

Standards Committee – 13 June 2006

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the Principal Committee Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday, 13 June 2006 at 2.15 pm

Present: Mr D Baker (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Croad, Slattery and Mrs Whitmarsh
Mrs A Elder, Mrs P Hawks, Mr W L Rogers, Mr M Stanbury and
Councillor E Warren

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

21. Apologies

Mr J Dewdney.

22. Minutes

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

23. Declarations of Interests

Councillor Mrs G Allgrove declared a personal interest in any items relating to Parish Council matters as she was Vice-Chair of the Somerset Association of Local Councils.

24. Appointment of New Members

Concern was expressed at the length of time it had taken to fill the two vacancies on the Committee for Independent Members. Details of the recruitment process were explained and it was hoped that the Council would be in a position in the near future to fill these two vacancies. It was agreed that the Chairman should have some input in the selection process.

It was reported that it had been difficult to attract suitable candidates to fill these vacancies and that this was a problem also being experienced with Standards Committees elsewhere.

RESOLVED that the appointment process continue as quickly as possible and the Chairman be involved in the selection process.

25. Chairman's Meeting with Group Leaders

The Chairman reported in detail upon his meeting with political group leaders of the Council which had taken place on 11 April 2006. Many issues had been discussed, in particular the forthcoming changes in legislation and the

proposal that local Standards Committees would have greater responsibility for appeal hearings.

It was essential that the delays experienced by the Standards Board for England were not duplicated when hearings were heard locally and the Group Leaders were informed of the view that sufficient funding would need to be made available to ensure that these delays did not occur.

In general the Group Leaders were supportive of the training programmes which had been developed by the Standards Committee and would encourage all of its Members to attend the forthcoming member briefing session on ethics and probity.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

26. Councillors' training 27 June 2006

Greg Dyke, Member Services Manager shared with the Committee the draft training presentation that had been put together for the Members Training Event on 27 June 2006. The Committee were given an opportunity to comment on the content of the presentation and make any alterations they felt necessary.

27. Parish Councils

David Greig, Parish Liaison Officer submitted details of the work he had done and continued to do within the Parishes to raise the awareness of ethics and probity. 29 of the 41 parishes had so far been visited. No concerns had been raised from his observations of these Parish Council meetings over the way the Parishes approach their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct.

Numerous enquiries from Parish Councils or declarations of personal and prejudicial interests had been received and suitable advice given.

The Chairman reported that he had attended a recent meeting of the West Hatch Parish Council where he gave a presentation on the work of the Standards Committee. This had been an opportunity to explain what the Committee's role was. He had written to all Parishes offering the attendance of Standard Committee Members at their meetings.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and David Greig be thanked for his work with the Parishes.

28. South West Independent Members Group Meeting – 24 March 2006

Submitted details of the latest meeting of the South West Independent Members Forum which had been held at Thornbury on 24 March 2006. The Committee had been represented by the Chairman David Baker and Greg Dyke Member Services Manager. The meeting had concentrated on future developments in relation to standards of conduct in English Local

Government and received a presentation from Anne Reyhill Senior Policy Adviser to the Standards Board for England.

Members present had also identified issues of general concern which would help to form the Agenda for future meetings of this Group.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

29. Report of Monitoring Officer on Ethics and Probity Issues

The Monitoring Officer provided the regular briefing on matters that had come to his attention since the last meeting. The question of pre-determination or “fettering of discretion” was a matter which had particularly exercised Councillor’s minds in recent times. There had also been issues relating to the publication of confidential papers and the role of Councillors at public consultation meetings. It was clear that a protocol would need to be provided in order that Members were aware of their role at such meetings.

The conduct of meetings was another issue which had figured in recent weeks. In addition advice had been given on possible prejudicial interests. The work of the Somerset Monitoring Officer’s Group and the common area of concerns between Local Authorities within Somerset were reported.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and the Monitoring Officer prepare a draft protocol regarding predetermination for further consideration by the Standards Committee.

30. Local Hearing

Consideration was given to the way in which the forthcoming local hearing should be dealt with.

RESOLVED that a Sub-Committee comprising the Chairman, one Parish Representative and one Councillor be formed to consider an allegation that a Parish Councillor had breached the Code of Conduct.

31. Bridging the Gap – 5th Annual Assembly of Standards Committee – 16/17 October 2006 ICC Birmingham

RESOLVED that the Chairman Jeremy Thornberry Monitoring Officer and Greg Dyke Member Services Manager be authorised to attend this Conference.

(The meeting ended at 4.18 pm)