

Statement re-Standards Board

Following complaints from members of the public and other members of this council, I approached the Monitoring Officer of Mid Suffolk District Council, Ian Rickard, on 12th December for advice on referring Councillor Cockerton to the Standards Board of England. I, and those who spoke to me, felt that her behaviour at the 10th December council meeting in relation to the accuracy of minutes and her failure to leave the table when Council debated the action to take in relation to the letter of complaint from her husband, demonstrated disrespect to fellow councillors, sought to improperly influence a decision and brought the council into disrepute. These are only the latest examples of such behaviour. I and the previous Chairman have tried on many occasions to convince Cllr Cockerton, directly and via advice to full council regarding conduct, that she should change her approach and the style of communication used to and about other members, and particularly the Clerk.

Since being elected Chairman I have tried my utmost to create an atmosphere at meetings that is friendly, open, relaxed and unilted whilst being professional and effective. Recent experiences have confirmed that I have been unable to control the corrosive and debilitating undercurrent that exists through disrespectful behaviour and the reaction it provokes, and which surfaces all too often. This wastes so much time, undermines morale and makes unpleasant the whole experience of being on Council. To the extent that I have been told that interested parishioners have decided not to join the council, other members have resigned and, in my view, it is threatening to cause this council to become totally dysfunctional. Despite my and my predecessor's continuing concerns about Cllr Cockerton's conduct, which I have striven to tolerate with patience, it has recently been made clear that her husband is considering taking a complaint to the Standards Board about me and other councillors, challenging our treatment of her.

Following regular and detailed discussions with the Vice Chairman and further advice from the Monitoring Officer, there appear to be two ways forward open to me. To continue with my personal complaint to the Standards Board, which realistically if upheld could only result in Cllr Cockerton being suspended for up to 3 months. This would involve a great deal of effort at a time when our Clerk is sick, bring further negative attention to the council and would distract us even more from the necessary work of the council. Also, sadly I believe that it would be unlikely to change anything in the longer term.

The second is to resign from Council, either in April or after the outcome of Mr Cockerton's threatened referral of Council to the Standards Board should have been resolved, whichever is the sooner.

Regrettably it has therefore become clear to me that I can no longer remain on Council whilst Cllr Cockerton is a member and able to have such a negative effect on the work of her colleagues and upon the reputation of the Council. You should also be made aware that at least two other councillors have expressed their intention to resign, staying only out of respect of the council and its present predicament. I hope that each of you and the people of Debenham will understand why I have had to make this statement. I hope that there may still be a way that this situation can be resolve and I have asked Mr Rickard if he can discuss Debenham's position with the Standards Board.

M J Morley
Chairman, Debenham Parish Council
21st January 2008