

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Wednesday, 11 February 2009 at 2.15 p.m.

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

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

Also present as observers: Mr A Cottrell, Mr P Malim and Mr R Symons.

1. Welcome

The Chairman welcomed Messrs Cottrell, Malim and Symons to the meeting. She explained that the three had been selected to fill the Independent Member vacancies on the Standards Committee. Their appointments had still to be formally confirmed by Full Council. In the meantime, they were in attendance as observers.

2. Apologies

Councillor Slattery and Mrs J Hoyle.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 3 December 2008 were taken as read and were signed.

4. Feedback from the 5th Somerset Standards Committees' Annual Forum

The 5th Somerset Standards Committees' Annual Forum had been held at County Hall, Taunton on Wednesday, 28 January 2009 and Members were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the Forum.

The general feeling expressed was that the arrangements at the start of the day had been very poor with delegates turning up at the wrong time, the meeting room not being prepared and audio aids for those hard of hearing being less than efficient.

The content of the Forum was considered to have been acceptable but not as good as previous years. The emphasis during the morning on Sedgemoor District Council's problems with the Local Assessment Scheme was thought to have been too laboured whilst the Workshop on Sanctions had been interesting.

The presentation made by Dr Michael Macaulay from the University of Teesside on “What makes a Standards Committee effective?” had been particularly well received.

This prompted a discussion between Members as to how Taunton Deane’s Standards Committee could become more proactive and how the Committee’s “status” could be raised within the Council’s structure.

Amongst ideas which were suggested to achieve a higher profile were:-

- Regular contact with the Political Group Leaders and Senior Officers to re-establish formal contact with the Council. (Richard Bryant reported that it was already intended to request both the Chief Executive, Penny James, and the Section 151 Officer, Shirlene Adam, to attend a future meeting of the Standards Committee);
- Consideration of the Committee’s functions to see whether these should be widened. For example, changes to the Council’s Constitution could be considered by the Committee;
- Further appearances by the Independent Members at formal meetings of the Council in a similar way to the visits already made to Parish Councils; and
- Greater publicity and promotion of the work of the Committee.

The Chairman felt that as the Committee was part of the Council, a far closer relationship was required than the rather remote standing the Committee currently had. Inclusion in certain events was suggested and a greater knowledge of the work of the Council.

It was felt that initially to help provide this knowledge, the Members of the Standards Committee should receive copies of the Weekly Bulletin and the quarterly Budget and Performance Reports. Richard Bryant confirmed that this would be arranged.

5. The Standards Committee’s Annual Report 2008

The Chairman reported that it was a requirement for the Standards Committee to prepare an Annual Report. A copy of the 2007 Report had been circulated for information and to provide a basis for the 2008 edition.

Once the draft report was agreed, it would be submitted to the Council’s Corporate Governance Committee for comment/acceptance. Thereafter, it would be made available to all Members of the Council and would be published on the Website.

Members felt that the theme of the report should be to “raise the Committee’s profile” and should contain reference to the Local Assessment Scheme, the continuation of the very good work being undertaken by David Greig and the Independent Members with the Parish Councils and updates of work and topics referred to in the 2007 Report.

One of the matters previously mentioned concerned the introduction of performance targets. This was thought to have been in connection with the length of time complaints against Taunton Deane or Parish Councillors were dealt with by the Standards Board for England.

Discussion of this item led to a number of questions relating to the complaints received since May last year under the new Local Assessment Scheme.

The Committee felt it would be very worthwhile to set up measurable performance targets to ensure complaints received were dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible. The targets could be used to show whether the various stages were being completed within reasonable timescales. Regular publication of this information, which would exclude any specific details of the complaints being released during the assessment stage, would be welcomed.

The Committee would be able to see at an early stage if certain cases were the subject of delay, why this was and, if this became a frequent problem, identify whether further resources were needed to ensure the investigation of complaints proceeded at a faster pace.

As far as the Annual Report was concerned, a draft would be circulated to Members within the next couple of weeks for comment before being circulated to the Corporate Governance Committee on Monday, 16 March 2009. It was usual for the Chairman to attend this meeting to introduce the Annual Report.

6. Visits to Parish Councils

Reference Minute No 54/2008, Mr Rodgers reported that he had since returned to the Parish Council where he had not been well received, this time with no problem. The Chairman of the Parish Council concerned had made him welcome and had permitted him to address the meeting.

David Greig circulated information to the Independent Members as to the Parish Councils which were due to be visited. He said he would co-ordinate the visits and would be more than happy to include the three new Independent Members, once they had been formally appointed to the Committee.

7. Business requiring to be dealt with as a matter of urgency

The Chairman reported that she had agreed that the item covered by Minute No. 8 below should be dealt with as an urgent matter.

8. Dispensation to Members of the Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council

Reported that Members of the Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council had previously been granted a dispensation in order to be able to participate in the planning process in respect of land at Ford Farm, Norton Fitzwarren.

The land would shortly be coming up for discussion again through the Local Development Framework and the Parish Council's views would be sought during the formal consultation process.

As more than 50% of the Members of the Parish Council had a prejudicial interest in the land as they lived near or within view of the site, the Standards Committee was able to grant a dispensation to the affected Members to enable them to participate in the planning process.

Resolved that a dispensation be granted to the Members of Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council in order to allow them to participate in the consultation process of the Local Development Framework in respect of land at Ford Farm and any subsequent planning application that should arise from that process.

9. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would be on Wednesday, 15 April 2009 at 2.15 p.m in Committee Room No. 1 at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.50 p.m.)