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## Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

### Standards Committee

Date: 21<sup>st</sup> December 2006

Subject: Parish and Town Council training

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**Electoral Wards Affected:**

**Specific Implications For:**

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

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### Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the Committee of the training provision offered to Parish and Town Councils since May 2006 and the amount of Parish and Town Councils who have been trained so far.
2. At the Committee meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006 it was requested that the Committee receive a six monthly report to establish what progress has been made so far and the date that Parish and Town Councils last received training.
3. To date 5 out of 30 Parish and Town Councils have received training on the Code of Conduct within this municipal year, and 2 in the previous municipal year. A training session being held in Kippax on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2006 will also hopefully incorporate up to 6 neighbouring parishes, meaning that a total of 11 Parish and Town Councils will have been trained by January 2007.
4. The City Council has made a significant commitment in this municipal year to improve the training available to Parish and Town Councils. Training on the Code of Conduct has been made more flexible, through offering central and localised sessions and offering training in other formats (e-learning).
5. More generally the Council has formally outlined its commitment to such training in the Parish and Town Council Charter, and has extended the training sessions available to City Councillors to include Parish and Town Councillors.
6. Members of the Committee are asked for suggestions as to what can be done to improve the take up of training on offer amongst Parish and Town Councils, and in particular whether as a Committee they should send a letter to the Parish and Town Councils outlining the importance of the training available.

## **1.0 Purpose Of This Report**

- 1.1 To advise the Committee of the training provision offered to Parish and Town Councils since May 2006 and the amount of Parish and Town Councils who have been trained so far.

## **2.0 Background Information**

- 2.1 On 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006 (minute 79) the Standards Committee received a report on the training available to Parish and Town Councils in Leeds on conduct and other issues. It was established that there was national training courses available to Parish and Town Councils as well as those provided by Leeds City Council.
- 2.2 This report also established that the new Member Development Strategy for 2006-2008 would open certain sessions to Parish and Town Councils, in particular training on issues such as planning.
- 2.3 The Committee resolved the following:
- a) that the Council provide training sessions for Parish Councillors centrally at Civic Hall, and locally in grouped sessions;
  - b) that the e-learning module be publicised and made available to all Parish Councils when complete; and
  - c) that training for Parish Councils be reviewed by the Standards Committee on an annual basis.
- 2.4 At the Committee meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006 it was requested that the Committee receive a six monthly report to establish what progress has been made so far and the date that Parish and Town Councils last received training.

## **3.0 Main Issues**

### Code of Conduct training delivered by Corporate Governance Team

- 3.1 Following the resolution made by the Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006, two central training sessions on the Code of Conduct were organised to take place on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> August, one session in the morning and the other in the evening.
- 3.2 Only three bookings were received for the training sessions and as a result of these bookings also occurring after the deadline provided, both sessions had to be cancelled.
- 3.3 Following the cancellation of these sessions, the Clerk to Thorner Parish Council expressed an interest in organising a local session for the Thorner Parish Councillors and for Councillors from surrounding areas. A local session was therefore held on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2006 during the evening. 15 Councillors and Clerks attended the training session representing Thorner, Shadwell, East Keswick, Scarcroft and Bardsey.
- 3.4 As can be seen in Appendix 1, to date 5 out of 30 Parish and Town Councils have received training on the Code of Conduct within this municipal year, and 2 in the previous municipal year. A training session being held in Kippax on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2006 will also hopefully incorporate up to 6 neighbouring parishes, meaning that a total of 11 Parish and Town Councils will have been trained by January 2007.

- 3.5 The feedback from the training session held in Shadwell was very positive on the whole, with most participants giving the training session a score of 3 or 4 (4 being 'excellent').
- 3.6 Appendix B shows how the Parish and Town Councils have been organised into five groups in order to conduct local training sessions.

#### Member Development Strategy 2006-2008

- 3.7 As reported on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006, in the Member Development Strategy for 2006-2008 the induction process will be on a rolling programme and will be available to all. The lunchtime seminar programme and personal development training have also been widened to include Parish Councillors from the beginning of 2006. Parish Councillors are asked to pay a fee of £10 per place to cover hospitality and administration costs. Amongst the topics covered are 'Understanding planning procedure and policy', 'Speech-making', 'Equality and Diversity' and IT skills.
- 3.8 To date no Parish and Town Councillors have attended training sessions through the Member Development Strategy, although they have been informed of all relevant seminars and sessions through the Parish Council Liaison Officer.

#### E-learning module

- 3.9 The e-learning module on the Members' Code of Conduct which has been produced in-house specifically for Leeds City Councillors, has been publicised and offered to those Parish and Town Councils who are interested in using the tool.
- 3.10 The second module which will cover the general obligations of the Code of Conduct is due for release in January 2007 and will also be offered to Parish and Town Councils once it becomes available.

#### Parish and Town Council Charter

- 3.11 Since the last report in March 2006, the Parish and Town Council Liaison Forum and the Leeds City Council Executive Board have adopted a Charter between Leeds City Council and the Parish and Town Councils within the administrative area of Leeds City Council. The Charter is attached as Appendix 2.
- 3.12 This Charter sets out how the Parish and Town Councils and Leeds City Council aim to work together for the benefit of local people. Through the Charter Leeds City Council, and more specifically, Democratic Services, have committed themselves to providing training and development opportunities for local councillors (subject to an administrative charge).
- 3.13 In return, the Parish and Town Councils have made a commitment to work with the Council's Monitoring Officer and the Standards Committee to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, although no specific detail is provided as to how this is to be achieved.
- 3.14 In line with this commitment, and to encourage a better take-up for Code of Conduct training a letter has been sent to the Parish and Town Council Clerks in the Leeds area with a paragraph from the Monitoring Officer urging them to take part in the training and pointing out the benefits of the training. So far this has not resulted in any more requests for training.

### Training and advice from national bodies

- 3.15 To coincide with the adoption of the revised Code of Conduct in May 2007 the Standards Board for England will be releasing new guidance on standards issues. One of these training aids will be a new DVD which will tackle the changes to the Code and will be released when the new Code comes into force. There will also be new guidance issued on how to declare interests.
- 3.16 As referred to in the last report in March 2006, there is a lot of training and guidance available through the County Training Partnerships (CTP) for Parish and Town Clerks and Councillors. These locally-based training partnerships act as a one-stop-shop for Clerks and Councillors wishing to access training opportunities and to register for the AQA Certificate in Local Council Administration. The local CTP in Yorkshire and Humberside provides the following services:
- Registration form for the Certificate in Local Council Administration
  - Training options to help Parishes attain the Certificate in Local Council Administration (access to the SLCC Working with Your Council distance learning pack, face to face courses, mentoring, advice etc)
  - Other training opportunities for councillors and clerks outside the AQA Certificate syllabus
  - Access to the 'What's on the Agenda?' training video and workbook pack. This video introduces viewers to 'meeting procedures' in parish councils.
  - Copies of 'The Good Councillors Guide' booklet
- 3.17 'The Good Councillors Guide' has been revised since the last report, and provides a clear and concise guide to the main provisions of the Code of Conduct, including how and when to declare interests. The guide is available to download from the National Association of Local Councils website ([www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk)) and from the County Training Partnership. The County Training Partnership can be contacted through the Yorkshire Association of Local Councils.
- 3.18 There is also a 'Political Skills Framework' available for Members through the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) which can be downloaded from their website ([www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)). Although this skills framework also includes sections for Cabinet Members and Leaders, it does provide examples of good ethical behaviour for elected Members without special positions.

### Ethical Audit questionnaire

- 3.19 Parish and Town Councillors and Clerks were also asked to take part in the above survey (agenda item 18 refers). Among the questions asked in the survey, Parish and Town Councillors were asked their opinions on the training provided by Leeds City Council.
- 3.20 Some Councillors expressed an interest in further training, although not related to the Code of Conduct:

*"I feel that more should be done to instruct Parish Councillors on items such as planning, procedural issues and as mentioned earlier in this survey the various acts as relevant, the Parish Councillors' handbook does not go far enough."*

- 3.21 However, other Councillors and Clerks were more negative towards the idea of training and the Code of Conduct in general:

*“The whole “standards” issue has got totally out of hand. Parish Councils should not be involved in this ridiculous red tape – let us do the job we were elected for. We are now spending too much time on government red tape.”*

*“There is far too much attention given to these issues – Parish Councils are there to look after the grass etc. not get into political minefields.”*

*“I find it incredible that you have asked Parish Councillors to fill in a 21 page questionnaire so that the latest PC fad (‘ethical standards’ otherwise known as ‘we trust nobody and let us regulate you to death’) can be ingratiated. This is an incredible waste of public funds – money that could have been given to voluntary groups to actually get on with doing something useful. Please do not bother us with such PC babble again.”*

*“We always were ethical, and didn’t need a paper makers dream to tell us how.”*

- 3.22 The above comments illustrate that some Parish Councillors and Clerks will be resistant to further conduct training no matter what time of year the training is offered, or the nature of the training.

#### Suggestions for improvement

- 3.23 As can be seen from the above information, the City Council has made a significant commitment in this municipal year to improve the training available to Parish and Town Councils. Training on the Code of Conduct has been made more flexible, through offering central and localised sessions and offering training in other formats (e-learning).
- 3.24 More generally the Council has formally outlined its commitment to such training in the Parish and Town Council Charter, and has extended the training sessions available to City Councillors to include Parish and Town Councillors.
- 3.25 Parish and Town Councils have been reminded of their responsibilities through correspondence, through the Parish and Town Council Charter and through the ethical audit questionnaire. However several Parish and Town Councils still seem resistant to such training and the Code of Conduct in general.
- 3.26 Members of the Committee are asked for suggestions as to what can be done to improve the take up of training on offer amongst Parish and Town Councils, and in particular whether as a Committee they should send a letter to the Parish and Town Councils outlining the importance of the training available.

## **4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance**

- 4.1 As outlined above, the City Council has a formal commitment to provide training and advice to Parish and Town Councils through the Parish and Town Council Charter.
- 4.2 By ensuring that all Parish and Town Councillors are properly trained in how to comply with the Code of Conduct, the Standards Committee is fulfilling its

responsibilities under its terms of reference and helping to ensure that Parish and Town Councillors in Leeds do not breach the Code of Conduct.

## **5.0 Legal And Resource Implications**

- 5.1 There are resource implications to carrying out additional training sessions and distributing correspondence, however these can be met from within existing budgets.

## **6.0 Conclusions**

- 6.1 As can be seen from the above information, the City Council has made a significant commitment in this municipal year to improve the training available to Parish and Town Councils. Training on the Code of Conduct has been made more flexible, through offering central and localised sessions and offering training in other formats (e-learning).
- 6.2 More generally the Council has formally outlined its commitment to such training in the Parish and Town Council Charter, and has extended the training sessions available to City Councillors to include Parish and Town Councillors.
- 6.3 Parish and Town Councils have been reminded of their responsibilities through correspondence, through the Parish and Town Council Charter and through the ethical audit questionnaire. However some Parish and Town Councils still seem resistant to such training and the Code of Conduct in general.

## **7.0 Recommendations**

- 7.1 Members of the Committee are asked for suggestions as to what can be done to improve the take up of training on offer amongst Parish and Town Councils, and in particular whether as a Committee they should send a letter to the Parish and Town Councils outlining the importance of the training available.