

BOROUGH OF KETTERING

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Report Originator	Martin Hammond Executive Director and Deputy Monitoring Officer		
Wards Affected	All	19 th March 2018	
Title	DESBOROUGH TOWN COUNCIL		

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To consider the mass resignation of Conservative Group councillors from Desborough Town Council.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Members of the Standards Advisory Committee may be aware that there has been a mass resignation of Conservative Group councillors from Desborough Town Council. This report explains the background to this, as some of the reasons touch on Standards concerns.

2.2 Desborough Town Council is made up of 12 councillors, serving a four year term of office which runs until May 2019. Following a bye-election in late 2017, the composition of the Council was

Conservative Group members	10
Independent member	1
Independents for Desborough Group member	1

2.3 During January and February 2018, all ten Conservative Group members resigned, eight on the same day and for the same reason. The Council needs a quorum of four to function, and now has only two.

2.4 The Borough Council has set in train the process for filling the vacancies, with any contested election likely to take place on May 3rd.

2.5 Under S91 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Borough Council may appoint temporary councillors to enable the Town Council to function in the meantime. It would be usual in these circumstances to appoint Borough or County Councillors for the area in question to these temporary positions, but four of the five potential candidates had just resigned as Town Councillors and the remaining one would not be prepared to be appointed, given the history as outlined below. Initially, the two remaining councillors did not consider it necessary to appoint anyone for the interim, although one now does consider that would be better, as does the Clerk, and the second member has agreed, subject to some conditions which may or may not be capable of being applied. The Northamptonshire Association of Local Councils is also in favour of the Borough Council making an appointment and has offered to help identify

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potential appointees. The Town Council has no financial commitments between now and May which cannot be met by some other means, although there are other issues which the Town Council may wish to address in the next two months. The Borough Council is now exploring, with NALC, whether there are people willing to serve as temporary councillors. Until then however, the Town Council will therefore cease to meet, and function for most purposes.

- 2.6 The ten resignations took place against a background of contentious debate within Desborough over recent times. In 2016, the Town Council significantly increased its precept, and this led to the creation of a new political group, Independents for Desborough, to a parish poll in June 2016 expressing “no confidence” in the Town Council, and to a number of difficult and sometimes unpleasant public meetings, including Town Council meetings, which have taken place over the intervening 18 months. Some of the meetings of the Town Council have been recorded and published on YouTube and these certainly show an atmosphere of anger and unpleasant behaviour.
- 2.7 In November, the Town Council Chairman resigned as chair, but not as councillor. His replacement resigned in January as chair and as a councillor, citing intimidation by members of the public. Prior to that she has lodged a complaint about another councillor and against that councillor’s spouse. At this time I was the Monitoring Officer, and as Monitoring Officer I considered that this complaint did not represent a breach of the code of conduct, nor in the case of the spouse, fell under my aegis to investigate. At the same time, the councillor’s spouse also lodged a complaint against the chair which, for similar reasons, I did not take up. Other incidents, in the wider community, including alleged criminal damage, led to her resignation. There were other issues which were brought to my attention as potential standards issues but which did not warrant investigation. Only one other matter did warrant investigation, and this is dealt with separately.
- 2.8 This was followed on the 22nd January by the resignation of another councillor (the former chair), although in this case, the reason given was the failure of the Town Council and the Borough Council to deal with a separate Standards issue (see separate report to this meeting) and wider dissatisfaction with the progress against the Town Council’s programme of improvements.
- 2.9 Finally, on 1st February, eight town councillors resigned, citing intimidation and abuse from members of the public.
- 2.10 There has no doubt been a polarisation of opinion in the town, and a breakdown of trust in Desborough between the Council and a proportion of the community. Some of the behaviour has been unpleasant and personalised, and has been directed at employees of the Town Council as well as its members. Some matters have been referred to the police for investigation.
- 2.11 A further issue is dealt with in the other report to this meeting.

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2.12 A new Council will be elected in May. It is considered that the new councillors should be invited to an induction session by the Borough Council, to set out the Standards regime and their duties, individually and collectively, as elected councillors, in the hope that this may address any potential continuation of the current atmosphere.

3. **RECOMMENDATION**

The views of the Standards Committee on any aspects of this report are sought.