

Report to the Audit & Governance Committee



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference: **AGC-028-2010/11**
Date of meeting: **14 February 2011**

Portfolio: None.

Subject: Standards for England (SFE) – Direction in Respect of Nazeing Parish Council.

Responsible Officer: Ian Willett (01992 564243).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendation:

(1) To note the current position on the Direction.

Executive Summary:

This is a progress report on the implementation of a Direction issued by SFE concerning Nazeing Parish Council. The report sets out details of training programmes put in place to achieve the objectives of the Direction, amendments agreed with SFE in regard to the terms of the direction, feedback on training given so far and future action.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The report was requested at the meeting of this Committee on 8 September 2011.

Other Options for Action:

None.

Report:

1. As a result of a series of “member on member” complaints at Nazeing Parish Council. SFE concluded that further investigations by SFE itself or by the Epping Forest District Standards Committee would be counter-productive offering little prospect of resolving the issues which underlie many of these complaints.

2. SFE therefore issued a direction to the Monitoring Officer, EFDC specifying other action under the Local Government Act 2000 which SFE felt would offer a better prospect of improving relationships between Councillors which seemed to be the root cause of the complaints. This Direction specified:

(a) that further training be offered to all Nazeing Parish Councillors in basic meeting practice and standing orders in mediation and conflict resolution; and

(b) that specific mediation for two named members of the Parish Council be made available.

3. As a result, negotiations were held with the Parish Clerk and two external trainers on delivering the programme. This resulted in a two phase programme being agreed with the Parish Council; the first concentrated on meeting procedure and the second on aspects of the Council internal relations. Item (b) was subsequently deleted from the Direction as only one of the two named councillors responded to the offer of mediation.

4. This programme was to be funded by the District Council and additional finance was included in the Standards Committee budget for 2010/11 to cover this.

5. Two training sessions have been held in Nazeing but not all members of that Council have been able to attend. After the second session, the trainer contacted the Council regarding her doubts about the future of the programme and its likely success in achieving the objectives of the Direction.

6. These reservations were reported to the local Standards Committee at its meeting on 18 January 2011. At that meeting, a letter was received from the Parish Council in reply to a letter from the District Council suggesting that the Parish Council consider making a voluntary contribution to these training costs at a later stage. The reply indicated that training and the request for a financial contribution should be deferred pending submission of the costs incurred.

7. The Standards Committee took the view that further training should be postponed pending receipt of a report of the trainer on her experiences at the first two of the five courses scheduled for Phase 1. The Monitoring Officer was asked to open discussions with SFE regarding the future of the Direction once that report was received.

8. No work has been undertaken in respect of Phase 2.

Resource Implications:

The training programme can be funded from existing budgets. Costs in respect of the first two courses in Phase 1 have been incurred. Although the amount is not yet known, this is likely to be of the order of £ 200 per course.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Local Government Act 2000 (Part III).

Any decision on the Direction is subject to SFE approval. Two complaints which were suspended pending the outcome of the Direction will be the subject of further decisions from SFE if the Direction were lifted.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

None.

Consultation Undertaken:

None.

Background Papers:

- Letter from SFE with direction dated 21 January 2010.
- Letter dated 13 January 2011 from Nazeing Parish Council.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

None.

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
None.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
N/A.