

Standards Committee – 19 November 2013

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in The John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday, 19 November 2013 at 2.30 p.m.

Present: Councillor Wren (Chairman)
Councillors Gaines, Tooze and A Wedderkopp
Michael Marshall and Bryn Wilson (Parish Council Representatives)
Terry Bowditch, Adrian Cox and Anne Elder (Co-opted members of the Committee)

Officers: Tonya Meers (Monitoring Officer), Roy Pinney (Legal Services Manager), Bruce Lang (Monitoring Officer, West Somerset Council), David Greig (Parish Liaison Officer) and Richard Bryant (Democratic Services Manager and Corporate Support Lead)

29. Apology

Councillor Mrs Allgrove.

30. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9 July 2013 were taken as read and were signed.

31. Public Question Time

Mr David Orr made reference to the points he had previously made about Councillors being involved in sub-contracting. He still had concerns about this and felt the matter should be reviewed.

In response, the Monitoring Officer (Tonya Meers) stated that Members had to register contracts they were involved with as well as declaring any particular interests. These stipulations were covered by the Council's Code of Conduct but not as Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. She was confident that the processes and procedures were in place to cover Mr Orr's concerns. The Code of Conduct was 'over and above' what the Government required of Councils.

32. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Wren declared a personal interest as Clerk to Milverton Parish Council. Councillor Tooze declared personal interests as Vice-Chairman of the North Taunton Partnership and as an employee of the UK Hydrographic Department. Councillor A Wedderkopp declared personal interests as a Member of Somerset County Council and as a member of Wessex Water's Environmental Panel. Anne Elder, declared personal interests as a Public

Governor of the Taunton and Somerset NHS Trust and as a Member of the House Management Committee of one of the premises operated by the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution.

33. Review of the Local Code of Conduct and Arrangements

Considered report previously circulated, as to whether a review of the Council's Code of Conduct should be undertaken.

In July 2012 Full Council had adopted its new Code of Conduct together with arrangements for dealing with complaints. In addition, a Standards Committee had been set up and an Independent Person appointed in accordance with the Localism Act 2011.

The new Code and arrangements had now been in place for over a year and some neighbouring authorities had carried out a review to look at what had worked with the new system and whether anything needed to be changed.

Reported that West Somerset Council had carried out a review in September 2013 and had recommended that some of the definitions of the seven general principals of public life should be amended, details of which were reported. Overall West Somerset wanted to continue with existing arrangements for dealing with complaints and retain their Independent Persons.

In addition, Somerset County Council had also conducted a review and concluded that all authorities in Somerset having the same Code of Conduct was helpful. It had also been felt that it would be useful to have a reminder system for Members to declare interests and to have the register of interests at every meeting in order for Members to update it at that time if it was appropriate. SCC had also recommended that Members should ensure that they attended Code of Conduct training as it had been noted that not all Members had attended these sessions.

As far as Taunton Deane was concerned, Mrs Meers stated that she had not been made aware of any major issues with the Code or the arrangements for this Council. The Standards Committee had decided to update its Dispensation Policy in order to provide some flexibility for Members should they find themselves with Disclosable Pecuniary Interests. This would allow them to have some input in debates should it be appropriate.

With regard to the numbers of complaints, the Council had only received two complaints since July 2012 - one was not investigated and the other was at an early stage and a decision would be made shortly.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made:-

- The Code of Conduct was used by both the County Council, the five District Councils and some of the Parish Councils;
- Although the overall Standards regime was 'overseen' by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, there was no real direction from

above. Councils were self-regulating as far as the Code was concerned;

- The Code of Conduct applied to Councillors “whilst engaged in Council business”. However, care would still be needed if providing information via social media even if such messages were marked as ‘personal views only’;
- Members felt there was a need for interests to be clarified. It was suggested that a flow-chart should be prepared dealing with the various types of interest, when they should be declared and why; and
- As with SCC, it was felt that all Councillors should undergo Code of Conduct training.

At the conclusion of the debate the Committee agreed that no review of the Code of Conduct nor the current arrangements was needed.

Resolved that:-

- (1) A flow-chart outlining the various interests and when they should be declared be prepared by the Monitoring Officers of both Taunton Deane and West Somerset Councils; and
- (2) The amended version of the seven principles of public life prepared by West Somerset Council – attached as an Appendix to these Minutes – be added to Taunton Deane’s Code of Conduct as a replacement for the original version.

34. Complaints received under the new Standards Regime

Mrs Meers reported that only two complaints had been received by the Council since the introduction of the new Standards regime.

One had not been investigated, however the other would require to be considered by a Hearings Panel of the Committee made up from the elected Members.

Resolved that the report be noted.

35. Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on Tuesday, 21 January 2014 at 2.30 p.m. in the John Meikle Room at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.27 p.m.)

Appendix

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC LIFE

SELFLESSNESS

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest.

INTEGRITY

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships.

OBJECTIVITY

Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Holders of public office are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

OPENNESS

Holders of public office should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

HONESTY

Holders of public office should be truthful.

LEADERSHIP

Holders of public office should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.