without the consent of the Sub-Committee.
- 5.33 The Investigating Officer may make representations as to whether the Sub-Committee should impose a sanction and what form any sanction should take.
- 5.34 The Sub-Committee may question the Investigating Officer in relation to any such representations.
- 5.35 The Subject Councillor (or their appointed representative) may make representations as to whether the Sub-Committee should impose a sanction and what form any sanction should take and may make representations as to mitigation.
- 5.36 The Sub-Committee may question the Subject Councillor in relation to any such representations.
- 5.37 The Legal Advisor will then raise any points that need to be addressed before the matter is determined.
- 5.38 The Independent Person will then give their views on the appropriate sanction, if any, to be imposed and their views will be recorded in the Minutes of the meeting.
- 5.39 The Sub-Committee will then retire with the Legal Advisor. If the hearing has been in public the Sub-Committee will need to pass a resolution under *Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972* to exclude the public from the meeting.

5.40 The Sub-Committee will come to a decision as to sanctions. Any sanction imposed must be reasonable and proportionate to the breach found and the Legal Advisor may advise the Sub-Committee in this regard. The Sub-Committee has no power to suspend or disqualify the member or to withdraw or suspend allowances. The Sub-Committee may:

- Censure or reprimand the Subject Councillor;
- Recommend to the Subject Councillor's Group Leader (or in the case of ungrouped members, recommend to Council or to Committees) that he/she be removed from any or all Committees or Sub-Committees of the Council;
- Recommend to the Leader of the Council that the Subject Councillor be removed from the Executive or removed from particular Executive Portfolio responsibilities;
- Recommend to Council that the Subject Councillor be replaced as Executive Leader of the Council;
- Instruct the Monitoring Officer to, or recommend that a Town or Parish Council, arrange training for the Subject Councillor;
- Publish its findings in respect of the Subject Councillor's conduct;
- Report its findings to Council, or to a Town or Parish Council, for information.

The above is not exhaustive.

5.41 The Sub-Committee will announce its decision in the presence of all parties, and this will normally be after passing a resolution that the public should no longer be excluded from the meeting. The Sub-Committee will give reasons for its decision and will explain the reasons why any advice from the Independent Person has or has not been followed in giving its decision.

5.42 The Monitoring Officer will, within 10 working days of the Sub-Committee meeting prepare a formal Decision Notice, and send a copy to the Complainant, to the Investigating Officer and to the Subject Councillor (and to the Town or Parish Council if appropriate). The Decision Notice will be published as part of the Minutes of the Sub-Committee meeting and will be placed on the Council's website, regardless of whether the Sub-Committee excluded the press and public for the meeting or not, unless the Monitoring Officer determines that it should remain confidential.

5.43 The findings and recommendations of the Sub-Committee are final and there is no right of appeal against the decision of the Standards Sub-Committee.

5.44 The Chair of the Sub-Committee has the right to depart from this procedure, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, or Legal Advisor, at any determination hearing where it is considered it is sensible to do so, to deal with the case fairly, effectively and in the public interest, provided that the principles of natural justice are upheld.

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