

Parish and Town Councils – Update on the Number of Register of Interests Forms Received

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Purpose of Report

To update Members about the number of Register of Interests forms returned from town and parish councils.

Public Interest

South Somerset District Council, through its Standards Committee, has responsibility for dealing with complaints that a councillor may have acted in breach of the relevant Code of Conduct. This responsibility relates to complaints about councillors of South Somerset District Council and all town & parish councils in our administrative area.

Each town and parish council is responsible for deciding what its own code should contain so its provisions may differ from our own. South Somerset District Council holds copies of all Codes for parish and town councils in order to see if the behaviour which is being complained about is specifically covered. If it is not covered then we cannot deal with the complaint.

All councillors are also required to complete a Register of Interests as required by the law and Codes of Conduct. Whilst the content may differ slightly between councils, in broad terms it contains details of the councillor's employment, land holdings, any contracts with the council and the identity of outside bodies of which they are also a member or in a position of control or management. These Registers are available for public inspection at our Brympton Way offices, and it is now also a requirement for them to be published on the internet. Responsibility for completing the register rests with the individual councillors.

Recommendation:

That members note the report.

Report

At the time of publishing this agenda, 92% of Register of Interests forms have also been received from a total of 828 town and parish councillors (there are 102 councils in South Somerset) but members will appreciate that some of the missing forms will be in relation to existing vacancies on parish/town councils. Democratic Services staff contact the town and parish clerks on an individual basis to encourage them to address any issue and omissions as soon as possible. Clearly it is not in anyone's interests for any failure to provide a completed Register of Interest form to end up as a formal complaint being made against the member under the town or parish council's code of conduct. Our own district councillors have been very good indeed and all have returned their completed forms.

As members will appreciate this is a significant piece of additional work for the Democratic Services team and some aspects have identified issues which we will try and address next time. The main issues seem to be that some councillors are not actually reading the supporting guidance or the form of the Register used by a particular council does not provide any additional guidance or clarification for its members. This means that queries present themselves on a significant percentage of forms which require further work to resolve. It is important that the information the Register contains is accurate and complete so that a member of the public can easily ascertain whether any member has an interest which should be declared.

All the Registers are then scanned by us (but excluding any signatures) and placed on our website for public view. The “new” process does it make it much easier for the public to access this information at any time which is a considerable improvement on the previous arrangements.

Background Papers: *None*
