

Standards Committee – 12 July 2011

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday, 25 July 2011 at 2.30 p.m.

Present: Councillors Mrs Allgrove and Gaines
Mr T Bowditch, Mrs A Elder, Mr L Rogers, Mr R Symons and Mr B Wilson

Officers: Mrs T Meers (Monitoring Officer), Mr D Greig (Parish Liaison Officer) and
Mr R Bryant (Democratic Services Manager)

69. Appointment of Chairman

Resolved that Mrs Anne Elder be appointed Chairman of the Standards Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

70. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

Resolved that Mr Alan Cottrell be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee for the remainder of the Municipal Year.

71. Apologies

Councillor Brooks, Mr A Cottrell, Mr H Davenport, Mr D Macey and Mr M Marshall.

72. Mr Maurice Stanbury

The Chairman announced that Mr Maurice Stanbury had resigned from the Standards Committee. He had been a Member of the Committee since its inception over 10 years ago and had served as Vice-Chairman for several years

The Committee agreed that a letter be sent to Mr Stanbury thanking him for his valuable service.

73. Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Eddie Gaines to his first meeting of the Committee.

74. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 25 January 2011 were taken as read and were signed.

75. Declaration of Interests

The Chairman, Anne Elder, declared personal interests as a Public Governor

of the Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust and as a Member of the House Management Committee of one of the premises operated by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution. Councillor Mrs Allgrove declared a personal interest as a Member of the Somerset Association of Local Councils.

76. The future of the Standards Regime

The Monitoring Officer, Tonya Meers, reported on the progress of the Government's Localism Bill the contents of which, if brought into law, could have a considerable impact on the Standards regime currently operated by Councils in England.

The Bill was currently being debated by the House of Lords against a clear background that many Councils wished to retain a Code of Conduct for both Members and officers.

If the current Code of Conduct was to be abolished, it was likely that the Local Government Association or the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSES) would draft a replacement which individual Councils could adopt.

As far as the six Councils in Somerset were concerned, all wished to retain a Code of Conduct and their Standards Committees. Councillor Williams, as Leader of Taunton Deane, had also indicated that he was very supportive of the work undertaken by the Committee in the past and hoped this would be able to continue in the future.

Mrs Meers also reported that apart from the original sanction of Councillors being prosecuted for misbehaviour in the Localism Bill, there had been no indication that a range of lesser sanctions would be available to Councils who opted to continue with a Code of Conduct.

It was likely that the Localism Bill would pass through the House of Lords during mid-September 2011 to coincide with the next scheduled meeting of the Committee. Mrs Meers hoped to bring a further, more detailed, update to this meeting.

During the discussion of this item the following points were made:-

- What was likely to happen to the Parish Councils who were currently subject to the Code of Conduct?
- It would be odd if Taunton Deane retained a Standards Committee which had no jurisdiction over the Parishes;
- Any Code in the future which applied to Parish Councils needed to include measures to protect the independence of Clerks; and
- Would it be helpful if the Chairmen and Clerks of Parish Councils met up on an annual basis to discuss matters relating to the Code of Conduct?

The Parish Liaison Officer, David Greig confirmed that such meetings had been held in the past but, due to low attendances, the decision was taken to stop convening them. It had been also agreed at that time that the provision of training on the Code of Conduct or discussions relating to it would be more effective if they were provided “at source” – at Parish Council meetings.

Mr Greig added that if there was an overwhelming demand for Chairman and Clerk meetings to be revived, this could be arranged in the future.

Resolved that the update provided on the Localism Bill be noted.

77. Budget Review Project

Mrs Meers reported that the Council was facing an unprecedented 40% cut in its funding over the next four years.

Although it was hoped that the reduction in funding would be partly mitigated by the introduction of further efficiency measures and by increasing income generation, it was inevitable that the services now provided by the Council would be severely affected.

Stage 1 of the Budget Review process had recently been completed. This sought to look at all the options open to the Council to address the predicament Council’s across the country were facing. Many of the options that had been proposed had come from staff consultation meetings where various proposals to achieve savings had been floated.

All of these options had been included in a Budget Review Pack which would be issued to all Councillors for consideration. The options would be fully considered through the political groups, Scrutiny and the Executive to establish which of the options should be recommended for implementation. Ultimately, it would be for Full Council to decide if these options should be pursued.

The Committee noted that a review of Taunton Deane’s Senior Management Structure was also taking place alongside the Budget Review. In addition, even though it was unlikely the Council would seek to renegotiate its contract with Southwest One, it would be looking for further savings to be made from it.

Members appreciated that a 40% cut in funding would have a serious affect on non-statutory services and staff numbers where a reduction in some services would be required to maintain a certain standard in others.

It was also recognised that the Standards Committee would have a role to play over the forthcoming months to ensure that both Councillors and officers adhered to the Code of Conduct.

Resolved that the report be noted.

78. Attendance at Taunton Deane Committee Meetings

The Chairman reported that since the last meeting in January 2011, she had attended all meetings of the Planning Committee and Full Council as the independent representative from the Standards Committee. She had also attended several meetings of the Executive too.

She reported that she had observed one or two minor issues which could have resulted in complaints being lodged but had sought to resolve matters by having a “quiet word” with the individuals concerned.

Although Terry Bowditch reported that he had attended a meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee in February, it was clear that other Council meetings had not been visited by the other independent Members.

The Democratic Service Manager, Richard Bryant, reported that he would ask the Vice-Chairman to re-circulate the list he had prepared of the Committees and those who had volunteered to attend future meetings.

With regard to Planning Committee meetings, it was felt that members of the public sometimes did not behave too well, sometimes making accusations against officers who then found it very difficult to respond.

Resolved that the report be noted.

79. Code of Conduct Training

Mrs Meers reported that all new Taunton Deane Councillors, who had been elected at the beginning of May 2011, had received training in respect of the Code of Conduct as part of the induction process.

Mr Greig reported that all new Parish Councillors had been sent a copy of the Code of Conduct (the “Brown Book”) and he had conducted one formal training session at Bishops Lydeard and Cothelstone Parish Council. This training session had been offered to all the other Parishes too.

The situation was slightly awkward as most Parish Councils were aware that the current Standards regime might change as a result of the Localism Bill and were therefore awaiting developments before committing to further training.

However, Mr Greig added that this did not mean that the new Parish Councillors would remain untrained. Many would have signed up for the general training offered by the Somerset Association of Local Councils which would include references to the Code of Conduct.

In his contact with the Parish Councils, Mr Greig had also requested that new Councillors should complete their individual entries on the Register of Interests.

Resolved that the report be noted.

80. Raising the profile of the Standards Committee

Councillor Gaines wondered whether the role of the Standards Committee could be promoted via Community Radio. Interviews could be taped and perhaps used as a future training aid.

Members felt that this was an idea worth pursuing once the future of the current Standards regime was decided.

81. Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on Tuesday, 13 September 2011 at 2.30 p.m. in The John Meikle Room at The Deane House.

82. Exclusion of the Press and Public

Resolved that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items because of the likelihood that exempt information would otherwise be disclosed relating to Clause 2 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest in withholding the information outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information to the public.

83. Update on complaints made against Councillors

Mrs Meers reported that a new complaint had recently been received against a Taunton Deane Councillor. This complaint would be investigated in due course.

She also reported that Taunton Deane received only one complaint during the whole of 2010/2011. This compared very favourably with the numbers of complaints received by the other five Somerset authorities during the same period.

Resolved that the report be noted.

(The meeting ended at 3.21 p.m.)