

Standards Committee 10 October 2017

SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT OF CO-OPTED MEMBERS OF STANDARDS COMMITTEE

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Wards affected: All

PROPOSED DECISION

To co-opt the two Town/Parish Councillors whose names will be provided at the meeting onto the Standards Committee to fill the two existing vacancies for Parish/Town Council Co-opted members (not-voting) on Standards Committee.

Reason for Decision

There are three co-opted member places (non-voting) on Standards Committee; at present, only one place is filled, by Parish Cllr Andy Cobden. The Wycombe District Association of Local Councils (WDALC) has previously advanced candidate names to WDC for acceptance after undertaking a screening process but on this occasion WDALC has been unable to do so. Following an approach direct to the Clerks, three candidates applied for the two roles and after interview by the Monitoring Officer and Independent Persons the two candidates above are recommended to be co-opted onto the Committee. Appointing to the two remaining places will mean that there will no longer be any vacancies.

Corporate Implications

1. Section 27 of the Localism Act 2011 places a duty on the Council to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members, and WDC has chosen to set up its Standards Committee as part of its arrangements to discharge this duty. When Council set up the Committee in 2012, it was resolved that it would be comprised of eight WDC members (voting), its two Independent Persons (non-voting) and three co-opted members (non-voting) selected from the parish and town councils in the district.

Executive Summary

2. It is recommended that the two proposed candidates are co-opted onto the Standards Committee in order to ensure that all places on the Committee are now filled.

Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications

3. Having a robust Standards Committee with all places filled, including its co-opted places, supports the Council's priorities in its Corporate Plan by helping to ensure that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and principles of good governance.

Background and Issues

4. When the Standards Committee in its current format was set up in 2012, as the Localism Act 2011 came into force, the Council resolved to form the Committee of 8 WDC members (voting, and politically balanced) its two duly appointed Independent Persons (non-voting) and three parish council co-optees (non-voting). For current purposes, parish councillors also includes town councillors. All Parish and Town Council members are already bound by the terms of their Councils' own Codes of Conduct. These may differ slightly from the WDC Member Code of Conduct, as from 2012 there is no longer a national model Code, but all will be based on similar principles as set out by the Localism Act 2011 and the "Nolan principles" on conduct in public life.
5. Whilst there is no "job description" as such for co-opted members, their overall function is to broadly bring additional views from a local level to the Committee's meetings and work, to provide a degree of scrutiny to its work and decisions, and to help support its objectives by bringing their experience and diversity to the table.
6. The law does not set out any general qualifications for co-opted members, but in practice, from a Standards point of view, and whilst there is no longer any strict statutory requirement as to the specific composition of a Standards Committee, WDC's practices are in keeping with the approach taken by most District Councils, and co-optees generally are intended to give undertake the functions outlined above, helping the Standards Committee to uphold high ethical standards.
7. On 12 November 2012 the Standards Committee resolved that Parish Councillors D Banfield, J Sherlock and Mrs V Smith be co-opted onto it. All had been promoted by WDALC and as full Council had resolved on 31 July 2012 that the Parish Councils be invited to nominate up to three names, there was no need to refer back to full Council for approval. Following periodic resignations, Cllr Andy Cobden was put forward by WDALC and co-opted onto the Committee in 2015.
8. Cllr Smith resigned in 2015. The recent death of Parish Councillor Brian Swain meant that there were now two out of three co-opted member vacancies. Unfortunately due to its lack of a current Chair and Clerk, WDALC was unable to put forward candidates for WDC's approval. Accordingly, in an effort to seek candidates, a direct approach was made to the clerks of all the parish and town councils in the district. This resulted in a total of five names being put forward as candidates. Two candidates withdrew prior to applying, so three candidates remained for two places. In place of any screening or selection process previously carried out by WDALC, an interview process similar to the one undertaken by North Hertfordshire District Council has been followed. Interviews were conducted by a panel comprised of the Monitoring Officer and Independent Persons. Appendix 1 to this report shows the selection criteria adopted. At interview, the recommended candidates were considered to show the most appropriate experience, interest and aptitude for the roles. Character references were also sought for all candidates.

9. Whilst the decision on composition of the Committee was for full Council to make, the Standards Committee can itself determine the individuals to fill the co-opted vacancies.

Options

10. The option is to fill the roles, or not to fill them. The latter option would mean that the Committee would continue to operate with an incomplete quantity of co-opted members, and consequently would have less opportunity to benefit from the input, scrutiny and views of members at parish and town level on standards and ethics issues. A different selection could be made, but though all candidates possessed strong characteristics fitting them for the role, the two recommended are considered to be overall the most fitted for it and the Independent Persons have had an input into the process. It is therefore recommended that the roles be filled by the two recommended candidates.

Conclusions

11. Approving the co-opted members as recommended will mean that moving forward the Committee will have a full complement of membership to strengthen its resilience and inform its decision making.

Next Steps

12. The recommended candidates will be invited to the meeting, and following approval will take their places as non-voting co-opted members.

Background Papers

None.