

Standards Activity Report

Report No:	STC/WS/19/002
Report to and date/s:	West Suffolk Standards Committee - 15 July 2019
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Decisions Plan: N/A

Wards impacted: All

Recommendation: It is recommended that the West Suffolk Standards Committee note the content of this report, and in doing so identify any areas of concern or development to be taken forwards by the Monitoring Officer.



1. Background / Context


- 1.1 At each regular meeting of the Standards Committee (excluding those convened just to consider specific complaints), the Monitoring Officer provides an update on standards activity since the previous report. This would include the levels of activity within West Suffolk and any national and local developments.

2. Standards Activity within West Suffolk

- 2.1 The numbers of standards complaints received for each financial year (April – March) is as per the table in 2.2 below. Please note that “parish” includes all complaints raised against all Parish and Town Councillors. In the exempt Appendix A to this report, further information is given in relation to all cases the Monitoring Officer has been considering since the previous report in December 2018.

2.2

Year	Complaints About:	Outcome – no breach	Outcome – breach	Open case	Total
2019/20	Parish	0	0	1	1
	District	0	0	1	1
					2
2018/19	Parish	3	1	3	7
	District	1	1	0	2
	Borough	4	0	0	4
		8	2	3	13
2017/18	Parish	11	3	0	14
	District	1	1	0	2
	Borough	4	1	0	5
Total		16	5	0	21
2016/17	Parish	12	4	0	16
	District	0	0	0	0
	Borough	5	0	0	5
Total		17	4	0	21
2015/16	Parish	5	1	0	6
	District	2	0	0	2
	Borough	6	2	0	8
Total		13	3	0	16

- 2.3 In December, it was reported that there had been a sudden upturn in the volume of complaints received; in the first 7 months of 2018/19, only 5 complaints had been received, and then 8 complaints were received in the month of November 2018. This raised concern that there may be a rise in complaints approaching the election, and a note was sent to all Councillors on behalf of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee to highlight this point.
- 2.4 It is pleasing to be able to confirm that no further complaints were received during 2018/19 which actually resulted in the lowest number of formal complaints for some time.
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- 2.5 This emphasises the fact that, amongst the hundreds of Parish, Town and District Councillors in West Suffolk, standards of conduct are perceived to be very high. The Monitoring Officer does receive concerns raised by members of the public about Councillors, but will only formally record the matter as a Code of Conduct complaint if it relates to the Code of Conduct and is made in writing, as is required by law.
- 2.6 Historically, a significant proportion of the complaints has arisen in relation to a small number of Parish or Town Councils. In particular, over the past 2 years, 30% of complaints dealt with have related to one Council and a report into current complaints relating to this Council is in the process of completion.
- 2.7 Details would also be provided to the standards committee where patterns of behaviour are arising which may require specific training needs to address across the Council / West Suffolk. No such concerns have been noted to report at this time.

3. Committee for Standards in Public Life

- 3.1 The Committee for Standards in Public Life (CfSPL) is an independent body appointed by Government to oversee conduct and behaviour across the public sector.
- 3.2 In 2018, CfSPL undertook a review of ethical standards in local government. Their report was issued on 21 January, and is available [here](#) or from the Committee for Standards in Public Life directly. A summary of the key findings and recommendations, and how West Suffolk is currently positioned against these recommendations, is included at Appendix B.
- 3.3 The next stage in this review is for the Government to formally respond to the recommendations of the CfSPL, and determine what action should be taken. As the report and Appendix B highlight, in order to progress many of the recommendations, changes are required to the relevant legislation governing Standards, most notably the Localism Act, which only the Government can initiate.
- 3.4 In addition, the CfSPL has been working with both Government and the Jo Cox Foundation to address intimidation in public life. As in national government, this can be a real issue for local government; as a Council we have seen instances of social media 'trolling' and threats being made in relation to contentious local planning applications.
- 3.5 We will continue to monitor the situation and work with partners such as the police to help advise Councillors, and take action where able to do so in relation to such events; for example, we have worked to highlight that Councillors can have their home addresses withdrawn from public disclosure if they wish to do so.



4. Elections and Induction

- 4.1 Although a number of reminders were issued, during the election period there were again several instances where existing Councillors were using Council resources for electoral purposes including photos and e-mail addresses. This is not an offence under electoral law, but is not in keeping with the Code of Conduct. Whilst reminders were issued, further publicity will be undertaken ahead of the next local government elections to emphasise this point and help Councillors avoid potential problems.
- 4.2 Following the election, each Councillor was provided with an induction pack which included a specific section on Conduct and Governance, including a copy of the Code of Conduct, guidance on declaring interests, and forms to register any gifts / hospitality that should arise. In addition, guidance was provided for working to support residents, using social media and dealing with press enquiries.
- 4.3 The expected behaviours and guidance on complying was reinforced in the Committee training provided to Councillors on 20 May, and in regulatory training sessions held at the end of May and early June.
- 4.4 Parish / Town Councils were provided with guidance (via Clerks) in March on deadlines for completing declarations of interest, and a refreshed guidance document explaining what information needed to be provided. All Parish / Town Councillor declarations of interests also have to be retained by the District Council and included on our website. Of the 562 Parish / Town Councillors elected in May, 53 (9%) declaration of interest forms remain outstanding. We have been in contact with Clerks directly in each case where the form is outstanding.

5. Consultation and engagement

- 5.1 No specific consultation / engagement has been undertaken in relation to this report.

6. Risks

- 6.1 This report supports the Standards Committee in discharging the duties in the terms of reference, namely to monitor the operation of the Code of Conduct; advise the Council / Councillors on training required, and promoting high standards of conduct. Failure to undertake these roles could lead to a loss of public confidence in the Council.

7. Implications arising from the proposal

- 7.1 No specific implications arise from this report

8. Appendices

- 8.1 **Appendix A (Exempt):** Report on individual standards cases, December 2018 – June 2019
Appendix B: Review of Committee for Standards in Public Life report on Ethical Standards in Local Government

