

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2015 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Gaywood (Chairman)

Cllr. Ball (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs. Mrs. Bosley and Lindsay

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr. Mrs. Bracken

Cllr. Bosley was also present.

1. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the Standards Committee held on 16 January 2014, be approved and signed as a correct record.

2. Declarations of interest

No additional declarations of interest were made.

3. Actions from Previous Meeting

The Committee noted that an email was circulated to all Members on 17 February 2014 regarding updating pecuniary interest forms.

4. Monitoring Officers Annual Report

The Monitoring Officer presented her tenth Annual Report, which provided an overview of the work of the Monitoring Officer; the work of the Standards Committee; and other governance arrangements monitored by other committees within the Council. Members were notified that ethical standards at the Council were high, there had been no cases of maladministration and although there had been 18 complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman over the year, this figure was low compared with other local authorities. No compensation payments had been made this year in relation to local settlements.

The Committee reviewed the summary of the six complaints against Members within the report. All complaints were to do with Parish Councils and no complaints had gone forward for investigation. The Monitoring Officer reported that since publication of the agenda one complaint concerning a Parish Councillor had been received.

In response to a question, the Monitoring Officer reported that the new system that had been implemented was much improved on the previous regime and as a result of this there had been a reduction in the number of frivolous complaints received. However, the

high number of Town and Parish Councils within our District compared with other authorities meant that there was a higher risk of complaints being received.

The Monitoring Officer reported that plans were in place to provide training for Members following the election in May 2015. The Clerks of Parish/Town Councils would also be invited to attend the training, as this could benefit achieving a reduction in the number of complaints received.

The Committee thanked the Monitoring Officer for all her work.

Resolved: That the Monitoring Officer's Annual Report be noted and recommended to Council to note.

5. Ethical Standards for Members

The Monitoring Officer presented a report providing information on recent publications concerning ethical standards for Members. One of the remits of the Standards Committee at Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) was to maintain and promote high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members of SDC and to advise and assist Parish/Town Councils and Parish/Town Councillors to maintain high standards of conduct.

In response to a question, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that following the election in May all Members of the Council would be required to complete a new Declaration of Acceptance of Office Form agreeing to abide by the Code of Conduct and would be required to complete the Disclosable Pecuniary Interests Form as well as Non Pecuniary Interests Form. The forms would then be published on the Council's website in line with statutory requirements.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted the DCLG publication entitled "Openness and transparency on personal interests" as giving valuable information on the interpretation of interests. The Monitoring Officer indicated that Members should be vigilant in making sure their Disclosable Pecuniary Interests Form is up to date as information had been received from the Local Government Lawyer published on the 18th November 2014 giving information that the Crown Prosecution Service had authorised the police to institute proceedings against the leader of Dorset County Council for three offences under the Localism Act for failing to declare interests. He has pleaded not guilty and the case has been adjourned until April 2015.

The Monitoring Officer reported that Appendix A to the report related to 'Duel-Hatted' Members. In January 2013, an informal view had been received from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) concerning the disclosable pecuniary interests of duel-hatted councillors. It was the view of the DCLG that where a councillor received a taxable allowance from any authority of which they were a member, the allowance would give rise to a disclosable pecuniary interest that should be entered on the register of interests. The question of whether a councillor had a disclosable pecuniary interest in an item of council business relating to another authority of which they were a member would depend on the nature of what was to be discussed.

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In response to a question, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that Members sitting on Town/Parish Councils should declare their District Council allowance on the relevant part of the Town/Parish Disclosable Pecuniary Interest Form.

The Chairman suggested that if Members had any concerns they should speak to the Monitoring Officer as soon as possible.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

6. The Seven Principles of Public Life

The Monitoring Officer introduced a report setting out the work undertaken by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in relation to the Seven Principles of Public Life. The Localism Act 2011 required that a relevant authority must promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members and Co-opted Members of the authority. An authority must ensure that a Code adopted by it, when viewed as a whole, was consistent with the Seven Principles of Public Life.

Members noted that the Committee on standards in Public Life had concluded that the seven principles should be kept although the brief descriptions appended to each of the seven principles should be updated.. The revisions were outlined in the report to the Committee. The Monitoring Officer assured the Committee that when the new standards regime was implemented by Sevenoaks District Council this Committee had taken a lot of trouble in evaluating the descriptions and changing them where necessary. However, if the Committee was minded to look at this further a working group could be set up.

Resolved: That the guidance set out in the report be noted.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 7.40 PM

CHAIRMAN

