

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