

Standards Committee – 15 April 2009

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Wednesday, 15 April 2009 at 2.15 p.m.

Present: Mrs A Elder (Chairman)
Mr M Stanbury (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Allgrove and House
Mr A Cottrell, Mrs J Hoyle, Mr R Macey, Mr P Malim OBE, Mr M Marshall,
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)

Also present : Dr Michael Macaulay and Professor Alan Lawton

1. Apologies

Councillor Slattery and Mr L Rogers.

2. Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Committee held on 11 February 2009 were taken as read and were signed.

3. Declaration of Interest

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

4. Good Practice in Standards – Research Project

The Chairman welcomed Dr Michael Macaulay, Reader in Governance and Public Ethics, University of Teeside and Alan Lawton, Professor of Public Sector Management, Hull University Business School to the meeting.

Dr Macaulay, whom most Members had seen at the 5th Somerset Standards Committees' Annual Forum back in January 2009, explained that he and Professor Lawton had been commissioned by the Standards Board for England to undertake a research project into notable practice in Standards.

Their research would be based on case studies focussed on different Councils across the country looking into the challenges faced and the outcomes.

They had come to Taunton Deane because they were particularly interested in the way in which the Council had successfully developed good relationships with its Parish Councils. Meetings had already taken place with the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, the Monitoring Officer and the Parish Liaison

Officer and a further discussion with the Parish representatives would be held at the conclusion of the Standard Committee's meeting.

Dr Macaulay added that the research project was due to be completed over the next two months and it was hoped that a draft report would be available before the end of July 2009. The main findings would be reported to the Annual Assembly of Standards Committees (the Standards Conference) in Birmingham towards the end of the year.

As well as explaining his main reason for visiting Taunton Deane, Dr Macaulay also received a number of questions from Members concerning his work with the Standards Committees of other local authorities. The answers he provided were as follows:-

- The size of Taunton Deane's Standards Committee was typical of most district Councils. However, three years ago the average appeared to be in the region of eight Members. One authority he visited had a membership of 40! Professor Lawton added that it was unusual to see such a high proportion of Independent Members on Taunton Deane's Committee – but his was not a bad thing;
- In response to what had impressed him at other local authorities, Dr Macaulay stated that he had been pleased to see such things as County-wide training, good governance, visits into schools, specific recruitment procedures and the use of pilot schemes to try new initiatives;
- How to effectively communicate the work of the Standards Committee was important, but down to the individual Council to decide how best to achieve this; and
- It was agreed that care needed to be taken to ensure the Committee did not become over-zealous. Adherence to the Code of Conduct was vital but additional contact with Borough and Parish Councillors was important too.

The Chairman thanked Dr Macaulay and Professor Lawton for the information they had provided and looked forward to receiving their draft report. Both remained in the John Meikle Room to observe the remainder of the meeting.

5. Proposed Guidance to Councillors appointed to Outside Bodies

The Monitoring Officer, Tonya Meers, submitted for comment a document titled "Proposed Guidance for Councillors appointed to represent the Council on Outside Bodies".

The Guidance covered in detail the duties, responsibilities and liabilities a Councillor would have if appointed either as a Company Director, a Trustee of a Charitable Trust or a Member of an Unincorporated Association or Body. The Guidance went on to deal with how the Members Code of Conduct still

had to be adhered to in performing a role with an outside body and detailed the circumstance where personal or prejudicial interests would apply.

Members welcomed the Guidance subject to a number of small amendments being made to clarify specific parts or words contained therein.

Mrs Meers confirmed that the Guidance, once amended, would be issued to all Councillors and would be followed up with training through one of the Council's "Members' Briefings".

6. Update on complaints made against Councillors

The Monitoring Officer provided an update on the three complaints that had been received to date against Councillors under the Local Standards Framework.

The first hearing had been held on 9 April 2009 into a complaint (Reference Standards 2008/01) made against Councillor Ms Denise Webber as to the wording of a statement she had made at a Planning Committee meeting in June 2008.

The Consideration and Hearing Sub-Committee had decided that Ms Webber had shown a lack of respect towards the complainant and had agreed to censure her. The Sub-Committee also recommended that Ms Webber should undergo further diversity and equality training. She had a period of 21 days to appeal against the Sub-Committee's ruling. A publicity notice had been issued and details were likely to appear in the press within the next few days.

Mrs Meers added that a further hearing was due to take place in the morning to consider complaint Reference Standards 2008/02.

The third complaint was still under investigation and it was hoped that the report from the Investigating Officer would be received very soon.

The Democratic Services Manager, Richard Bryant, drew attention to the document that had been circulated at the start of the meeting which proposed a Complaints Performance Indicator Matrix setting out the timescales by which the various stages of handling a complaint were dealt with.

It was agreed that Members should consider the matrix and submit any comments they had to Mr Bryant.

7. Proposed Performance Indicators for the Standards Committee

The Committee considered another Performance Indicator Matrix which would help in the measurement of the work (other than Complaints) of the Committee. Details of the proposed targets were submitted. The aim was to have the targets in place at the earliest opportunity.

Members made a number of comments/suggestions which would be incorporated into the matrix. The matrix would be brought back to the next meeting of the Committee for further consideration.

8. The Standards Committee's Annual Report 2008

Submitted for information the Standards Committee's Annual Report which took a look back on 2008. It contained sections on Membership, Terms of Reference, Functions of the Committee, Review of the Year, Work with Parish Councils, Training and The Future.

The report which had been drafted in conjunction with both the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, had already been submitted to the Council's Corporate Governance Committee for consideration on 16 March 2009.

The Chairman reported that she had attended this meeting and was particularly pleased to say that the report had been well received and that the work of the Standards Committee was supported.

9. Visits to Parish Councils

The Parish Liaison Officer, 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 if the Independent Members indicated which of the meetings they would like to attend.

10. Future items for discussion

The following items were suggested for future consideration:-

- The Constitution of the Standards Committee; and
- Further consideration as to how to raise the Committee's profile.

11. Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would be on Tuesday, 9 June 2009 at 2.30 p.m. in Committee Room No. 1 at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.31 p.m.)