STANDARDS AND ETHICS COMMITTEE
10th September, 2026

Present:- Councillor Clarke (in the Chair); Councillors Brent, Currie, Brent, Currie, Harper and McKiernan, along with Parish Councillors Griffin and Senior and Mrs. A. Bingham and Mrs. K. Penney (Independent Members).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T. Collingham and Hall.

Also in attendance were:-

Mr. S. Fletcher, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Mr. P. Beavers, Independent Person
Mr. D. Roper-Newman (Independent Person).

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

13. 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. 17 and 18 (Whistleblowing and Complaints) on the grounds that the appendices to those reports involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

14. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 11TH JUNE, 2026

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 11th June, 2026 were approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

With regards to Minute No. 5 (Civility and Respect Pledge) and the second resolution, this had not yet been undertaken, but the Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed he would be sending a further reminder to Town and Parish Councils on the benefits to encourage them to sign up to the Pledge shortly.

15. STRENGTHENING THE STANDARDS REGIME

The Deputy Monitoring Officer provided a verbal update on the latest position on proposed reforms to the Standards regime. Members were advised that the most recent update, reported in the Municipal Journal last week, indicated that Whitehall officials were continuing to explore options to strengthen the Standards Framework despite the absence of a primary legislative vehicle.

While proposed Standards reforms were not included in any specific legislation announced in the King's Speech earlier this year, the Government remained committed to wider system reform. Proposed measures included the introduction of powers to suspend Councillors for misconduct and the ability to withhold allowances where standards of behaviour fell below the required level.

Members were informed that senior Whitehall officials were considering alternative routes to progress the reforms and were continuing to engage with the Local Government sector to develop policy proposals. The intention was for the reforms to be ready for introduction when Parliamentary time allowed.

Local authorities remained keen to see the introduction of a more robust and enforceable Standards regime.

Resolved:- That the update be received and the content noted.

16. REPORT OF THE DEBATE NOT HATE WORKING GROUP

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, which outlined the work undertaken by the Standards and Ethics Committee Working Group following completion of the Local Government Association's Debate Not Hate self-assessment toolkit.

The Working Group had been established in the previous year and had held a number of meetings between November 2025 and July 2026. During this period, evidence was gathered from a range of internal and external stakeholders to assess the Council's arrangements against the five principles of the Debate Not Hate framework.

The Working Group agreed to consider each of the self-assessment toolkit’s five principles in turn which were:-

- Creating supportive and informed spaces.
- Creating a risk-led approach.
- Creating an infrastructure.
- Creating connections.
- Creating a culture of safety and respect.

The Working Group used the toolkit questions to structure discussion and evidence gathering.

Members were advised that the Working Group had reviewed the Council's arrangements against the Debate Not Hate principles and found that comprehensive systems and support mechanisms were already in place. However, opportunities had been identified to improve awareness, visibility and accessibility of the support available to Members.

The Group considered the range of wellbeing and support services available, including health and safety arrangements, Member resources and support initiatives. It was concluded that these could be brought together more effectively through improved signposting, communications and the development of a dedicated Member Wellbeing Guide and Hub.

In relation to personal safety, the Group reviewed the Council's approach to supporting Members who experienced abuse, harassment or intimidation. Strong arrangements were in place, including referral pathways and support from the Police where appropriate. However, the Group identified opportunities for refresher training, greater awareness of social media risks and more consistent recording of incidents.

The Group also considered reporting and escalation arrangements and found that clear reporting routes and support mechanisms were available. It was felt that further promotion of these processes and a review of guidance could help ensure Members were fully aware of how to access support when required.

Partnership working with the Police and other relevant organisations was also reviewed. Effective liaison and information sharing arrangements were found to be in place. However, it was recognised that some incidents, while distressing for Members, did not meet the threshold for enforcement action or prosecution. The Group, therefore, considered that there was value in strengthening feedback mechanisms and continuing to work closely with partners, particularly the Police, while also supporting wider lobbying efforts to address abuse and intimidation in public life.

The Group concluded that the Council already had a strong culture of safety and respect, supported by previous cross-party commitments and clear democratic leadership. However, it was considered that further communication and awareness-raising activity would help reinforce expectations around respectful engagement and acceptable standards of behaviour.

Members were reminded that the work was not intended to prevent criticism or robust democratic debate, which remained essential parts of public life, but to ensure that abuse, harassment and intimidation were not accepted as part of public service and that appropriate support was available to those affected.

The Committee was asked to endorse the findings of the Working Group and the recommendations set out in the report. It was noted that additional detailed issues identified by the Group would be presented at a future meeting by way of an action plan. An implementation update report would be brought back to the Committee within twelve months to monitor progress against the action plan. Continued engagement with the Police, particularly in relation to potential criminal offences committed online, would also be taken forward as part of the programme of work.

Members welcomed the report and emphasised the importance of continuing to report incidents and gather robust evidence to support improvements in the protection of Councillors.

The Chair wished to place on record her thanks to the Working Group and their efforts were acknowledged, with a view that the review had identified a generally sound framework, although some refinements may be beneficial. It was also agreed that ongoing monitoring of incident numbers and emerging trends would be important for the Committee's oversight role.

Concerns were raised about the impact of abuse, intimidation and harassment directed at some Councillors. Members stressed the importance of ensuring Elected Members felt safe and supported and noted that legislative changes may be required to strengthen protections and drive further improvement.

The Committee discussed reports that, while some incidents did not meet the threshold for formal action, they nevertheless remained concerning and could have a negative impact on those affected. It was recognised that behaviour falling below the threshold for criminal or regulatory intervention could still damage relationships and discourage participation in public life.

Members were advised that a number of incidents had been referred to the Police and relevant social media platforms. However, it was noted that obtaining action from some social media platforms could be challenging. Although some content had been removed where it breached platform rules, concerns remained about the consistency of responses.

The need for greater clarity around the criteria used by both Police and social media platforms when assessing abusive or threatening content was discussed. Members felt that a better understanding of these thresholds could help Councillors recognise what should be reported and what action may realistically be expected.

Members also highlighted the importance of supporting those who were targeted by abuse and of reinforcing the message that such behaviour was unacceptable. Particular concerns were expressed regarding anonymous and fake online accounts, which could make it difficult to identify perpetrators and pursue further action. It was suggested that increased awareness, education and communication around reporting processes and available support would be beneficial.

Members discussed the importance of following established reporting procedures when experiencing abuse, harassment or concerning communications. It was noted that inappropriate social media content should be reported through the relevant platforms, while concerning emails or other direct communications should be referred through the appropriate Council channels so that advice and support could be

provided. The importance of not responding personally and allowing appropriate officers to manage such matters was stressed.

The Committee acknowledged that abuse directed at Councillors, particularly through social media, remained an ongoing concern and noted that women in public life could be disproportionately affected and expressed support for stronger legislation and protections for Elected Members and local authority staff.

The Committee shared the view that online abuse should not be taken personally.

The value of training was highlighted throughout the discussion and reference made to training on communication skills, respectful engagement and conflict management, suggesting that such learning opportunities could also be extended to Parish Councillors. It was agreed that promoting respectful communication and supporting one another were important aspects of maintaining a positive culture.

The Committee discussed standards and behaviour within Parish Councils, noting that many complaints arose from conduct issues at meetings. Members heard that a significant proportion of local Councils had signed up to the Civility and Respect Pledge with Rotherham more than exceeding the national average. There remained ambition to increase participation further. It was recognised that strong leadership and effective chairing could play an important role in promoting respectful behaviour and reducing complaints.

The Committee also discussed arrangements for recording and monitoring incidents involving threats, violence or personal attacks. It was confirmed that systems were already in place to record and manage such concerns confidentially, although there may be opportunities to improve awareness and understanding of these arrangements.

Overall, the discussion emphasised the importance of reporting concerns appropriately, promoting respectful conduct, continuing training and awareness activities and strengthening protections for Councillors and staff.

Reference was made to whether a database existed that recorded incidents/addresses of concern and the Clerk advised the Committee that such a report on the same subject relating to the violence and aggression database was to be presented to the next meeting of the Member and Democratic Panel. Details of the discussion would be fed back into the next meeting of this Committee with a further update on the reporting routes and how information was captured and linked across systems.

Discussion also took place regarding the distinction between criminal, civil and anti-social behaviour matters and at what point concerns such as false information, persistent complaints or inappropriate behaviour

became matters for Council enforcement action, anti-social behaviour processes or Police involvement.

It was pointed out that the Working Group's focus had been on criminal activity and Police-related processes. It was recognised, however, that there may be value in considering the civil and enforcement aspects further, particularly where behaviour fell below the criminal threshold, but continued to cause concern.

The Committee noted that, in some cases, it could be difficult to identify individuals responsible for online activity, limiting the options available for further action. Current arrangements were, therefore, largely focused on securing the removal of inappropriate content through social media platforms and addressing any potential criminal offences through the appropriate authorities. It was agreed that the wider civil and enforcement perspective would be explored further.

The importance of maintaining accurate records, including dates, times and supporting evidence, was emphasised throughout the discussion.

The Committee referred back to the uptake of the Civility and Respect Pledge amongst Parish Councils. It was observed that some Councils experiencing few or no conduct issues had not signed up to the pledge, while others with a history of complaints had done so.

The Committee expressed an interest in understanding whether there was any relationship between complaint levels and participation in the Pledge and were advised that Parish Council data was already included within oversight arrangements, but no analysis had yet been undertaken to identify any correlation between complaints and Pledge sign-up rates. It was agreed that this would be explored further with the Parish Liaison Officer, with trend data and findings to be reported back to a future meeting.

The Committee concluded that the matters discussed required ongoing attention and monitoring and should not be left without further action, but welcomed the activity and ongoing support to date.

Resolved:- (1) That the work undertaken by the Working Group be received and noted and the findings be endorsed regarding the comprehensiveness of the Council’s existing arrangements.

(2) That the recommendation of the Working Group that a Member Wellbeing Guide and portal be developed be approved.

(3) That the recommendation of the Working Group that a Debate not Hate Communications and Engagement Plan be developed be approved.

(4) That the content of the Action Plan for further improvements at Appendix 1 be approved.

(5) That a report as to progress in respect of the Action Plan be brought back to the Standards and Ethics Committee within twelve months.

(6) That information be provided to a future meeting following consideration by the Member and Democratic Panel of the Violence and Aggression Register.

17. 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. From the cases there were no particular trends just one-off issues.

Unfortunately, due to staff absence updates were pending, but any particular concerns would be taken back.

Members discussed the distinction between grievance procedures and whistleblowing arrangements, questioning whether employees fully understood the difference between the two processes and when each should be used. It was noted that whistleblowing procedures should be reserved for reporting genuine concerns in the public interest rather than matters that could be addressed through management channels or personal reporting routes.

The importance of promoting awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy was highlighted, with a suggestion that additional training or communications could be delivered internally to improve understanding of the process, the protections available to individuals who raised concerns and the appropriate use of the procedure.

Concerns were also raised about the length of time taken to resolve some cases, particularly those that have remained open since 2024.

The Committee was advised that any safeguarding concerns were reviewed and addressed promptly through regular oversight arrangements. However, many cases related to employment matters, where investigations could be complex and take a considerable period to conclude.

Feedback regarding investigation timescales would be taken forward for consideration.

Clarification was also sought regarding the continued inclusion of older cases within committee reports and it was confirmed that the reporting process was cumulative, with cases remaining in the report until they were closed and subsequently removed once they fell outside the reporting period.

A suggestion was made that an analysis of whistleblowing cases be undertaken to identify how many represented genuine whistleblowing concerns. The findings could then be used to inform future training, awareness-raising activities and improvements to the reporting process. This proposal was welcomed and would be considered further.

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

18. REVIEW OF COMPLAINTS

Consideration was given to the report presented by the Deputy Monitoring Officer, detailing the progress with 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 findings relating to standards of behaviour, noting that a significant proportion of complaints related to conduct issues and concerns about the culture of some meetings. It was recognised that repeated instances of poor behaviour and a lack of civility could contribute to wider tensions, including interactions outside formal meetings.

Members were advised that work was ongoing to promote the Civility and Respect Pledge and to encourage participation in relevant training opportunities.

Particular concerns were raised regarding standards issues within Parish Councils where it was observed that complaints often stemmed from interpersonal disputes and longstanding local disagreements. It was suggested that a greater emphasis on early intervention, mediation and direct engagement with those involved may help address underlying issues and reduce the number of formal complaints.

The Committee also considered whether stronger local accountability and support arrangements could encourage more effective resolution of concerns before they escalated.

It was noted that the Borough Council had a statutory responsibility to maintain standards arrangements and provide a mechanism for complaints to be submitted. Whilst local resolution was encouraged

wherever possible, this was not always achievable in practice, but there was consensus that promoting positive culture, cohesion and effective working relationships remained key to reducing complaints and improving governance outcomes.

Potential future actions included further engagement through existing Parish Council networks, consideration of peer-support initiatives and exploring opportunities to share best practice and learning across the sector.

The Committee was advised that a more detailed update would be provided at a future meeting and apologies were offered for delays in progressing some actions due to staff absence.

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

19. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Committee's consideration.