

Item 7 (c) - Monitoring Officer Annual Report

The attached report was considered by the Standards Committee, and the relevant minute extract is below:

Standards Committee (5 April 2022, Minute 3)

Members considered the seventeenth annual report of the Monitoring Officer, which set out the work of the Monitoring Officer and Standards Committee. Within the report was a breakdown of the complaints that had been received from January to December 2021. He reported that eleven formal complaints were received this year in comparison to ten the previous year, which indicated that the Code of Conduct was well observed and accessible to those who wished to make a formal complaint.

The Monitoring Officer advised Members that the working group which had been set up to consider whether to adopt the 2020 Model Code of Conduct, had concluded that the Model Code should not be adopted. Accordingly, the existing Sevenoaks District Council Members Code of Conduct was reaffirmed by Full Council in July 2021. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that he had every confidence that Members followed the seven Nolan principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

The Monitoring Officer reported changes had been implemented during the pandemic which had made the decision-making process more accessible. He stated that he was confident in the Council's Governance structure.

A Member asked the Monitoring Officer if he had spoken to colleagues at other local Councils regarding governance procedures during the pandemic. He advised that Councils varied in size and nature, and therefore were each faced with unique challenges. He advised that the biggest issue was the legislation surrounding social distancing and the continued use of virtual platforms. He explained that following the expiry of the relevant regulations, voting Members needed to attend meetings in person, which could be unhelpful on occasions of illness or bad weather. He stated that the Local Government Association were continuing to lobby the government in order to allow remote access to count as Member attendance. The Member thanked the Monitoring Officer and his staff for implementing the changes from central government so quickly.

A Member asked the Monitoring Officer regarding the handling of complaints about Member conduct. The Monitoring Officer advised that the process was governed by the Localism Act, which mandated the Monitoring Officer to process complaints with the assistance of one or more Independent Persons. He advised that if necessary he would be able to provide Members with anonymous examples of previous complaints for training purposes.

He also advised that an Independent Person had attended the Standards meeting in the past and would be given the opportunity to attend the next meeting.

A member asked the Monitoring Officer whether he had responsibilities for the general governance of Parish Councils. He clarified that he did not and that such issues should be dealt with by the Kent Association of Local Councils.

Resolved: That the report be noted and that it be recommended to Council that the report be noted.