

Standards Committee – 2 September 2014

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in Committee Room No. 1, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton on Tuesday, 2 September 2014 at 2.30 p.m.

Present: Councillor Wren (Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Allgrove, Gaines and A Wedderkopp
Michael Marshall and Bryn Wilson (Parish Council Representatives)
Terry Bowditch, Anne Elder and Lynn Rogers (Co-opted independent members of the Committee)
Mrs Louise Somerville-Williams (Independent Person)

Officers: Bruce Lang (Monitoring Officer), Paul Harding (Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager) and Richard Bryant (Democratic Services Manager and Corporate Support Lead)

44. Apology

Councillor Tooze.

45. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 July 2014 were taken as read and were signed.

46. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Wren declared a personal interest as Clerk to Milverton Parish Council. Councillor Mrs Allgrove declared a personal interest as Vice-Chairman of the Somerset Association of Local Councils. Councillor A Wedderkopp declared a personal interest 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.

47. Annual Governance Statement 2013/2014

The Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager, Paul Harding, reported that Taunton Deane Borough Council was responsible for making sure that:-

- its business was conducted in accordance with the law and proper Standards;
- public money was protected and properly accounted for;
- public money was used economically, efficiently and effectively; and

- there was a sound system of governance incorporating the system of internal control.

The Council also had a duty under the Local Government Act 1999 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions were exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council was responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, and the management of risk.

An Annual Governance Statement (AGS) which was compiled in accordance with a Code of Corporate Governance recommended by CIPFA/SOLACE explained how the Council had complied with the code and also met the requirements of Government Regulations in relation to the publication of statement on internal control. The AGS was based on the following six core principles:-

- Core Principle 1: Focusing on the purpose of the Council and on outcomes for the community creating and implementing a vision for the local area.
- Core Principle 2: Members and officers working together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles.
- Core Principle 3: Promoting the values for the authority and demonstrating the values of good governance through upholding high standards of conduct and behaviour.
- Core Principle 4: Taking informed and transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny and risk management arrangements.
- Core Principle 5: Developing the capacity and capability of members and officers to be effective in their roles.
- Core Principle 6: Engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability.

The AGS also included a review of the effectiveness of Taunton Deane which had concluded that, overall, the governance arrangements were robust and working effectively.

Noted, however, that during the year the Group Auditor had brought a number of control issues to the attention of the Council's Corporate Governance Committee. The opinion of the Internal Auditors was that the control environment was "reasonable" in 2013/2014.

High priority recommendations had been made in the following areas from audits during 2013/2014 - these continued to be included on the Council's action plan for 2014/2015:-

- Strengthening of contractual arrangements;
- Creditors – purchase ordering and new creditor authorisation processes;
- Equality and Diversity – compliance with requirements and duties;
- Fraud – improvement of awareness of Corporate Counter Fraud and Corruption Policy and Strategy; and
- Information governance – introduction of a confidentiality Code of Practice.

Further reported that the Council proposed over the coming year to take steps to address the above matters in order to further enhance Taunton Deane's governance arrangements.

During the discussion of this item, the following points were made (*with responses in italics*):-

- What was the role of the Standards Committee with regard to the AGS? *With regard to this year's AGS, it was submitted principally for information although any particular comments from Members of the Committee would be welcomed.*

It was recognised that the AGS was a formal document which was not exactly 'user friendly' and that either an AGS summary or, alternatively, an Annual Report should be prepared for next year which could be easily understood by members of the public. It was thought that a clear statement about the current joint management arrangements and an acronym glossary should be provided too!

- Should the issues in the action plan be addressed by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee? *The Chairman undertook to discuss this with the relevant portfolio-holders. There was a need for future AGSs to review the action plan from the previous year to establish whether the required improvements had been undertaken or not.*
- It was hoped that the modified version of the AGS in future could be circulated to the Parish Councils too.
- One of the main points to emerge from the current AGS was the need to ensure there was a good programme of training in place particularly for newly appointed Councillors following the Local Government Elections in May 2015.
- It was all very well putting together such a programme but it was equally important for Members to attend the various sessions. Could pressure to attend be exerted by the Group Leaders? Or by way of an incentive scheme? Should not Councillors require to undergo refresher

training every year? *The more notice that could be given about potential training dates the better chance of Councillors being able to attend. A record of attendance was already kept for training events and these could be made available to Group Leaders if required. Even though Councillors could not be forced to attend training strong 'pointers' could be given by labelling particular sessions as 'Mandatory' or 'Recommended'.*

- The provision of Planning training for Parish Councils was likely to be important too.

At the conclusion of the discussion it was agreed that:-

- (1) The ideas put forward to make the Annual Governance Statement more accessible be supported;
- (2) The Chairman be requested to approach the Group Leaders in an attempt to encourage their respective Members to take the opportunity to attend all relevant future training sessions; and
- (3) Details of the Induction Training provided to new Councillors following their election in May 2011 and the subsequent Programme of Training for Members over the four year term be submitted for information and discussion at the next meeting of the Committee.

48. Review of Standards Regime

Reference Minute No 41/2014 the Monitoring Officer, Bruce Lang, reported that following the discussion that had taken place at the last meeting, a paper had been drafted for consideration by the Council's Constitutional Sub-Committee at its meeting on 4 September 2014.

This proposed that the Committee should have:-

- Advisory status – where any decisions that needed to be taken were referred to Full Council rather than dealt with by the Committee;
- Three parish representatives rather than the two at present who should have full voting rights;
- Full voting rights for the independent members of the Committee; and
- Sub-Committees chaired by any voting Member of the Committee.

In addition, it was going to be proposed that these proposed alterations should be introduced on a cost neutral basis.

If the proposals met with the approval of the Constitutional Sub-Committee, the Corporate Governance Committee and, ultimately, Full Council would also be recommended to approve this particular way forward.

Resolved that the report be noted.

49. Forward Plan

It was suggested that the Committee should consider the following items at future meetings:-

- Following the discontinuation of the Parish Liaison Officer post how Standards issues would be monitored at the Parish Council level; and
- How the new 'Transparency Regulations' (e.g. the recording of meetings) will affect the Council.

50. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee would be held on Tuesday, 18 November 2014 at 2.30 p.m. in the John Meikle Room at The Deane House.

(The meeting ended at 3.40 p.m.)