



STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a MEETING of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE on WEDNESDAY 3 OCTOBER 2007.

PRESENT:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Independent Members | - | Mrs C O'Sullivan (Chairman), Mr Lefever, Mr Shipman, Mrs McCord, Mr McGuigan and Mrs Liptrot |
| Members of the Council | - | Mrs P Rugg, Mr Hewson and Mrs White |
| Also in attendance | - | Mrs J Clarkson, Chairman of Salisbury District Council's Standards Committee (observer) |

51. Apologies

No apologies were received.

52. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

To confirm and sign the minutes of the meeting held on 4 July 2007.

53. Chairman's Announcements

(a) Chairman's welcome

The Chairman welcomed members who had been appointed to the Committee since the last meeting, namely Mrs Margaret White and Mrs Lynne Liptrot and Mr Peter McGuigan who had been re-appointed.

(b) Standards Committee Annual Report 2006/07

The Chairman reported that following the Committee's approval at its last meeting, the Committee's Annual Report for 2006/07 had been published.

Copies were tabled at the meeting for members and would be available on the Council's web site with details of the web link sent to all members of the Council for their information.

(c) Register of Interest Forms

The Chairman said she was pleased to report that all Members had now submitted their Register of Interest form made under the new Code of Conduct for Members. Only one remained outstanding from one of the co-opted members and arrangements had been made to submit the form in the near future.

(d) The Sixth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

The Chairman reminded members that as agreed at the last meeting, she would be attending the Annual Assembly between 15 – 16 October 2007 along with Nina Wilton.

(d) Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire Forum for Independent Members of Standards Committee

In order to ensure Committee representation, the Chairman enquired as to who would be attending the Forum to be held on Friday 19 October. It was noted that the Chairman and Mr Shipman would be attending.

(e) Link to the Intranet

The Chairman reported that arrangements were in hand to provide recently appointed independent members with access to the Council's intranet. Officers were also resolving outstanding IT issues for other members.

(e) Code of Conduct – DVD

The Chairman reminded members that time permitting, the Standards Board for England DVD on the Code of Conduct called 'The Code Uncovered' would be shown at the end of the meeting.

In response to a question from Mr Hewson, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that it had been agreed to purchase an interactive training package on the code of conduct which was largely based on the West Sussex County Council model. This would be shown to members in due course.

54. **Members' Interests**

No interests were declared.

55. **Public Participation**

None.

56. **Person Specification – Independent Members of the Standards Committee**

The Committee had previously requested a review of the person specification for independent members of the Standards Committee. The purpose of the review was to ensure the specification would enable potential applicants to be able to demonstrate experience of the attributes required for the position. Accordingly, officers had obtained examples from other authorities and taken on board the comments and suggestions previously made by Members. A revised person specification was presented for the Committee's consideration.

Members made a number of further refinements to the person specification and to the job description to better reflect the terms of reference of the Committee.

Resolved:

That the person specification and job description as attached as an appendix to these minutes be approved for use in the future recruitment of independent members to the Committee.

57. **Complaints BPR**

The Monitoring Officer advised that the BPR programme was progressing, albeit slowly. The main difficulty related to IT issues and in particular achieving complete compatibility with the customer care management system. It was hoped to have the system operational and rolled out in the New Year and would be demonstrated to the Committee in due course.

On the subject of complaints, the Monitoring Officer considered that the Council should seize opportunities to use complaints to collate feedback in order to improve services to the public. He also considered that in dealing with administrative processes, the focus should always be on putting the customer at the heart of service provision.

The Monitoring Officer referred to the recent 'lean principles' exercise applied to the issuing of Blue Badges which had improved the speed in which the badges were issued dramatically, details of which would be presented to a future meeting.

Resolved:

That the position be noted.

58. **Local Government Ombudsman – Annual Letter**

The Monitoring Officer presented the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for the period 2006/07 together with this Council's response.

It was noted that during this period, 33 complaints had been made against the Council, an increase of 8 from the previous year. The greatest increase was seen in the adult care services having increased from 2 in the previous year to 8 this year and children and family services which had gone up from 2 to 7. It was noted that although 8 complaints had been settled locally, the Ombudsman had not found it necessary to issue any reports against this Council. The Ombudsman had commented that given the size of the Council's responsibilities, the number of complaints remained small.

The Ombudsman had made a general observation about the culture which sometimes prevailed within the Council in dealing with complaints. He accepted that mistakes would occur from time to time, but considered that where there was fault, the Council needed to more readily accept responsibility and place greater emphasis on putting things right at the earliest opportunity. The Director for Children and Education accepted this point in so far as the Education service was concerned and reported that she was actively working to address this issue.

Members referred to an instance when it had proved somewhat difficult to convene a Review Panel (which heard Stage 3 complaints) within the specified timescale. It was hoped that this would be less problematic in the future following the increase to the Committee's membership.

The Chairman reported that the Ombudsman, Mr White, had been invited to attend this meeting to present his report, but unfortunately could not attend due to prior commitments. The Chairman sought the Committee's views on an offer by the Ombudsman to attend the next meeting on 23 January 2008 to give an overview of his role and answer members' questions.

Resolved:

- (a) That the Ombudsman's Annual Letter be received and noted.**
- (b) That the Chairman of the Committee be informed of any difficulties convening a Review Panel.**
- (c) That the Ombudsman be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to which members of the Standards Committees of all Wiltshire councils would be invited.**

59. **Local Determination**

The Chairman initiated a discussion on the local determination hearing several members of the Committee had attended in an observer capacity in July 2007. The Chairman asked Members to comment without making any judgements, on any lessons which could be learnt from that experience.

This Council had not yet had to carry out a local determination hearing and members commented that this Council should draw on the experience of

district councils who had and to ensure that this Council's hearing procedure was adequate.

Resolved:

That the Procedure for the Determination of Complaints Referred by the Ethical Standards Officer be reviewed at the next meeting.

60. **The Bulletin No. 35**

The Committee received 'The Bulletin No. 35' dated September 2007 from the Standards Board for England for information.

Resolved:

That the Bulletin be received and noted.

61. **The Committee's Work Plan**

The Committee was invited to consider drawing up its work plan for 2008/09. Suggested items for inclusion were: reviewing the staff code of Conduct; preparations for a new unitary council from a Standards Committee perspective, including a new Constitution. In addition, the Committee had previously agreed to consider an updated action plan on involvement of members in the decision making process in the New Year.

The Monitoring Officer explained that the Transitional Cabinet would be determining the ethical governance structure of the new Council taking into account the views of the Standards Committee. It was proposed to involve the Wiltshire district councils in these discussions. Members emphasised the importance of involving the district councils in this process as early as possible.

The Monitoring Officer suggested that the Committee might like to host a Standards Committee workshop towards the end of the year, to which members of all Wiltshire district council Standards Committees would be invited. A representative from the Standards Board for England would be invited to attend to discuss the local filtering mechanism and the impact this would have on Wiltshire and similarly, a representative from the Audit Commission would be invited to discuss ethical governance issues. It would also be an opportunity to work together more closely with neighbouring councils and to share information and best practice, especially in the light of arrangements being made for a unitary council.

Resolved:

That a Standards Committee Workshop be arranged and be held by the end of December 2007 to which all members of the Wiltshire district councils Standards Committee would be invited. The purpose of the Workshop would be to share information and

best practice on standards issue and to discuss how best the standards functions should be delivered under a unitary council arrangement and to inform the Transitional Cabinet accordingly.

62. **Urgent Business**

There was no urgent business.

On conclusion of the meeting, the Committee watched the Standards Board for England DVD on the Code of Conduct called 'The Code Uncovered'.

(Duration of meeting: 2.30pm – 4.15pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Yamina Rhouti, of Democratic & Members' Services, direct line (01225) 718024, e-mail yaminarhouati@wiltshire.gov.uk

Press enquiries to Communications, direct line (01225) 713114/713115.