
Standards Panel MINUTES

**Of a meeting held in the Penn Chamber, Three Rivers House, Rickmansworth, on
Monday, 7 September 2026 from 2pm**

Present: Councillors

Oliver Cooper, Stephen Cox, Ian Morris, Louise Price, Ciaran Reed and Narinder Sian

Also in Attendance: Councillors

Christopher Alley, Ian Campbell, Oliver Cooper and Vicky Edwards

Officers in Attendance:

Alison Betts – Associate Director for Finance

Jonathan Boyle – Deputy Monitoring Officer

Lucy Smith – Committee and Electoral Services Manager

External in Attendance:

Alex Oram – Ch&I Associates

Kenneth Lee – Independent Person

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Councillor Reed proposed and Councillor Price seconded, that Councillor Cox be appointed Chair for the meeting. On being put to the vote, the motion was carried.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Cox be appointed as Chair for the meeting.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Reed declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 4 as a member of the Conservative Group.

Councillor Price declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 4 as a member of the Liberal Democrat Group and as an attendee of the meeting discussed.

3 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Panel considered whether the press and public should be excluded from the meeting and determined that the meeting should remain public.

RESOLVED:

That the press and public not be excluded from the meeting.

4 ASSESSMENT OF A CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINT

The Complaint

The Panel confirmed that it had read the agenda report and in the independent investigation report concerning alleged breaches of the Council's Member Code of Conduct by Councillors Christopher Alley, Ian Campbell, Oliver Cooper and Vicky Edwards.

Alex Oram, Investigating Officer, presented the investigation report, summarised the complaints, the evidence considered and the conclusions reached, and thanked those who had assisted with the investigation.

The Subject Members and the Panel questioned the Investigating Officer. The discussion included the decision taken in November 2025 to consider the Local Plan report in private; the statutory basis and legal advice relied upon at that meeting; whether the report retained the necessary quality of confidence when similar information was already in the public domain, whether the information was capable of affecting land values or otherwise related to financial or business affairs; and the routes available to Members who wished to challenge the decision to treat the report as confidential.

The Investigating Officer explained that the investigation was concerned with the subsequent disclosure of the Council document rather than a reconsideration of the November 2025 procedural decision. In his view, the report remained a confidential Council document at the time it was published. He advised that prior publication of similar information did not, of itself, remove the report's confidential status.

The Panel also considered the requirement in paragraph 4 of the Code of Conduct to consult the Monitoring Officer before disclosing confidential information. The Subject Members relied upon the objections and discussion which had taken place at the November meeting. The Investigating Officer did not consider that this amounted to the specific consultation stipulated by the Code.

Members were asked to note an error in regard to Councillor Cooper's occupation, erroneously stated as solicitor rather than lawyer.

The Councillors' Case

Councillor Cooper speaking on his behalf, submitted that the subject Members had acted collectively and in good faith. He stated that they considered the original decision to exclude the press and public to be unlawful, that their confidence in the use of Part 2 information in this instance had been undermined, and that the public interest justified disclosure. He also relied upon Local Government Association guidance on disclosure in the public interest and maintained that concerns had been raised with the Monitoring Officer at the November meeting.

Councillor Edwards said that she did not consider the information to be confidential in substance, as significant information was already in the public domain and developers were already aware of the relevant matters. She said that publication had not been immediate, that the group had considered whether disclosure was justified, and that the purpose was to enable residents to understand the Local Plan position and to respond to what the group considered to be misleading political material.

Councillor Campbell said that the intention had been to provide clarity in the public interest and not to act maliciously. He said that the Subject Members considered that publication

would assist residents in understanding the Council's Local Plan position and would demonstrate the basis for their political statements.

Councillor Alley said that the publication had been a specific response to material issued by the Liberal Democrat Group and was not part of a wider practice of disclosing confidential information. He said that the decision had been considered carefully, that the group believed the public interest test was met, and that there had been no malicious intent.

In questioning the Subject Members, the Panel explored the distinction between information already in the public domain and publication of the restricted Council report itself; the extent of any consultation with the Monitoring Officer; the timing of the disclosure; and whether publication was reasonable, in the public interest, made in good faith and compliant with the Council's reasonable requirements.

Summing Up

In summing up, the Investigating Officer advised that the Panel should determine whether the conditions in paragraph 4 of the Code had been met. He did not consider that the public interest justification had been established, considered the consultation with the Monitoring Officer to have been insufficient, and remained of the view that the Code had been breached.

Councillor Cooper reiterated that substantive concerns about the use of confidential business had been raised with the Monitoring Officer at the November meeting and maintained that the Subject Members considered this sufficient consultation in the circumstances.

The Independent Person confirmed that nothing heard during the meeting had changed his view. He considered that the report remained restricted at the time it was published, notwithstanding that it was expected to become public shortly afterwards, and that insufficient steps had been taken to seek the Monitoring Officer's approval or advice before disclosure. He supported the Investigating Officer's conclusion that the Code had been breached.

Power of the Panel to Retire

The Panel retired in private to deliberate on whether there were any disputed facts and found none. The Panel then retired in private to deliberate on its findings, in consultation with the Independent Person, and returned to the meeting at 5.51pm.

Decision

The Chair announced that the Panel had found that Councillors Christopher Alley, Ian Campbell, Oliver Cooper and Vicky Edwards had breached paragraph 4 of the Council's Member Code of Conduct.

Before determining what action should be taken, the Panel heard representations on aggravating and mitigating factors. The Panel took account of the Subject Members' strongly held concerns, their evidence that the decision had not been taken lightly, the absence of malicious intent, their differing levels of involvement and the fact that the report was expected to enter the public domain shortly afterwards. It also took account of the deliberate publication of a document clearly marked as restricted, the absence of sufficient consultation with the Monitoring Officer and the importance of maintaining confidence that confidential information provided to Members would be protected.

The Chair stated that the Panel considered the action determined to be at the lowest end of the available sanctions.

RESOLVED:

That Councillors Christopher Alley, Ian Campbell, Oliver Cooper and Vicky Edwards had breached paragraph 4 of the Council's Member Code of Conduct; and

That the Panel's finding in respect of the Subject Members' conduct be published on the website.

CHAIR