

Present:	Councillor Geoff Ellis (<i>in the Chair</i>)
Councillors:	Chris Burke, Brent Charlesworth, Ronald Hills, David Jackson, Rosanne Kirk, Hilton Spratt and Ralph Toofany
Independent Person:	Russell Pond
Also in Attendance:	Rodney Booth (Reserve Independent Person) Chris Elkington (Reserve Independent Person)

11. Confirmation of Minutes - 12 December 2012

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2012 be confirmed.

12. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were received.

13. Code of Conduct: Cases Review

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services:

- a. presented a report containing information on recent cases relating to other local authorities' codes of conduct.
- b. highlighted that members should identify any issues raised within the report as being relevant for further consideration with regard to their impact upon members of the Council.
- c. invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- noted the case relating to the involvement of a council leader with freedom of information requests.
- discussed the scope available to members for political debate, noting the line between robust and offensive language. The need for effective chairing was noted, as was the potential for standards complaints to be politically motivated.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services responded that:

- any interaction between elected members and officers dealing with freedom of information requests should not allow control over the response to be ceded to elected members.

- the provisions of the Localism Act 2011 gave the Monitoring Officer the power, in consultation with the Independent Person, to place limits upon vexatious complaints and to refer matters to the Committee wherever necessary.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

14. **E-Democracy**

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services and the Democratic Services Officer:

- a. presented a report summarising the Council's current use of modern technology in democratic services.
- b. explained that the Council was procuring a replacement for its committee management IT system, as its current system had not been under active development for a number of years.
- c. noted that the replacement committee management system would allow, among other things, members to download and view their agenda papers on a tablet computer, and could potentially enable significant savings in printing and postage, as well as an environmental benefit.
- d. highlighted that councillors had access to an e-learning website, which was not widely used and was allocated a significant proportion of the member development budget; members' views on its continuation were therefore sought.
- e. invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- noted their previous positive experiences with paperless agendas and the intuitive manner in which tablet computers could be operated, even by those with relatively limited experience of computers.
- discussed the Council's current provision of electronic agendas, noting the previous difficulty in navigating large agendas and questioning whether Microsoft tablet computers would be supported.
- raised concerns about the likely cost of providing tablet computers to members, including the potential risk and additional costs in the event of the computers being lost.
- considered the manner in which paperless agendas could be trialled, including the advisability of using the Committee as a starting point for any trial.
- discussed the potential complexity of paperless working for councillors who were not from a professional background; while the move towards electronic working was to be supported, the imposition of a potential barrier for ordinary people should be considered.
- advised that the e-learning package should be discontinued, with funds diverted towards development activities which would benefit a greater number of

councillors.

The Democratic Services Officer responded that:

- using the new system, committee papers could be accessed directly through Android and iPad tablet computers, which accounted for approximately 95% of those sold in the UK; Microsoft tablets were not currently supported. The Council currently only provided iPads, but the provision of Android tablets would be discussed with IT officers.
- even incorporating the cost of providing tablet computers to members and any mitigation of the risk of loss through insurance, the Council could expect to make significant savings through paperless agendas over the course of a councillor's four-year term.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services noted that for the purposes of the trial, it would be possible to provide tablet computers to committee members to enable them to offer feedback on the use of the new committee management system.

RESOLVED that:

1. members' interest in taking part in a trial for paperless agendas be noted.
2. officers be requested to cancel the Council's e-learning service for councillors.

15. **Councillors' Use of Social Media**

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services:

- a. presented a proposed protocol covering the use of social media by councillors.
- b. noted that the protocol was provided in response to requests by councillors who required additional guidance on the use of online social media, including services such as Facebook and Twitter.
- c. explained that a consultation had been undertaken with members in advance of the Committee's consideration of the protocol, and that responses had emphasised the new opportunities for public engagement offered by social media as well as the need for clear guidelines.
- d. emphasised the need, in addition to any guidance, for members to exercise common sense in engaging with social media.
- e. invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- noted the varying perceptions associated with different kinds of electronic devices

in meetings, with smaller devices, including mobile phones, more likely to be viewed by members of the public as being used improperly.

- highlighted that the use of pseudonyms would often allow councillors to avoid effective oversight.
- discussed the particular legal and political risks associated with social media, and requested guidance on the extent to which councillors' statements were protected by qualified privilege.
- considered the benefits that social media could bring, particularly through encouraging interaction with different sections of the community.
- debated the extent to which social media was used in community groups across the city, noting that social media could not replace face-to-face contact with residents.
- discussed broader topics relating to the perceived professionalisation of councillors, with a particular emphasis on the increased focus upon member development in recent years.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services responded that a report was scheduled to be considered at the next meeting of the Committee which would address the Council's approach to member development.

RESOLVED that:

1. a briefing note on qualified privilege be requested.
2. the social media protocol be circulated for members' attention pending the approval of guidance regarding qualified privilege.

16. **Independent Person Protocol**

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services:

- a. presented a report proposing the adoption of a protocol governing the role of the Council's Independent Person.
- b. noted that the protocol had been developed in accordance with the Council's particularly inclusive approach to involving the Independent Person in its operations wherever appropriate.
- c. invited members' questions and comments.

The Independent Person:

- requested that the attendance of the Independent Person at meetings of the Council be incorporated within the protocol, including with reference to their receipt of agendas, incorporation in minutes, and seating arrangements at the Guildhall.
- advised that the position of the Independent Person with relation to exempt information should be clarified.
- suggested that the Independent Person's access to Council buildings should be

altered to ensure prior permission was not required.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services responded that the Independent Person's views would be incorporated into the final protocol.

RESOLVED that the Independent Person Protocol be approved subject to the incorporation of the points highlighted above.

17. **Work Programme Update**

The Democratic Services Officer:

- a. presented the current Ethics and Engagement Committee work programme for consideration by members.
- b. noted the addition of an item relating to the provision of citizenship lessons within local schools, which was scheduled for consideration at the next meeting, and requested members' input on the manner in which the item would be considered.
- c. invited members' questions and comments.

Members:

- noted the value of effective engagement with local schools and the value in understanding the current position of citizenship lessons.
- discussed the conducting of school councils at the Guildhall and the positive contribution these could make to young people's understanding of local democracy.
- considered whether the inclusion of a work programme item relating to increasing the diversity of electoral candidates encroached upon the exclusive realm of political parties or was a necessary step in ensuring, among other things, that local residents were aware of how to become a councillor.

The Assistant Director of Legal and Corporate Support Services responded that:

- school councils were still conducted in the Guildhall, although one had yet to take place in the current year.
- the work programme item relating to the diversity of electoral candidates was in no way meant to dictate the policies of political parties and would be re-worded to ensure this was clear. The topic had been included as support for the relevant strand of the Council's Strategic Plan.

RESOLVED that:

1. members' comments regarding the work programme be noted.
2. appropriate teacher and pupil representatives from a local school be invited to the next meeting to discuss the provision of citizenship lessons and activities.