

Standards Advisory Committee – 17 July 2017

Present: Anne Elder (Chairman)
Councillors Booth, Davies, Hall and James
Michael Marshall and Bryn Wilson (Parish Council representatives),
Lynn Rogers (Co-opted independent member of the
Advisory Committee)

Officers: Bruce Lang (Monitoring Officer) and Richard Bryant (Democratic Services
Manager)

21. Apologies/Substitution

Apologies : Councillor Mrs Smith-Roberts and Louise Somerville-Williams
(Independent Person).

Substitution : Councillor Booth for Councillor Mrs Smith-Roberts

22. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Standards Advisory Committee held on 23
May 2017 were taken as read and were signed.

23. Declaration of Interest

Mrs Anne Elder, declared a personal interest as a Public Governor of the
Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust.

24. Raising Standards : Parish Council Health Checks

Due to the further indisposition of Mr Justin Robinson, the County Executive
Officer of the Somerset Association of Local Councils (SALC) the Monitoring
Officer, Bruce Lang, gave the Advisory Committee the presentation prepared
by Mr Robinson titled 'Raising Standards : Parish Council Health Checks'.

SALC was now in its 75th year and it currently represented 266 Town and
Parish Councils and four Parish Meetings in Somerset.

The key services it provided were support and advice, troubleshooting,
training and networking. Current areas for development included sharing
good practice, specialist training and the promotion of high standards of
governance.

The common problem areas encountered by SALC were:-

- Poor Council/community relations;
- Poor Member relations;
- Poor officer/Member relations;
- Lack of a plan;
- Lack of understanding of legal/ financial responsibilities and the Code
Of Conduct; and

- Lack of ambition.

SALC was currently planning to offer 'Council Health Checks' in an attempt to overcome the above problems areas.

The Health Checks were in the early stages of development but would draw on elements of existing work that had already proven to be valuable.

SALC would act as a critical friend, highlighting both good practice and areas for improvement.

There would be five different options which could be chosen by a Town/Parish Council depending on the nature of the problem. These options were:-

- (1) **Council Policy/Compliance Check** – A desktop exercise or Combined with 1-2-1 new Clerk training; Would ensure that policies were in place and up to date; Checks of agendas and minutes to ensure compliance with relevant legislation; Assessing the structure of the Council and compliance with the Transparency Code which might lead to referral to the Local Council Advisory Service.
- (2) **Staff Review/Salary Benchmarking Exercise** - Conducted by telephone or 1-2-1 interview; Reviewed hours/salaries/contracts against the work currently undertaken by the Council and its future aspirations; Would look at current member HR management, appraisals and assess training needs; This had proven helpful in diffusing officer/Member tensions in the past.
- (3) **Meeting Observation** - Particular focus on agenda management, public participation, Member engagement, Chairmanship, procedural and Code of Conduct compliance; This was a useful method to help build Council confidence and address compliance issues in a practical way.
- (4) **Personalised Training** - Training for the whole Council and staff or referral to SALC's existing training options; Single Council sessions which provided greater focus on what the Council did and an opportunity to address local concerns/problems or a training Question and Answer session where Members set the agenda. This had proven very effective at addressing poor internal relations; and a Mentoring Scheme was being developed.
- (5) **Council Business Planning** - An informal, facilitated session to take stock of where the Council was and where it wanted to be in 3-5 years' time; This might lead to a Council Work Plan or something larger involving the whole community; This had been tried and tested elsewhere and had been shown to raise aspirations and as a way of re- engaging with the local community.

Mr Lang concluded the presentation by stating that although the development of the Health Checks were in their early days there had already been some

positive outcomes and interest in the scheme from the National Association of Local Council's Improvement and Development Board.

There was a need to further trial aspects of the scheme and then assess how the Councils concerned were operating six months later on. SALC was hopeful that the approach outlined above would be one Standards Committees would recommend to Town and Parish Councils.

During the discussion of this item the following points were raised, with responses shown in italics:-

- How much would SALC charge to provide a 'health check' on a particular issue? *In the absence of Mr Robinson this was unknown. However, SALC had provided Taunton Deane with advice in respect of a recent parish issue having attended several meetings at a cost of only £100;*
- How many of Taunton Deane's Parish Council were members of SALC and how many had adopted the SALC Code of Conduct? *The majority of Parishes were members, but it was unknown how many had decided to adopt SALC's Code of Conduct. It was pointed out that all versions of the Code were required to cover the same basic principles set out by legislation.*
- It was very difficult to convince Parish Councils to seek outside help. Should SALC set out to attend Parish meetings where there were known issues without prior notice? *The SALC approach of raising awareness as to what it could offer Parish Councils was considered to be the right way forward.*
- There were currently a number of Parish Councils who were considering cancelling their subscription with SALC on the basis that they received very little in return. It was possible that these Parishes might join the Society of Local Council Clerks instead or rely on the wealth of information that was readily available from the internet. *Parish Councils needed to carefully consider withdrawing its membership of SALC as, in the future, the current support it offered might not be available.*

Resolved that Mr Lang be thanked for making the presentation on behalf of SALC, the contents of which would be noted.

25. Discontent with the current Standards Regime

Reference Minute No. 16/2017 the Democratic Services Manager, Richard Bryant, reported that a letter had been sent to the Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government as a 'follow up' to the letter that had originally been sent by Sedgemoor District Council on behalf of a dozen other Councils in the South-West.

A further letter had also been sent to the local Member of Parliament, Rebecca Pow, seeking confirmation that all of the original concerns of the Advisory Committee had been passed on to the Secretary of State.

Copies of both letters had been circulated to the Members of the Committee for information. Once responses were received, these would be copied to Members.

Resolved that the report be noted.

26. Exclusion of the Press and Public

Resolved that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items because of the likelihood that exempt information would otherwise be disclosed relating to Clause 2 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

27. Update on complaints made against Councillors

The Monitoring Officer, Bruce Lang, provided a report on the complaints that had been received by him over the past three months, the action that had been taken to deal with the matters raised and the outcomes.

Resolved that the report be noted.

28. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Advisory Committee would be held on Tuesday, 5 September 2017 at 2.30 p.m. in the John Meikle Room at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.29 p.m.)