
INDEPENDENT MEMBERS' FORUM

1 November 2007

**at
Rochford District Council
Civic Suite
Rayleigh**

Present:	Maldolm Fielding	Independent Member	Basildon
	John Quinlan	Independent Member	Basildon
	Alwyn Hollins	Independent Member	Basildon
	Sharon Lowe	Deputy Monitoring Officer	Braintree
	Peter Schwier	Independent Member	Braintree
	Chris Webb	Independent Member	Braintree
	Derek Connelly	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Amanda Darke	Independent Member	Castle Point
	David Cottis	Independent Member	Rochford
	Bernard Flynn	Independent Member	Rochford
	Stanley Shadbolt	Independent Member	Rochford
	John Honey	Monitoring Officer	Rochford
	Notes taken by: Denise Britnell	P.A.	Rochford

31. Introduction

John Honey welcomed everyone to Rochford District Council and the fifth Independent Members' Forum. An invitation for an Independent Member to chair the meeting was declined. All present introduced themselves to the group.

32. Notes of the Independent Members' Forum 15 March 2007

Agreed, subject to clarification by John Honey that, with reference to minute 25, the Rochford District Council Independent Members are not required to give prior notice of their attendance at meetings. As with ordinary Members, they are requested to advise of any intended attendance at training sessions for catering purposes.

33. Matters Arising

24. Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMSce)

No one present had heard further from AIMSce, other than requests to the relevant authorities for updated contact details for their Independent

Members of the Standards Committees. AIMSce held a fringe event at the Annual Assembly in Birmingham on 15 and 16 October. John Honey advised the forum that AIMSce do have a website and have adopted a constitution, The Chairman of the Association is an Independent Member of Isle of Wight Council. The forum was of the general opinion that AIMSce did not seem to be a settled organisation and had not moved on in the past year.

Peter Schwier advised that an area of concern at Braintree is that, by joining local or national forums, independence of members may be compromised giving rise to issues of bias. It was generally felt that self-help at a local level is acceptable but that membership of a national association was not something this forum would wish to pursue. Discussion followed on development of the forum, chairmanship, joint training and attendance. It was generally agreed that an officer presence and guidance would continue to be necessary.

Basildon District Council

It was noted that the recruitment problems reported at the March meeting had been overcome and Basildon now had a full complement of three Independent Members.

Thurrock Training

Derek Connelly offered to remind Andrew Smith that papers had not been circulated.

34. Feedback from the 6th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees (Birmingham 15 – 16 October 2007)

A number of the Forum had attended the Annual Assembly and general opinion was that it was a well organised, interesting and informative event this year.

David Cottis reported that, in his view:

- Many dedicated people attended the Assembly
- There is a lot of frustration around the new rules effective from April 2008
- Funding of local investigations is of concern
- Regulations are felt to be a “sledge hammer to crack a nut”
- A light-touch approach will be best
- Mediation will be important
- Improvement of councillors’ competencies should be considered
- Training to deal with referred cases is important

Overall consensus is to “let common sense prevail”.

Peter Schwier, who also attended the Assembly, concurred with David Cottis's feedback. John Honey reported that two Rochford District Councillors had also attended and enjoyed the event.

The Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act received Royal Assent on 30 October and it is expected that the provisions relating to the Ethical Framework will come into force in April 2008. At the date of the meeting, the final version of the Act is still not available on any website.

Discussions continued around consideration of increasing the numbers of members on Standards Committees and the importance of training for Standards Committees as a whole. It was generally felt that referrals are likely to increase when determinations are localised. Therefore, there will be an increased budget requirement. Publication of the Act and subsequent regulations and guidance is awaited before the full impact can be assessed.

35. ETHICAL GOVERNANCE HEALTH-CHECK AT ROCHFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

John Honey reported on the Ethical Governance Health-Check (EGHC) carried out by the IDeA and the Audit Commission between March and May this year. Three of the four key elements were used:

- Self Assessment Survey
- Light Touch Health Check
- Workshops

A full audit was not carried out.

The on-line self-assessment probably needed some refinement and was felt to be less useful than the light-touch health check. The latter had similarities to a peer review and resulted in a report and action plan. The Workshops were interesting and enjoyed by both Members and Officers, who worked together on scenarios facilitated jointly by the IDeA and Audit Commission.

Members and Officers were involved in all three elements and the final report, available on the Rochford District Council website, shows that the Council are generally performing well. Full details of the Ethical Governance Toolkit is available on the IDeA website.

36. SHARED APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

As promised at the previous I.M.F., Andrew Smith, Monitoring Officer at Castle Point Borough Council, provided a note on shared appointments. The report informed the I.M.F. that there is no legislative provision at present for the appointment of an inter-authority Standards Committee, however it is permissible for an Independent Member to be on more than one Standards

Committee. The report raised awareness of the Government's proposals to give discretion to create Joint Standards Committees.

Discussions continued around numbers of Independent Members, Parish Members and elected Members on Standards Committees as well as chairmanship and involvement of the independent chairman in other Council meetings.

- Braintree have had an Independent Member as Chairman for 5 years. The chairman attends other Council meetings, as necessary, to present recommendations from the Standards Committee.
- The Chairman of Braintree Standards Committee attends training sessions, including Parish Council training.
- The Chairman of Basildon's Standards Committee has attended Council meetings.
- Castle Point Standards Committee provide Annual Reports.
- Members of Castle Point Standards Committee attend Council meetings to monitor ethical standards, when a check list is completed.
- Rochford's Standards Committee have developed a comprehensive training programme but do not have an independent chairman at present.

Further discussions followed around the advantage of holding this type of forum and whether, as a result, this did raise an issue of bias if a hearing occurs.

General consensus was that it would be best to preserve locality and share resources when necessary. More focused discussions should be possible at the next meeting in 6 months time, when regulations and guidance under the new legislation will be available.

Peter Schwier reported that Braintree will be contacting Uttlesford and Colchester Councils and a report on this meeting will be taken to their Standards Committee to decide attendance at future meetings.

37. Any Other Business

None

38. Date and venue of next meeting

Malcolm Fielding will liaise with Lorraine Brown (Deputy Monitoring Officer) to discuss hosting the next meeting at Basildon Council offices. Details of the date and venue would be circulated in due course.