

## **Standards Committee – 18 April 2006**

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Minutes of the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on **18 April 2006** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr C A Hungate  
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs S A Harper

Cllr P A Capon

Cllr D Merrick

### **INDEPENDENT MEMBERS**

Mr A C Comber  
Mr B M Flynn

### **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Mr D J Cottis, Independent Member

### **OFFICERS PRESENT**

P Warren - Chief Executive  
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Internal Services)  
S Fowler - Head of Administrative and Member Services  
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

### **140 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2006 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **141 MEMBER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME 2006/07**

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the Member Training and Development Programme for 2006/07 and attendance at training courses in 2005/06.

In discussing the format of the 'attendance at training sessions' schedule it was observed that it would be appropriate to retain a facility for the public to be able to identify the reasons for apologies. It was recognised that it would only be appropriate to expect apologies to be given in cases where a Member has specifically signed up for some training that they subsequently find they cannot attend.

With regard to shared working with other Councils, the Committee concurred with the observation of the Chairman that a number of Members (and particularly those in full time employment) can experience difficulties in

achieving attendance at training in other Council areas if such training is scheduled before 7.30pm. Where training is away from a standard location it is important that associated documentation provides directions to the venue and arrangements for parking. Whilst it is possible for attendees to consider using other forms of travel, such as taxis, it would clearly be appropriate for more cost effective options, such as car sharing, to be considered in the first instance.

It was recognised that, in terms of general responses to questionnaires, the return rate associated with the Member training and development questionnaire (nearly 50%) could be considered good. Session attendees are perhaps the most likely to return such questionnaires. It can be observed that individuals may be less likely to take the trouble to complete a questionnaire if they are relatively satisfied.

The Committee noted that :-

- One of the planning related sessions in the 2005/06 Training Programme had been cancelled.
- The Councils' Planning Committee Review Sub Committee was in the process of developing recommendations to Full Council. These would cover training requirements for Members serving on a Development Control Committee.
- Generally speaking, the training room at the Rochford Council offices would be too small for Member training events. It may lend itself to induction events.
- Once the proposed 2006/07 programme is endorsed, officers would work on the timing of specific sessions. Consideration could be given to including a speed-reading session under the personal skills strand.
- The introduction of best practice arrangements, such as Ward visits, would not necessarily place additional pressure on resources, particularly where it is possible to utilise existing linkages into the community.

In terms of training venues within the District Members felt that, where practicable, it would be appropriate to develop a programme on the basis of an equal split between accommodation at the Civic Suite, Rayleigh and the Freight House, Rochford. This would allow for the geography of the District. Whilst there can be problems with the Carriage Room at the Freight House when the weather is hot, this is only likely to be an issue during mid summer months when an alternative room can be utilised if necessary.

Reference was made to the potential value of considering whether there are mechanisms beyond the monitoring of attendance that could encourage

Member attendance at training sessions. It could be accepted that the voluntary route was most likely to have influence and that the emphasis should be on the benefits associated with the development of competencies. It was felt that, notwithstanding that Group Leaders can already draw Members' attention to training events, it would be appropriate for each Group Leader to be asked to actively promote the value of training. Group discussions on training may assist in clarifying the reasons for some low attendance.

Whilst accepting that the milestones/ standards associated with the East of England Charter for Elected Member Development could represent best practise, the Committee felt that charter adoption would be inappropriate at this time. In discussing some of the explanatory terminology associated with the charter, some concern was expressed that it is possible to perceive an implication that authorities that do not sign up to a charter are not committed to improving performance. Reference was made to the likelihood that the circumstances of some Members (such as being in full time employment) could prove incompatible with charter expectations. There would be no point in the Authority embarking on the adoption of a charter if there are likely to be issues of practicability that could mean poor assessments. It was recognised that the appropriateness of signing up to a charter could be kept under review.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the summary report of Member attendance at training sessions during the 2005/06 Municipal Year noted.
- (2) That the proposals for the Member Training and Development Programme 2006/07, as set out in paragraphs 5 and 6 of the report, be agreed on the basis that:-
  - Where practicable, there be an equal split between the use of accommodation at the Civic Suite, Rayleigh and the Freight House, Rochford for training.
  - Whenever possible, evening training sessions in other council areas should commence at 7.30pm to help maximise likely attendance. Associated documentation should provide travel directions and arrangements for parking. Attendees should be mindful of cost effective travel options, such as car sharing.
  - Consideration being given to the inclusion of a session on speed-reading under the personal skills strand.
- (3) That Group Leaders be asked to actively promote the value of training to their membership.

- (4) That no action to be taken at this time with regard to adoption on the East of England Charter for Elected Members Development. The situation to be kept under review. (HAMS)

### **142 APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS AND PARISH MEMBER/S FROM 2006/07**

Consideration was given to the term of office and arrangements that would need to be in place from the next Municipal Year for the appointment of Independent Members and Parish Members to the Standards Committee.

It was noted that:-

- Whilst the Authority had previously determined that it would be appropriate for appointments to be on the basis of a four-year term, there was no statutory requirement. There was also no reason why an Independent Member could not review his/her own position during a term of office.
- The Standards Board for England advises that it is important for Independent Members to be seen as impartial.
- If existing Independent Member appointees are not re-appointed, the Authority would need to go through a process of advertising.
- The Standards Board for England had made a number of observations on the role of Parish Members and was now recommending that there should be two appointees. Such an arrangement is likely to be appropriate given that, statistically, when cases do arise they frequently involve Parish Councillors (and a Parish Member has to be present at an associated hearing).
- The Parish Member is appointed by the Rochford Hundred Association of Local Councils.

During discussion it was agreed that, subject to the agreement of the current independent Member appointees, there would be merit in inviting them to continue in office. There was no reason to question their impartiality and it would be unfortunate to lose such valuable contributors to the Council's work. Reference was made to the fact that, to date, the Committee had not had to consider complaints or allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct, which meant that the Independent Members had not had an opportunity to fulfil a key aspect of their role. It was observed that the skill-set of Independent Members could be transferable across authorities and that, technically, there appears to be no reason why an Independent Member could not serve more than one authority.

Mr B M Flynn indicated that he would be prepared to be appointed for a further term. Mr A C Comber indicated that he too would be prepared to be further appointed, subject to reserving the right to re-assess the situation in due course following implementation of the proposed legislation/regulations extending the role of the Standards Committee and introducing local investigation and determination of complaints. The Corporate Director (Internal Services) confirmed that the position with regard to Mr D J Cottis could be clarified separately.

### **Recommended to Council:-**

- (1) That the current Independent Members be appointed for a further term of four years.
- (2) That the composition of the Standards Committee be changed to provide that membership comprises two Members of a Parish Council wholly or mainly in the Council's area (a Parish Member). The Rochford Hundred Association of local Councils to be asked to determine the appointees. (CD(IS))

### **143 DIRECTION/WORKLOAD**

It had originally been anticipated that the timing of this meeting would suit informal discussion on direction/workload. However, fruitful discussion was somewhat dependent on the receipt of further information on the arrangements for District Councils to operate as a filter for all complaints. There was, in fact, little to report on progress in this respect since discussion at the last meeting of the Committee.

It was noted that guidance due later in the year was likely to indicate that Independent Members should Chair both Standards Committees and Hearing Panels and that, in its revised role, the Committee was likely to function in a fashion similar to that of the Licensing Committee.

The Committee agreed that, under the circumstances, it would be appropriate for the first meeting of the Standards Committee in the next Municipal Year to now include provision for structured discussion on direction/workload.

It was noted that Rochford would be hosting a meeting of the Independent Members Forum on 30 May 2006. Castle Point Borough Council was in the process of making arrangements for a moot on 13 July 2006 to which all Members of the Standards Committee would be invited.

## Standards Committee – 18 April 2006

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Prior to the close of the meeting the Chairman extended thanks to all Members and officers for their contribution to the work of the Committee over the last year.

The meeting closed at 8.58pm.

Chairman .....

Date .....