

Standards Committee
15 MARCH 2023

Present: Councillors: Diana van der Klugt (Chairman), Joan Grech, Kate Rowbottom, David Skipp, Belinda Walters, John Donaldson, Michael Rumble, Philip Baxter and Stephen Watkins

Apologies: Councillors: Peter Burgess and Tricia Youtan

SC/18 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 November were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

SC/19 **DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no declarations of interest.

SC/20 **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

There were no announcements.

SC/21 **STANDARDS UPDATE**

The Legal Services Business Manager updated the committee on Standards complaint cases.

Comparative data was provided, from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 there was a total of 33 Code of Conduct complaints. 26 complaints related to Steyning Parish Council (80%), three related to Horsham District Councillors, two related to West Chiltington Parish Council and one related to both Henfield and Nuthurst Parish Councils.

From 1 April 2022 through to 15 March 2023 there had been a total of 21 Code of Conduct complaints. 14 related to Steyning Parish Council (66%), four related to Horsham District Councillors, and Nuthurst, Pulborough and Storrington Parish Councils each received a complaint.

Of those seven cases not related to Steyning Parish Council and following assessment and consultation with the Independent Person, no further action was required in six of the cases. One case was satisfactorily dealt with by informal resolution that included a meeting with the parties and Monitoring Officer without further action necessary.

Of the 14 Steyning Parish Council complaints this year, 10 were Councillor to Councillor complaints and 4 related to members of the public against Councillor complaints including an ex- councillor complaining.

The committee were advised that three complaints were received during the Hoey Ainscough process in August/September 2022 and dealt with by way of informal resolution.

A further eight complaints were received shortly after the publication of the Hoey Ainscough report in November/December 2022 and after Steyning Parish Council resolved to accept the report and implementation plan.

Three complaints have been received since January 2023, after assessment and consultation with the Independent Person, one complaint required no further action and two have been recently received and require further assessment.

The committee were positive that complaints had reduced since last year relating to Steyning Parish Council however acknowledged the review from Hoey Ainscough was taking place during this time. It was also noted that the amount of complaints received from Steyning Parish Council was still disproportionately high.

SC/22 **STEYNING PARISH COUNCIL - REVIEW SUPPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Chairman provided the Committee with a brief overview and update on Steyning Parish Council.

The Committee were reminded that it was agreed at Standards Committee in March 2022 to commission Hoey Ainscough Associates to undertake a review at Steyning Parish Council due to the vast increase over the last 3 years of code of conduct complaints received by Horsham District Council of which 70% related to Steyning Parish Council.

Six main areas were considered at the review and during a Parish Council meeting in September, 36 recommendations were set out and an action plan to address issues. A Draft Implementation Plan was completed and agreed at a Steyning Council meeting on 21 November as well as agreement to sign up to the NALC/SLCC Civility and Respect Pledge.

Progress on implementation of the plan will be reported to Horsham District Council in approximately six months and 12 months. The Chairman advised that progress was being carefully monitored.

The Interim Monitoring Officer verbally updated the committee on the current situation and contents of the report presented to committee.

Since the publication of the Hoey & Ainscough report and adoption of the Implementation Plan in November 2022, 11 code of conduct complaints had been received from Steyning Parish Council. It appeared that some Councillors did not consider the comments contained in the report referred to them or recommendations applied to them.

Several meetings had taken place between Steyning Parish Council, the Deputy Monitoring Officer and the Independent Person to assess complaints, meet the complainants and encourage engagement in the process and adopted plan. Most parties involved in outstanding complaints still requested formal investigation, determination and sanctions applied.

Members acknowledged that even though the implementation plan was still in its early stages it was possibly not working and complaints were continuing to be made. It was strongly felt that Steyning Parish Council was still taking up an extraordinary amount of Officer time and resource and unless the situation improved, harsher sanctions would need to be considered moving forward.

The Committee also discussed if a Vexatious Behaviour Policy would provide further support in the future. As part of Steyning Parish Council's Implementation Plan it was suggested that a new policy include vexatious behaviour and an update would be provided at a future meeting.

RESOLVED

The Standards Committee therefore approved the recommendations set out in the report, subject to an amendment to point (iii). It was proposed and seconded to revise the date in point (iii) from 6 May 2023 to 14 June 2023.

The Standards Committee recommended:

- i) To approve that the Standards Team continues to support Steyning Parish Council in implementing its plan to tackle issues, which was recommended by the Hoey & Ainscough intervention;
- ii) To approve that all outstanding Steyning Parish Council code of conduct complaints are dealt with by way of informal resolution (as opposed to formal investigation) and to give effect to the Hoey & Ainscough intervention; and
- iii) To approve that any new Steyning Parish Council code of conduct complaints received from 15 March 2023 up to 14 June 2023 are reviewed to assess the seriousness of any alleged breaches and are dealt with by way of informal resolution, unless the facts and evidence demonstrate that a formal investigation is warranted.

SC/23 **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 11.35 am having commenced at 10.00 am

CHAIRMAN