

STANDARDS COMMITTEE REPORT

REPORT TO:	Standards Committee		
DATE:	4 December 2023		
MEETING DATE	18 December 2023		
TITLE:	Parish Council Support in relation to the Standards regime		
REPORT AUTHOR:	Monitoring Officer		
OPEN/EXEMPT		WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT:	No

REPORT SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF REPORT/SUMMARY:

To place before Members a range of options to increase support for Parish Councils in relation to the Standards regime.

KEY ISSUES:

Within the Council's Corporate Strategy 2023-2027, it states as follows with regards to the priority of '*Efficient and Effective Delivery of our Services*':

"Expand our support to help parish councils with governance and to attract new members"

The Monitoring Officer recognises that a significant proportion of standards complaints have an underlying governance dispute from which the conduct complained of ultimately originates. It is anticipated that providing earlier support to Parish Councils on the standards regime will prove symbiotic to resolving governance issues, thereby improving the culture of Parish Councils. The ultimate result of this will hopefully be Parish Councils being able to attract new Members.

The number of Parish Councillor complaints for 2023-2024 is almost double that received during the whole of 2022-2023 (thirty-two and seventeen respectively.) Sixteen out of the seventeen Parish Councillor complaints in 2022-2023 came from fellow Parish Councillors.

The split of Parish Council complainants so far for the thirty-two 2023-2024 Parish Council complaints is seven from fellow Parish Councillors and twenty-five from members of the public.

It is hoped that by providing frontloaded support to Parish Councils, this will result in significantly reduced numbers of formal complaints, thereby saving the Borough Council the resource of its officers (including significant proportions of time of the Morning Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer) which can be deployed elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To consider proposing to the Leader of the Council that 'Member Champions for Civility in Public Life' be appointed under the '*Local Protocol – Member Champions*' to act as one option of support to Parish Councils that request assistance with standards related matters.
2. That the Monitoring Officer set up an online 'forum' for all Parish Council Clerks within the Borough to attend to discuss how to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members within their authority.

3. That the Monitoring Officer set up an online 'forum' for all Parish Council Chairs within the Borough to attend to discuss how to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members within their authority.
4. That the Monitoring Officer in conjunction with the Chair of Standards Committee offer a one-day training event to Parish Councillors and their clerks at the King's Lynn Town Hall. Such training to be repeated once during every term after local government elections.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

To fulfil the Standard Committee's functions in relation to the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct by Councillors and co-opted members.

REPORT DETAIL

1. Background

- 1.1 Within the Council's Corporate Strategy 2023-2027, it states as follows with regards to the priority of '*Efficient and Effective Delivery of our Services*':

"Expand our support to help parish councils with governance and to attract new members"

- 1.2 The Monitoring Officer recognises that a significant proportion of standards complaints have an underlying governance dispute from which the conduct complained of ultimately originates. It is anticipated that providing earlier support to Parish Councils on the standards regime will prove symbiotic to resolving governance issues, thereby improving the culture of Parish Councils. The ultimate result of this will hopefully be Parish Councils being able to attract new Members.
- 1.3 The number of Parish Councillor complaints for 2023-2024 is already double that received during the whole of 2022-2023 (thirty-two and sixteen respectively.) Fifteen out of the sixteen Parish Councillor complaints in 2022-2023 came from fellow Parish Councillors. The split of Parish Council complainants so far for the thirty-two 2023-2024 Parish Council complaints is seven from fellow Parish Councillors and twenty-five from members of the public.
- 1.4 It is hoped that by providing frontloaded support to Parish Councils, this will result in significantly reduced numbers of formal complaints, thereby saving the Borough Council the resource of its officers (including significant proportions of time of the Morning Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer) which can be deployed elsewhere.

2 Issues for the Panel to Consider

In relation to the recommendations to the Standards Committee:

- 2.1 *To consider proposing to the Leader of the Council that 'Member Champions for Civility in Public Life' be appointed under the 'Local Protocol – Member Champions' to act as one option of support to Parish Councils that request assistance with standards related matters.*
- 2.1.1 The Council's '*Local Protocol – Member Champions*' is attached for Members' reference as Appendix A. It is proposed that new Member Champions could be appointed for '*Civility in Public Life*' under this Protocol; to reflect the Local Government Association's campaign on the same name.
- 2.1.2 The Member Champions would receive specific training from the Monitoring Officer and/or the Local Government Association in relation to the concept of '*Civility in Public Life*'. The Member
- 2.1.3 It is anticipated that the appointed Champions would each be designated Parishes in the Borough, and where those Parish Councils requested, the Member Champions would attend Parish Council meetings, both informal and formal, to champion the issue of Civility in Public Life.

- 2.1.4 It would be proposed that Member Champions be appointed in the 2024-2025 municipal year to allow time for necessary changes to be made to the Local Protocol to clarify that '*Member Champions for Civility in Public Life*' would be accountable to the Chair of Standards Committee rather than through the executive and that travel expenses would be approved under the Members Allowance Scheme for attending Parish Council meetings.
 - 2.1.5 Standards Committee Members would need to be mindful that if they were involved in the chronology to a formal Code of Conduct complaint, they would be conflicted from sitting on a Hearing Panel, were the matter to progress to that stage.
 - 2.1.6 Member Champions could establish links with Norfolk Association of Local Councils to act in conjunction to support Parish Councils experiencing standards related issues.
- 2.2 *That the Monitoring Officer set up an online 'forum' for all Parish Council Clerks within the Borough to attend to discuss how to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members within their authority.*
- 2.2.1 The proposal is that a six weekly 'forum' via Teams be set up, with an invite to all Parish Council Clerks to discuss the generalities of how to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members within their authority. This could be in the form of policies, procedures, advice, etc.
 - 2.2.2 It would be necessary to set rules of the forum so that names and specific details of complaints were not discussed to protect confidentiality and the impartiality of the Monitoring Officer. The Deputy Monitoring Officer undertakes the assessments of Parish Council complaints therefore there would not be a direct conflict in relation to the Monitoring Officer discussing with Parish Councils Clerks the generalities of potential complaints.
 - 2.2.3 The effect of the forum would hopefully for Parish Council Clerks to also make networking links to support each other at a more local level.
- 2.3 *That the Monitoring Officer set up an online 'forum' for all Parish Council Chairs within the Borough to attend to discuss how to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members within their authority.*
- 2.3.1 See above at 2.2.1 to 2.2.3 – replacing Parish Council Clerks for Parish Council Chairs.
- 2.4 *That the Monitoring Officer in conjunction with the Chair of Standards Committee offer training to Parish Councillors and their clerks at the King's Lynn Town Hall, across as many days as the uptake necessitates. Such training to be repeated once during every term after local government elections.*
- 2.4.1 Parishes are responsible for their own training and have their own statutory duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by its members.
 - 2.4.2 However, undertaking a day of training devoted towards how a complaint is handled, the process through to a potential Standards Committee hearing and the financial impact on the Borough Council in relation to dealing with complaints will provide Parish Councillors with a more informed basis of the standards regime from the Borough Council's perspective.

3 Financial Implications

Member Champions would not receive a Special Responsibility Allowance.

Expenses in relation to travel to Parish Council meetings are proposed to be approved by the Standards Committee under the Members Allowance Scheme, Appendix B:

(vi) conferences, seminars or meetings approved by the appropriate Committee or Board and open to all members, the prime purpose of which is either to discuss matters relating to the interests and functions of the Council or inhabitants of the Borough, or to assist Members to understand and carry out their duties more effectively

The financial impact of additional travel claims should be assessed after one year of operation of Member Champions.

In terms of officer time, there would be additional resource required from the Monitoring Officer to facilitate the forums and training, however this would need to be monitored as whether it is offset from the resource currently required to process Code of Conduct complaints, which currently involves every officer within the legal team save the Property Solicitor.

4 Any other Implications/Risks

An effective standards regime forms part of the Council's Code of Corporate Governance. The Department for Levelling Up, House and Communities has recognised the 'Culture' of a local authority as one of the seven themes of good practice for running an authority that meets and delivers best value. The culture of a local authority is determined by its shared values, ethics and beliefs, how decisions are made, as well as how elected members and officers behave, interact and carry out their roles. The standards regime supports the process of monitoring the culture of the Borough Council and its Parishes, enabling all respective authorities to take action to address Councillor behaviour and thereby improve the culture of the organisation.

5 Equal Opportunity Considerations

None arising out of this report.

6 Environmental Considerations

None arising out of this report.

9. Consultation

Chair of Standards Committee.

Meeting of the Leader open to all Parish Councils held at the King's Lynn Town Hall on 3 October 2023.

10. Conclusion

Members are requested to consider the ways in which support to Parish Councils on the standards regime could be considered within the budgetary framework of the Council.

11. Background Papers

None