

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in Committee Room 2, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday, 21 October 2008 at 2.15 pm

Present: Mrs A Elder (Chairman)
Mr M Stanbury (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor House
Mrs J Hoyle, Mr R Macey, Mr L Rogers, Mr M Marshall and Mr B Wilson

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

40. Mr Harold Inder

The Chairman reported that Mr Harold Inder, who was one of the Committee's Independent Members, had recently died. The Committee paused in silence in Mr Inder's memory.

41. Apologies

Councillors Mrs Allgrove and Slattery.

42. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 26 August 2008 were taken as read and were signed.

In response to an enquiry by the Vice-Chairman, Maurice Stanbury, it was confirmed that the final version of the "How to make a complaint about a Councillor" Leaflet had been published and distributed in accordance with what the Committee had agreed at its last meeting.

43. Appointment of the third Parish representative to the Standards Committee

Reference Minute No 36/2008, reported that following further publicity a total of five Parish Councillors had now applied to fill the current vacancy for a third Parish Council representative on the Standards Committee.

The Monitoring Officer, Tonya Meers, reported that it had recently come to light that the wording of the Council's Constitution made it clear that a Parish Councillor could not serve as an Independent Member on the Standards Committee. This newly identified situation would affect the standing of Jenny Hoyle, who was a Milverton Parish Councillor.

Mrs Meers reported that having spoken to her about his matter, Mrs Hoyle had indicated that she would be happy to take up the third Parish Council place on the Committee.

Resolved that:-

- (1) Mrs Jenny Hoyle be appointed as the third Parish Council representative on the Standards Committee alongside Mr Michael Marshall and Mr Bryn Wilson; and
- (2) Letters be sent to those Parish Councillors who had applied for the position, thanking them for their interest.

44. Update on the appointment of an Independent Member to the Standards Committee

Reference Minute No 37/2008, the Democratic Services Manager, Richard Bryant, reported that the recent advertisement of a vacancy on the Standards Committee for an Independent Member in the "recruitment" section of the Somerset County Gazette and on Parish Noticeboards across Taunton Deane had already resulted in half a dozen requests for application forms.

This was most encouraging as the last advertisement had brought only one enquiry. The closing date for completed applications to be submitted was 7 November 2008 and with Harold Inder's untimely death and Jenny Hoyle filling the Parish Representative vacancy, three new Independent Members were now required.

Mr Bryant went on to explain that interviews would be arranged, probably towards the end of November. The Interviewing Panel normally comprised the Chairman of the Committee, at least one of the Political Group Leaders and the Monitoring Officer.

Resolved that the report be noted.

45. Feedback from the Standards Board for England's Conference

Mrs Meers and Mr Bryant had both attended the Standards Board for England's Annual Conference which had been held in Birmingham on 13 and 14 October 2008.

Mrs Meers provided Members with a broad overview of the Conference. There had been clear messages from the Standards Board for England that now was the time for local Standards Committees to become integral parts of the local authorities. She listed the following as ways in which this overall aim could be achieved at Taunton Deane:-

- By forming working relationships with the Scrutiny side of the Council, perhaps by inviting the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Board to attend a future meeting, and the Corporate Governance Committee;
- Meeting up with the Chief Executive and the Section 151 Officer (with the Monitoring Officer, the three Statutory Officers of the Council) so that their roles in the Council were clearly understood;

- Becoming more involved in the Ethical Governance arrangements of the Council and the Member Development Charter;
- The Chairman meeting up with the Political Group Leaders to establish better working relationships;
- By publicising the future work of the Standards Committee; and
- By continuing the previous practice of attending meetings of the Council as observers.

Mr Bryant provided some detailed feedback on the two Conference “breakout” sessions he had attended – a workshop titled “Focus on fire, police and park authorities” which identified the advantages and disadvantages of possible future joint working with neighbouring local authorities and a mini plenary session titled “The parish perspective”.

The latter session was very informative and proved conclusively that Taunton Deane was significantly ahead of the game in having a Parish Liaison Officer who had not only delivered Code of Conduct training to every Parish Council at source but had been available to provide advice on matters which could have resulted in complaints being generated.

Mr Bryant informed Members that if they wished to find out more about the Conference and the wide range of topics covered they could visit the following website – www.annualassembly.co.uk.

46. Visits to Parish Councils

The Parish Liaison Officer, David Greig, had circulated a list of those parishes which had not yet received a visit from one of the Independent Members of the Committee.

It was agreed that these “goodwill/show the face of the Standards Committee” visits should recommence as soon as possible. It was further agreed that either the Clerk or Chairman of the appropriate Parish Council should be contacted in advance to explain the planned visit – David Greig to provide contact details.

During the discussion of this item, Jenny Hoyle enquired whether arrangements were in hand to provide the Code of Conduct training to those Parish Councillors who missed out first time around. Mr Greig confirmed that he would seek to do this in the New Year.

47. Update on the new Local Assessment Process

The Monitoring Officer, Tonya Meers, reported that since the new Local Assessment Process had come into effect in early May 2008, a total of three complaints had been received.

Two of these complaints were currently the subject of investigation. The other had been submitted without sufficient information. A request for further facts had brought no reply, so no action on the complaint would now be taken.

48. Communities and Local Government Consultation Paper

Mrs Meers informed Members that a Consultation Paper had been received from the Department of Communities and Local Government titled "Communities in control : Real people, real power. Codes of conduct for local authority members and officers".

Although the deadline for responses was not until 24 December 2008, it was intended that the Somerset Monitoring Officers would put together a joint response to the Government, once the Standards Committees across the County had first commented on the Consultation Paper.

As the next scheduled meeting of the Committee was not until the New Year, Mrs Meers asked Members to consider setting up a "special meeting".

49. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would be held on Tuesday, 25 November 2008 at 2.15p m in Committee Room No 2 at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.25 p.m.)