



**Horsham
District
Council**

Steyning Parish Council

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Dear Steyning Parish Council

LOCALISM ACT 2011 – CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS STEYNING PARISH COUNCIL

I write in relation to the ongoing position at Steyning Parish Council and I confirm that Horsham District Council continue to receive standards code of conduct complaints against various Steyning Councillors.

I received 8 code of conduct complaints against Steyning Councillors in the calendar year of 2019, 15 complaints in 2020 and 26 complaints in 2021. Over the last three years, the position and behaviour has deteriorated and now over 70% of the total code of conduct complaints received by Horsham District Council relate to Steyning Councillors. When dealing with these and all the surrounding issues it means that over 80% of the total time spent dealing with standards matters directly or indirectly relates to Steyning. This is despite it being just one Parish Council out of a total of 35 Parish and Neighbourhood Councils, which the standards regime covers, as well as the District Council itself.

It is estimated that dealing with Steyning complaints alone, together with the all-encompassing issues could now cost in the region of £65,000.00 per annum, when considering officer, lawyer, monitoring officer, independent person, parish representative and Standards Committee Member's time. Whilst this is a rough estimate, it is based upon time spent and projected time and notional hourly rates.

Generally, these are Councillor against Councillor complaints but occasionally complaints are made by members of the public or by ex-councillors against current Councillors. The overall position, and the behaviour and the internal disputes and in-fighting between the factions has not improved and as you are aware there has been ongoing difficulties over a significant period of time.

We currently have two ongoing investigations and a total of 15 outstanding code of conduct complaints, with a total of over 1600 pages of complaint documentation, counter complaints, evidence, examples of alleged bad behaviour etc. etc. These complaints are at different stages of progress and much work has already been undertaken by the standards team and we are nearing the completion of investigations and complaints in some of the existing cases. There are also some complaints that can be dismissed and dealt with relatively quickly, but

others still need careful consideration and need to be dealt with appropriately. However, and meanwhile, the day-to-day position at the Parish Council has not improved and as stated if anything is deteriorating.

Due to the ongoing bad feeling, with the more recent and previous history surrounding this Parish Council, together with the significant resource implications for Horsham District Council and the Legal Department, when considering the total time, effort, and costs needed to deal with all of these existing and ongoing complaints I have had no alternative but to consider an alternative way forward. I have therefore approached experts in the standards code of conduct area and asked for their advice and assistance.

Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd was set up in April 2012 to support local authorities in managing their arrangements for handling councillor conduct issues. The company was co-founded by Paul Hoey, who had been director of strategy at Standards for England from 2001 until its closure in 2012, and Natalie Ainscough who had worked as his deputy. They were expert advisers to the Committee on Standards in public Life 2019 review of the Localism Act, were commissioned by the Local Government Association in 2020 to produce a new model Code of Conduct and supporting guidance and are regular advisers to both NALC and SLCC on standards issues.

If a Parish Council is facing difficulties with working relationships, or where there have been a continued large number of standards complaints or a breakdown in governance, Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd can work with the Parish Council directly to offer support to seek to improve the way the Parish Council operates and deal with the underlying issues. They are extremely experienced in dealing with Parish Councils facing problems and difficulties.

The aims of the review and support offered include helping the Parish Council consider how they can work more effectively and help with rebuilding their reputation through demonstrating that there is a culture of high standards and good governance.

Whilst a review of all processes, procedures and underlying issues is undertaken, the emphasis is very much on looking for better ways of working and building better relations. It is a hands-on approach, and their team will include an associate who is a recently retired chief executive of a county association of local councils who will bring with them direct experience of working in and with a Parish Council. All Councillors and the clerk will be interviewed as part of the process. Specific action plans and a formal report will then be submitted to the Parish Council and Horsham District Council and ultimately published, with potentially a wide remit as to its conclusions and recommendations.

I have already consulted with Paul Hoey and Natalie Ainscough and I have received a proposal for the review and support which could commence in March 2022. I have been advised that all current and future complaints and investigations should be suspended whilst this review is undertaken and the support provided, unless a complaint is deemed as so serious that it must be investigated immediately. In effect, what I am suggesting is an alternative way to dealing with the numerous code of conduct complaints made and surrounding issues by way of informal resolution and also by ongoing training that will be

provided. We would however reserve the right to recommence dealing with any individual complaints should the process breakdown or not improve or help resolve matters.

The support detailed may cost in the region of £12,000.00 plus VAT, and Horsham District Council will agree to pay these costs. Whilst the cost is significant, it is considered worthwhile and if it produces the desired results, it will be a saving compared with the ongoing cost of dealing with ever increasing complaints.

I confirm I have met and spoken with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Standards Committee, and I have also consulted with the Independent Person and other Standards Committee Members regarding this, and they agree to us looking into and pursuing this course of action, if ultimately considered appropriate.

There is a real desire to help Steyning Parish Council function more effectively and to be able to concentrate on working and delivering for their residents, without the internal fighting and backbiting. Undoubtedly, there are hardworking Councillors within Steyning and there is a passion for local democracy. It is hoped, by engaging these specialist experts to conduct a thorough review and offer support, this will enable you to focus on improvement and a clear way forward.

In order for this approach to have the best chance of success, it needs all Councillors and the Parish Council itself to fully engage with this process. It is hoped that this open letter will aide initial discussions between yourselves, and I can provide further information and detail if necessary.

However, I would like initial feedback as to this proposal, as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely

Signature Redacted

Sharon Evans
Monitoring Officer &
Head of Legal & Democratic Services

