

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in Committee Room 2, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday 10 June 2008 at 2.15 pm

Present: Mrs A Elder (Chairman)
Mr M Stanbury (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Allgrove and House
Mr H Inder, Mrs J Hoyle, Mr M Marshall and Mr D Wilson

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

24. Apologies

Councillor Slattery, Mr D Macey and Mr W L Rogers

25. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 16 April 2008 were taken as read and were signed.

26. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mrs Allgrove declared a personal interest as Chair of the Somerset Association of Local Councils

27. The Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008

The Monitoring Officer, Tonya Meers, made a presentation to the Standards Committee to explain in detail The Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008 which had come into force on 8 May 2008.

Regulation 5 made provision for the appointment of Independent Members and Parish Councillors to the Standards Committee.

Whilst it was generally felt that the size of Taunton Deane's Standards Committee was about right, Mrs Meers wondered whether a third Parish Councillor should be appointed instead of filling the current vacancy for an Independent Member caused by David Baker's recent decision to step down from the Committee.

Mrs Meers anticipated that there were likely to be complaints about Parish Councillors in the future which would have to be considered through the Local Assessment procedures. She felt that an additional parish representative would be helpful in widening the 'pool' when it came to selecting an Assessment Panel but would also reduce the possibility of there being a conflict between the Parish Councillor the subject of the complaint and the Parish Members on the Standards Committee.

After a short discussion it was agreed that a replacement Independent Member and a third parish representative should be appointed to the Standards Committee. Mrs Meers confirmed that an increase in the size of the Committee was a Constitutional change which would need to be approved by Full Council, possibly at the July 2008 meeting.

The Chairman asked whether it was permissible for a Parish Councillor to serve as an Independent Member of the Committee. Mrs Meers confirmed that she would investigate this point and would report back.

28. Local Assessment Guidance for Standards Committees and Monitoring Officers

The Standards Committee also considered the recently published guidance issued by the Standards Board for England titled "Local Assessment of Complaints".

In terms of publicising the complaints system, it was proposed to issue a leaflet explaining the procedures which would also include a simple form which a potential complainant could use.

An initial draft leaflet was circulated for the information and comment of the Committee. Several changes were suggested to the draft which would be incorporated into the final version. When the leaflet was eventually printed copies would be made available to the public in The Deane House Reception, the Community Office in Wellington, local libraries, the Citizen's Advice Bureau and local Post Offices.

As to the procedure to be followed once a complaint was received, it was agreed that:-

- Once a meeting of the Assessment Sub-Committee had been arranged, the Monitoring Officer would prepare a pre-assessment report for consideration by the Sub-Committee;
- If the Sub-Committee decided that the complaint should be investigated, a letter should be sent to the complainant acknowledging receipt of the complaint together with the decision notice stating the complaint was to be investigated;
- At the same time, the Councillor the subject of the complaint would be notified of the Sub-Committee's decision and would also be provided with a summary of the complaint made against him/her;
- The above actions would all usually take place within 20 working days from the receipt of the complaint.

(Mrs Jenny Hoyle arrived at the meeting at 3.20 p.m. during the discussion of Minute No. 28.)

29. Complaints received concerning a Parish Council

The Chairman brought to the attention of the Committee a situation where one

of the Independent Members had received several anonymous complaints about a particular Parish Council in the Taunton Deane Area.

The Parish Liaison Officer, David Greig, stated that he was fully aware of this matter which involved a conflict over a specific issue between two of the Parish Councillors. He added that in his opinion, this was a governance issue and was not therefore within the remit of the Standards Committee.

If, however, the situation was subsequently considered to be a breach of the Code of Conduct, a complaint could now be made direct to the Council.

30. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would be on Tuesday, 26 August 2008 at 2.15pm in the Committee Room No 1 at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.26 p.m.)