

**TO: GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE
28 JANUARY 2014**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF TELEPHONE USAGE BY THE LEADER
Director of Corporate Services – Legal**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 During the summer 2013 local newspapers ran a number of articles based upon Freedom of Information requests on the cost of telephone and text usage of the Leader of the Council. One local resident also made a formal complaint.

Faced with this level of interest and a formal complaint, officers, in consultation with the Leader felt that complete transparency was needed in answering the questions raised. Consequently, the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Chief Executive and S151 Officer commissioned an independent report by a senior officer completely unconnected with the Council. This report places before the Committee the independent report on the review into the telephone usage of the Leader, conducted by Victoria Jackson, Senior Investigations Officer, Wokingham Borough Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is asked:

- 2.1 **To note the report into telephone usage by the Leader.**
- 2.2 **To endorse the recommendations set out in the report.**
- 2.3 **To request that a report on implementation of the recommendations be brought to the next meeting of the Committee.**

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Implementation of the recommendations in the report will assist in ensuring that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place for the use of Council mobile phones by Members and that the Council secures best value for such usage.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 None.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 In July 2013 the Council received requests, made under the Freedom of Information Act, for information as to payments made for expenses by the Council to Councillor Bettison and to Bettison Associates Limited. The response to those requests was followed by significant press coverage. A complaint was made to the Borough Solicitor (in his capacity as Monitoring Officer) alleging that the “extremely high” costs for telephone usage by the Leader constituted a breach of the Code of Conduct for Members. In

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accordance with the procedures for dealing with complaints against Councillors which pertain following the introduction of the Localism Act, the Borough Solicitor met with the independent Chairman of the Standards Committee (Gordon Anderson) to consider whether or not the matter should be referred for investigation. The unanimous decision was that the complaint did not provide any basis for considering that there had been a breach of the Code of Conduct and should not be referred for investigation. However, following discussions with the Chief Executive it was decided, in light of the attention which the issue of the Leader's telephone expenses had attracted, that an independent review should be commissioned by the Council. Victoria Jackson, who is a Senior Investigations Officer at Wokingham Borough Council, was asked to conduct the review.

- 5.2 A copy of the report on the outcome of the review is attached as Annexe A. The report unambiguously states that the review found no misuse by Councillor Bettison. However, the report does make recommendations to strengthen the Council's policies and procedures relating to telephone usage by Members. It is proposed that those recommendations be accepted and that a progress report on their implementation be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.
- 5.3 Ms Jackson has kindly confirmed that she will be in attendance at the Committee Meeting to respond to any questions which Members may have on the conduct of the review, the report and its recommendations.

6. ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The Borough Solicitor is the author of this report.

Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 Nothing to add to the report.

Strategic Risk Assessment Issues

- 6.3 Not required.

Other Officers

- 6.4 The Head of Audit and Risk Management advises that compliance with new policy and procedures to address recommendations raised in the independent review report will be followed up at the next audit of Member's expenses.

7. CONSULTATION

Principal Groups Consulted

- 7.1 Not applicable.

Background Papers

None.

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