



Report to Standards Committee

Date: 14 September 2006

Author: Sue Sale - Head of Legal and Democratic Services

Subject: Parish Council Meetings

1. Purpose of the Report

The meetings with the Borough's Parish Councils who wished to meet with members of this Committee have been completed. This report is designed to inform members of the outcome of those meetings by drawing together the common themes from the minutes of those meetings and to assist members to identify particular points of further action.

2. Background

This Committee had resolved on 26 March 2005 to discuss with Parish Clerks and Chairs their experiences of working with the Code of Conduct and the ethical agenda in general. Between August 2005 and March 2006 small working groups from this Committee accompanied by either the Monitoring Officer or the Deputy Monitoring Officer had visited seven of the Borough's Parish Councils by invitation. Three Parish Councils had declined the opportunity to meet with the Standards Committee, but links were maintained with these Councils as they had a member who was either a Borough Council member or a member of the Standards Committee.

At each meeting a standard agenda comprising the Proposed Discussion Topics was used. A copy of the standard agenda is attached at **Appendix 1**.

3. Common Themes

Without exception each Parish Council made the members of the Standards Committee welcome and it is hoped that the meetings were an equally positive experience for the members of the Parish Councils.

3.1 Code of Conduct

Each Parish Council reported that they had adopted the Code of Conduct and although in some instances there had been some trepidation concerning the Code none of the anticipated problems had arisen in reality. Most Parish Councils had attributed this to the way they conducted Parish business, being a “commonsense approach”.

It was noted on more than one occasion that there had been no difficulty with members completing the Register of Interests and therefore the Borough’s Parish Councils had not been overburdened with these issues. Declarations of Interest were more common in some Parish Councils than others, but in any event these were not proving to be a concern to the Parish Councils.

It was felt to be an issue where a Council had a dual-hatted member that it was difficult to explain to the public why there was an apparent unwillingness to represent a declared view. One member in such a position did not make any comment on planning issues at the Parish Council therefore preserving his position in each case at the Borough’s Planning Committee.

3.2 Relationship with the Standards Committee

All Parish Councils felt that they had an adequate working relationship with the Standards Committee and there were no requests to develop the relationship further.

Most Parish Councils described their experiences of seeking advice from the Borough Council and receiving advice and assistance from helpful and responsive officers as required. The Parish Councils felt that this was a valuable support to them, but one that they wished to draw on according to their own needs.

Burton Joyce Parish Council gave the example of the support and advice provided by David Graham, the Borough Council’s Democratic Services Manager in running a recent Parish election and Ravenshead Parish Council gave the example of Sue Sale, the

Monitoring Officer providing training in relation to the new Code of Conduct.

In several instances planning issues were identified as being a contentious matter between the Parish Councils and the Borough Council particularly in the light of the Local Plan and the formation of the group Gag5, which had represented the interests of five Parish Councils during the Local Plan process. It was felt that in the planning process generally the Borough Council did not attach sufficient weight to the representations put forward by Parish Councils. At each of the meetings when this issue arose it was recognised that this was a matter outside the remit of the Standards Committee.

3.3 Complaints

Not all Parish Councils had a formal complaints procedure, but most had a time set aside in their standing agenda where the public could speak at the Parish Council meetings and in most instances any complaints would be dealt with at that point. It was felt by the Parish Councils that their business was conducted openly and transparently for the good of each Parish. The meetings were conducted with mutual respect for members and this staved off the need to issue complaints. One Parish reported “robust behaviour” at meetings which was still within the limits of the Code of Conduct.

3.4 Financial Procedures and Standing Orders

In each case the Parish Councils had adopted the NALC/SLCC models with local variations to suit their particular needs and this had not given rise to any particular problems. If advice had been required it had been sought from NALC or the Borough Council at that time. There were no lingering issues concerning either the Financial Procedures or Standing Orders.

It was recognised by the Standards Committee that the Parish Councils themselves had a wealth of experience amongst their members and each recognised the need to abide by the Financial Procedures and Standing Orders.

3.5 Training

This was an area where it was felt by the Parish Councils that the Borough Council could provide assistance to them. In the majority of Parish Councils the Clerk attended training events and passed on the knowledge gained to members as required. In all cases

where the Parish Council was a member of NALC this was recognised as a good resource for training and information.

Each Parish Council had an induction process for new members where an induction was undertaken on a one to one basis as a member was elected or co-opted or as in the case of Bestwood St Albans Parish Council, an Induction file was provided to new members containing all the information they required.

The following requests for future training were identified:

Calverton: “introducing training” for relatively new Parish Clerks.

Newstead: Future training on the Code of Conduct as it developed.

Burton Joyce: Planning, information on cemeteries, with particular regard to the maintenance of headstones and financial procedures.

Ravenshead: Employment matters, risk assessments and information sessions comprising a short half day to inform the Parish about areas of change affecting them.

3.6 Other matters arising

Confidentiality was recognised as being an area of concern only in relation to employment contracts and these matters were dealt with accordingly. Burton Joyce Parish Council had the highest number of employees.

Members were aware of the need to declare gifts and hospitality and to sign the register of interests, but no difficulties had been encountered in relation to these matters.

4. Recommendation

It is recommended that members note this Report and that it forms the basis of discussion in identifying any further action points or recommendations.



PARISH MEETINGS

Proposed Discussion Topics

1. How do they find the Code of Conduct is working, how has it affected the way they work, including the wider aspects of their work and do they feel there is a need for further training?
2. What do they feel their relationship is with the Standards Committee and how would they like to see it developed?
3. Are any of the following areas causing problems or throwing up a training need:
 - (i) Complaints
 - do they get them
 - how do they deal with them
 - (ii) Financial procedures
 - do they have them
 - are they effective
 - (iii) Standing Orders
 - are they working and useable
 - have they varied them
4. Do they feel there are any more general areas of training needs.
eg Freedom of Information Act. risk assessment, employment, procurement?