

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a MEETING of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE on FRIDAY 11 MARCH 2005.

PRESENT:

Mr R Tickell (Chairman), Mr PCB Coleman, Mr P McGuigan, Mrs P Rugg and Ms C O'Sullivan.

9. **Apologies** Apologies for absence were received from Mr G Gooch.

10. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Resolved: To confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2005.

11. **Chairman's Announcements** The Chairman made the following announcements:-

(a) Independent Members' Forum

The Chairman reminded members that Wiltshire was hosting the next meeting of the Independent Members' Forum which would take place on Friday 22 April 2005.

(b) Consultation Paper on the Review of the Code of Conduct for Members

The consultation paper was circulated at the meeting and the Chairman asked members to let Nina Wilton have any comments so that these could be incorporated into the formal response from the County Council. This matter would be discussed at the next meeting.

(c) New Independent Member

The Chairman reported that the five shortlisted applicants would be interviewed on 22 March 2005. Twelve people had applied for the position.

(d) Training Day – 8 March 2005

Members reported back on the training event held on 8 March in Devizes and stated that this had been a very useful training day.

(e) Next Meeting

The Chairman announced that the next meeting would be his last, as he would be retiring from the Committee at the end of April, having completed over the agreed four years as a member.

12. **Audit Commission: Annual Audit and Inspection Letter**

The Committee received a report by the Chief Executive and the annual Audit and Inspection letter prepared by the Audit Commission.

The Auditors confirmed that the message from their letter this year was mainly positive. The recent CPA inspection had acknowledged improvements since the last inspection in 2002 and the Council had progressed from a “fair” to a “good” rating. The auditors also commented favourably upon the Council’s partnership working and the Supporting People service.

The Audit Commission explained that, in spite of the varied nature of local councils, performance indicators aimed to be as consistent as possible across the different authorities.

The audit letter highlighted the fact that there was a £2.75 million predicted overspend which was being addressed. However there was now a need to replenish balances and strengthen the budget monitoring processes throughout the authority. The Council had responded to these recommendations in setting its annual revenue budget for 2005-06.

There was some confusion about the outturn figures for 2003/04 as the net underspending figure of £0.677 million did not appear to be consistent with the spending and budget figures.

(NB: The Auditors have since confirmed that two figures in the paragraph entitled “Outturn 2003/04” at the top of page 9 - £365.919 million and £365.242 million - had been transposed).

There were diverse practices across the County Council in the procurement of goods and services and not all procedures were in line with the financial regulations. The County Council was taking this issue seriously and would be implementing a training programme to improve weaknesses in this area.

The internal audit function was due for review in order to comply with the new CIPFA Code of Practice for Internal Audit. There was also a need to review the operation and member oversight of Internal Audit.

***Resolved:** To note the positive and encouraging Annual Audit and Inspection letter for 2004.*

13. **Audit Commission: Audit of the Best Value Performance Plan and Best Value Performance Indicators**

The Committee received a report by the Chief Executive and the Audit Commission’s audit of the Best Value Performance Plan and Best Value Performance Indicators.

The Committee was encouraged to note that this year the audit had given an unqualified BVPP opinion and recognised improvements in performance

information. However, there were still some inconsistencies in the figures and the two reserved PIs were:

BV 12 The average working days lost due to sickness per FTE
BV 177 Legal and advice expenditure on quality mark services.

Some concern was expressed that this was the second year running that the authority had been unable to provide sufficient audit trail for the calculation provided for the legal and advice expenditure on quality mark services.

The Chief Executive explained that for the 2005 return the authority had to provide 135 separate performance indicators. For 2005/06 this figure was likely to be 95 performance indicators. As the requirements changed each year the production of this data created a considerable amount of work for Council officers.

Members felt that the report was encouraging.

Resolved: To welcome the County Council's improved performance in this area.

NB: Ms O'Sullivan declared a personal interest in this item as a member of the Board for Legal and Advice Services. Ms O'Sullivan remained in the meeting and spoke on this item.

14. Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy

The Committee received a report by the Monitoring Officer which advised members of the implementation plan for the Council's Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy.

Members noted that the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy had already been approved by the Cabinet and that there was now a need to raise awareness of the policy and to publicise it. Now that the whistleblowing policy had been finalised it was felt to be the right time to launch these policies together. The audit and corporate standards teams would be working on this initiative.

In paragraph 18 of the policy it was suggested that the line manager should authorise acceptance of hospitality. It was also suggested that in training sessions on this subject it would be useful to include examples of a register of gifts and hospitality and the type of entries that should be included in the register.

Resolved:

- (1) To note the contents of the report and to welcome and endorse the proposal to publicise this policy.*
- (2) To receive a progress report at the September meeting of the Committee.*

15. **Equality and Diversity Progress Report**

The Committee received a report by the Monitoring Officer which advised members on the action that had been taken with regard to the Council's Equality and Diversity strategy.

Members noted that a great deal of progress had been made on equality and diversity within the last few years. The Chief Executive had set up a Race Equality Steering Group chaired by a Chief Officer. A specialist had been employed to produce the action plan and this was being dealt with at a senior level within the authority.

Although Wiltshire was not a very ethnically diverse area the number of ethnic and also disabled employees within the County Council still did not adequately represent its population. It was suggested that there could be a Cabinet member who was specifically responsible for championing equality and diversity issues.

It was noted that age discrimination would be included in the policy once it became a statutory requirement.

Members stressed the importance of consulting on the equality and diversity policy at the same time as the District Councils, if possible, because it could be confusing for members of the public if they received several different consultations. This would also ensure consistency of approach.

Resolved:

- (1) *To note the contents of the report and the draft Corporate Equality Plan.*
- (2) *To receive a progress report at the March 2006 meeting of the Committee.*

(Duration of meeting: 2.30pm – 4.20pm)

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