

STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE
Thursday 12 September 2024

Present:- Councillor Monk (in the Chair); Councillors Clarke, Beck, T. Collingham, Hall, Hughes and Keenan and also Mrs. A. Bingham, Mrs. K. Penney and Mr. P. Edler (Independent Members).

Also in attendance was Mr. P. Beavers, Independent Person.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mr. A. Buckley, Parish Council Representative and Mr. D. Roper-Newman, Independent Person .

7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

8. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved:- That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for Minute Nos. 11 and 12 (Whistleblowing Policy and Complaints) on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

9. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 13TH JUNE, 2024

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 13th June, 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings and signed by the Chair.

10. THE CIVILITY AND RESPECT PLEDGE

Consideration was given to an update on the progress of the Civility and Respect Pledge that had previously been recommended for adoption by Town and Parish Councils.

The Civility and Respect Pledge had been introduced because there was no place for bullying, harassment and intimidation within the Town and Parish Council sector. The pledge would enable Town and Parish Councils to demonstrate that they were committed to standing up to poor behaviour and to drive through positive changes which supported civil and respectful conduct.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer shared with the Committee a presentation involving Michaela Moss, Project Officer, and Carina Helm, County Officer. The presentation drew particular attention to:-

- The Project Group.
- Mission and Objectives.
- Four Key Areas of Focus.
- Civility Continuation Model.
- Civility and Respect Pledge.
- Bespoke Training on Offer and the Key Areas.
- E-Learning Modules Available.
- On Demand H.R. Podcasts.
- Recruitment Guides.
- Governance Support.
- Other Working Taking Place.

As a further update the Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed she had written to all Town and Parish Councils recommending they sign up. It was noted the majority of complaints received by the Monitoring Officer were in relation to the behaviour of Town and Parish Councillors.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer also pointed out that further work had also taken place around the wider environment of councillors alongside the LGA. Detailed guidance was available on the LGA website.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity for this pledge believing good governance is fundamental to ensuring an effective and well-functioning democracy at all levels.

The Committee were interested to learn how the pledge had been received across the Borough and were advised that about half of the Town and Parish Councils had signed up.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer agreed to update the Committee every six months on progress of the pledge and how effective the take-up offer for training had been received.

Whilst nationally it was noted there had been some changes in behaviour, until the sanctions were strengthened the changes would still need to be monitored.

Those members of the Committee who were also involved with Parish Councils found the package of support through the pledge to be excellent and a well detailed resource for Parishes to run a transparent and stable council. However, it was still disappointing that the sign up to the pledge was still voluntary which mean some Parish Councillors did not engage if they did not attend.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer also pointed out the pledge also provided some excellent resources for Clerks to enable them to provide advice and strengthen the process.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer also provided for the new members to the Committee a synopsis of the complaints process through to an investigating sub-committee hearing.

The Committee were unified in their duty to promote good behaviour and drive through positive changes that supported civil and respectful conduct. They wished to see all Town and Parish Councils sign up to the pledge and indeed directed the Monitoring Officer/Deputy Monitoring Officer to again make contact in writing and attend the next Parish Council Liaison Meeting.

Resolved:- (1) That the presentation be received and the contents noted.

(2) That the Monitoring Officer/Deputy Monitoring Officer write to all Town and Parish Councils encouraging them to sign up to the pledge (if they have not already done so).

(3) That the Deputy Monitoring Officer attend the next Parish Council Liaison Meeting.

(4) That a further update be provided back to the Committee in six months' time on sign up progress of the pledge.

11. **A REVIEW OF CONCERNS RAISED PURSUANT TO THE WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY**

Consideration was given to the report and appendix presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, which provided an overview of the Whistleblowing cases which have been received over the past year.

Particular reference was made to the appendix to the report which set out clearly the description of the concerns received and action taken.

The information shared covered a two year period and provided an assurance that there was no particular patterns or trends.

The Monitoring Officer outlined the role of this Committee in overseeing the Whistleblowing Policy which was reviewed every two years. To date there was no recommended changes to the current policy.

Resolved:- That the Whistleblowing concerns raised over the previous year and the actions taken to address these matters be noted.

12. REVIEW OF COMPLAINT

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, detailing the progress for the handling of complaints relating to breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members and Town and Parish Councillors. The report listed the current cases of complaint and the action being taken in respect of each one.

Reference was made to each related case and recommended outcomes/actions identified were highlighted.

Discussion ensued on the process for complaints and the merits and reasons for anonymising the detail as part of the appendix shared. The Committee were, however, interested to learn if there were certain patterns amongst some Parish Councils and the process undertaken when an anonymous complaint was received.

Rotherham's number of complaints was pleasingly low compared to some other Local Authorities, which was indicative that the level of behaviour had improved. However, the pros and cons of social media were recognised.

The Monitoring Officer provided the Committee with some assurance that the complaints process was managed effectively within his own team and each and every complaint was considered. From those received there were no suggestions of personal safety issues.

Examples of non-engagement with the Code of Conduct and details of the Livingstone Case 2006 were shared and discussed.

Resolved:- That the report be received and the contents noted.

13. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business requiring the Committee's consideration.