

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

11 March 2026 at 1.30pm

Present:

Councillor K. Franks (Chair)

Councillors H. Ayres, I. Fuller, B. Massey, M. Steel, A. Thompson and
S. Young

Also in attendance –

Independent Person –
Ms P. Mills

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Independent Persons C. Gossling and P. Jeremiah.

2. Declarations of Interest

All Members were reminded to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests or other registerable interests where appropriate in any items of business on the meeting's agenda, none were made.

3. Chair's Announcements

No Announcements were received.

4. Standards Complaints 8/25 Hearing Report

The Chair explained the processes under the hearing procedure at Part 5.1.2 Annex 5 of the Constitution. Those present were informed that after hearing the necessary information, the Committee would consider the information in private and determine whether the code had been breached. The Committee noted that this hearing was in relation to Complaint 8/25 which was about the alleged disrespectful tone and behaviour of City Councillor Paul Clark against the complainant.

The Committee noted that Appendices 3 and 4 to the agenda contained confidential information. The Committee agreed that any discussion relating to these documents would take place in Part 2. It was therefore agreed that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for any discussions concerning Appendices 3 and 4, on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information falling within paragraphs 1 and 2 of Part 1 of

Schedule 12A to the Act (Information relating to any individual and Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual).

The Committee noted that Councillor Paul Clark was not in attendance at the hearing. The Committee was advised that he had been given the full agenda and all associated documents and had stated that he would not be attending. The Committee agreed to proceed with the hearing in his absence.

At this point of the hearing, the Committee received the report of the Investigator, Mr John Austin. The Committee heard that the published report contained the full details of the investigation and the evidence considered, and that the report set out the Investigator's findings in relation to the allegation referred to the Committee for determination. The Committee was informed that the complaint concerned an incident on 5th June 2025 in which Councillor Paul Clark had attended the Council offices unannounced and had spoken to the complainant in a manner that the complainant described as hostile, dismissive and disrespectful. It was noted that the Investigator had interviewed the complainant, the complainant's line manager and two colleagues who had witnessed the incident, and that their accounts had been consistent in describing behaviour that they felt was uncomfortable, demeaning and discouraging for staff.

The Committee was advised that Councillor Paul Clark had declined invitations to meet with the Investigator but had provided limited responses by email after the completion of the investigation report, in which they denied the allegations and questioned the fairness of the process. The Committee noted the Investigator's conclusion that the witnesses were credible and that their evidence supported the complainant's account.

The Investigator emphasised that in a complaint of this nature, there was no hard evidence in the form of written or recorded material and that the assessment depended on weighing the testimonies and evidence provided by the complainant and the witnesses. After considering all statements, the Investigator found the evidence to be credible and consistent. They added that it was rare for officers, particularly those who were not senior, to feel the need to submit a complaint against a councillor, and that doing so required courage and was not something undertaken lightly.

The Committee was informed that the Investigator found that Councillor Paul Clark had acted disrespectfully towards the complainant in breach of paragraph 1.2 of the Code of Conduct.

In response to questions from the Committee, the Investigator stated that:

- The matter was regarded as serious because officers required a professional working relationship with councillors, and concerns of this nature needed to be addressed early to prevent patterns of behaviour developing. It was noted that this behaviour was not within the culture of the organisation.
- the original complaint was reflected in the investigation report, and a third witness mentioned early in the process had been interviewed but they felt they did not have sufficient information to contribute to the investigation report.

- A previous incident involving the interruption of an online meeting had resulted in a reminder being issued to all councillors about the need to make an appointment before attending the office.
- Although the subject member repeatedly requested “evidence,” he did not wish to meet with the Investigator to discuss the witness statements available.

Mr Austin did not call the complainant or witnesses to give oral evidence, as their evidence is contained in the investigation report, but the Committee asked the complainant, two witnesses and the complainant’s supervisor various questions.

The Investigator was invited to summarise the case. The Committee was reminded of the Investigator’s findings, and they confirmed they had nothing further to add.

The Committee heard from the Independent Person who stated that Councillor Paul Clark had only made comments after the investigators report had been completed and that the tone of his responses were potentially sarcastic and dismissive, although noted that this was hard to prove from a written email. It was added that the Councillors refusal to engage with the process was considered frustrating and disrespectful to the Code of Conduct.

The Committee retired to determine the complaint in private at 2.54pm

The meeting resumed in open session at 3.35pm. The Committee confirmed that they had come to the following findings:

Following consideration of all evidence presented at the hearing:

The Committee agreed that the subject member **did fail** to comply with the Code of Conduct. The Committee found that the subject member had failed to comply with paragraph 1.2 of the Code of Conduct, which states, “I treat local authority employees, employees and representatives of partner organisations and those volunteering for the local authority with respect and respect the role they play.” The Committee also found that the subject member had breached paragraph 8.2 of the Code of Conduct, which required councillors to cooperate with any Code of Conduct investigation and determination.

The Committee retired to determine the potential sanctions for the failure to comply with the code of conduct.

The Committee resumed the meeting and confirmed the following sanctions as set out in Section 8 of the Complaints Procedure. That the Committee:

- Publish its findings in respect of the Councillor’s conduct.
- Recommend to Council that the Councillor be issued with a formal censure.
- Instruct the Monitoring Officer to arrange training for the Councillor, specifically relating to the ‘Councillor Code of Conduct’ and ‘Protocol for Relationships between Councillors and Officers’
- Exclude the Councillor from the Council’s Offices or other premises, with the exception of meeting rooms and the members area as necessary for attending Council, Committee and Sub-Committee meetings for a period of 12 months, reduced to 6 months upon compliance with the attendance at the training arranged under No. 3 above.

(1.35pm to 4.20pm)

5. Urgent Business

There were no matters of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 4.21pm

Chair