

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2023 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Mr Peter Tucker (Chair); Councillors Austin, J Bayford, Crittenden, Fellows, Ovenden and Peter Lorenzo (Independent Member of the Standards Committee)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Michael Clarke.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Mr Tucker proposed, Councillor Crittenden seconded and members AGREED that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2022 be approved, and signed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. KEY DECISION DEFINITION

Nicholas Hughes, Committee Services Manager, introduced the report making the following key points:

- The report looked at the key decision thresholds.
- As part of the review of the Independent Monitoring Officer (IMO) it was recommended to review the scheme of delegations to ensure that it was considered clear and easy to understand, including appropriate conditions requiring engagement of Councillors in strategic decisions.
- A current definition of a key decision was outlined within the report.
- The main definition of a key decision was noted as anything over £250,000 expenditure. By having a specific amount of money, there would be little room for questioning regarding what a key decision would be classed as.
- Four other Councils in Kent had set their threshold at £250,000.

Members then discussed the report and made the following points:

- The sum of £300,000 seemed more appropriate given market prices in 2023.
- When would the Council next look at reviewing £250,000 as a sum of the key decision threshold?
- The clarification of the key decision definition was welcomed by Members.

Nicholas Hughes responded to Members comments and questions with the following points:

- In other Councils in Kent £250,000 was the most popular sum. It was difficult to know when other Councils had reviewed this part of the constitution.
- The definition could be reviewed in no less than 18 months time from the point of the meeting.

Councillor Crittenden proposed option 2 within the report, 'Which is likely to have an annual expenditure of less than £250,000, but has a total contract value over the lifetime of the contract of over £750,000,' with the amendment that there would be a review of the financial definition of £250,000 within a period of 2 years after the meeting.

Councillor Bayford proposed, Councillor Ovenden seconded and Members agreed.

5. REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S POLICY FRAMEWORK

Nicholas Hughes introduced the report making the following key points:

- This report was the other half of the engagement of Councillors in strategic and high risk decisions.
- Every Council had a policy framework, all Councillors are allowed to have a vote on these at a Full Council meeting. This was of great importance.
- The amended and suggested framework was noted within the report. This included removing the local transport plan, housing investment programme and the food law enforcement service plan.
- This would be replaced with the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, Housing Assistance Policy, HRA Business Plan and the Treasury Management Strategy.

Members then discussed the report and made the following points:

- The Food Law Enforcement Service Plan was noted to already have expired in 2020.

Nicholas Hughes responded that the Food Law Enforcement Service Plan may not have shown up on previous agenda's due to the item having confidential information.

It was proposed by Councillor Austin, seconded by Councillor Bayford and Members agreed the proposed changes in the Review of the Council's Policy Framework report be adopted.

6. AMENDMENTS COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES REGARDING FREQUENCY OF QUESTIONS

Nicholas Hughes introduced the report making the following key points:

- Theoretically, the constitution allows members of the press and public to put an identical word for word question already submitted by a Councillor in for Full Council meetings. This was interchangeable, with the constitution also allowing Councillors to put an identical word for word question as a member of the press and public.
- The amendment meant that the wording within the constitution was tweaked, therefore a question would not be accepted and asked within the 6 month period if it had already been asked by either a Councillor or member of the press and public.
- There had been an increase in questions over the last few meetings from May 2023.

Members then discussed the report and made the following points:

- Time was limited, as noted within the constitution, at Full Council for both members of the public and Councillors to ask questions. It was fair that people get to ask different questions.

- There was questioning whether it should be a 6 month period for asking the same question, or if this should be reduced to 4 months.

It was proposed by Councillor Austin, seconded by Councillor Bayford and Members agreed the amendment in the report Amendments of Council Procedure Rules Regarding Frequency of Questions.

7. STANDARDS COMPLAINT STATISTICS

The committee discussed the statistics and made the following points:

- When there was a 'no further action' result, it would be positive for the complainant to be told as soon as possible, possibly through a phone call and with a follow up email. This could be a stressful time for those involved.
- It was important to look into the media policy further to gain clarification and strengthen the policy.

Ingrid Brown, Head of Legal and Democracy & Monitoring Officer, responded with the following points:

- A phone call with a 'no further action' result could be made.
- The media policy would be looked into further, the previous Monitoring Officer had begun this work.

Members noted the item.

Meeting concluded : 7.43 pm