

Standards Committee – 7 March 2007

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in The Principal Committee Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday 7 March at 2.00pm

Present: Mr D Baker (Chairman)
Councillors Croad, Slattery and Mrs Whitmarsh
Mrs A Elder, Mr J Dewdney, Mr D Gollin, Mrs P Hawks and
Mr W L Rogers

Officers: Mr J J Thornberry (Monitoring Officer), Mr G P Dyke (Democratic Services Manager), Mr D Greig (Parish Liaison Officer) and Mrs D Durham (Democratic Services Officer).

1. Apologies

Councillor Mrs Allgrove and Mr H Inder

2. Dates of Future Meetings

The following meeting dates were noted:

Tuesday 12 June 2007
Tuesday 14 August 2007
Tuesday 16 October 2007
Tuesday 15 January 2008
Wednesday 16 April 2008

3. Forward Plan

Further to Minute Number 53/2006 a Forward Plan outlining the future work of the Committee was submitted. Members were particularly keen to develop links with Parish Councils. It was felt that a nominated member should be appointed to undertake this work.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be agreed and Lynn Rogers take on the role of strengthening links with Parish Councils.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 14 November 2006 were taken as read and were signed.

Reference Minute Number 52/2006 the Chairman reported that a Member of the Standards Committee had requested details of the attendance of his elected Members, with a view to publishing the information in his parish.

It was felt by all members of the Committee and by the officers that the information gave a misleading impression, as reliance on attendance figures did not reflect the varied role of a Councillor.

The role of the Standards Committee was to promote high ethical standards and the proposed publication of such information by one of its members was cause for concern. The Chairman emphasised the need for any information to be balanced, less the public view of the work of Councillors could become distorted.

It was agreed that a protocol of how Members of the Standards Committee should carry out their duties should be produced.

5. South West Independent Members Group meeting

The latest South West Independent Members meeting on 2 March 2007 had been attended by the Chairman, David Baker and the Democratic Services Manager, Greg Dyke. Each provided a resume of the lectures and workshops attended.

The local filtering of investigations had been discussed and the necessity to separate roles, investigating, filtering and decisions. It required guidance, flexible solutions and a need to be robust.

The new Code of Conduct was discussed and many concerns were raised.

A representative from Bristol City Council had produced a variety of protocols including one on statements made by Members and it was felt that this could prove useful.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

6. Report of the Monitoring Officer on Ethics and Probity issues

The Monitoring Officer provided his regular briefing on matters that had come to his attention since the last meeting. The issues had included, the auditing of Members and officers' hospitality registers, the ISiS project and the new Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

7. Consultation on Amendments to the Model Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members

The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) had officially launched their revised Code of Conduct consultation paper, asking for views to be submitted by the 9 March 2007.

The document had been circulated to Members of the Standards Committee, prior to the meeting, asking for their views and comments.

The aim of the new Code of Conduct, was for it to be more clear and enabling, however, there were concerns that many of the definitions were more vague than previously.

The views that would be submitted to the DCLG were as follows:

- The Standards Committee were very supportive of a Code of Conduct and the discipline it introduced to the role of those in public life;
- it was now an accepted part of local government and the Standards Committee were happy that it should continue as such;
- the proposed revised Code, as currently drafted was too imprecise. It contained too many opportunities for different interpretations and would lead to an inconsistent approach;
- It required clearer definitions; and
- It provided an opportunity to introduce a Code based on the experience of past years.

RESOLVED that the views of the Standards Committee be submitted to the DCLG.

8. Standards Committee Training

A training course had been held at County Hall on 19 February 2007 and was attended by the majority of the Standards Committee.

Those who attended found the training useful and enjoyed the opportunity to network with other Standards Committees in the County.

9. Elections 2007

The Democratic Services Manager reported on how the work of the Standards Committee would be included in the election process. The guide for prospective candidates, both Borough and Parish, included details of Ethics and Probity and the Chairman of the Standards Committee would be invited to the new Members Welcome Day to talk about the role of the Standards Committee.

Ethics and Probity training would be carried out as soon as possible after the elections with refreshers being held over the following four years.

10. Membership of the Standards Committee

The Chairman reported that Mr J Dewdney and Councillor Croad would not be standing as a Member on the Standards Committee. He thanked them both, on behalf of the committee, for their contributions to the work of the Standards Committee.

11. Any Other Business

The Chairman reported that he would be meeting with the Audit Commission and would report back to the Standards Committee at a later stage.

The Democratic Services Manager submitted details of a series of roadshows that the Standards Board for England were holding. Four places had been booked on the Exeter event on 20 June 2007.

(The meeting ended at 4.35pm)