

Standards Committee – 4 October 2007

Minutes of the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on **4 October 2007** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr D Merrick
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs S A Harper

Cllr P A Capon

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

Mr D J Cottis
Mr S Shadbolt

PARISH MEMBERS

Cllr M J Steptoe, Barling Magna Parish Council
Cllr R E Vingoe, Hockley Parish Council

VISITING MEMBERS

Cllrs Mrs P Aves, Mrs H L A Glynn, Mrs J A Mockford, M G B Starke, Mrs M J Webster and P F A Webster.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr J Thomass and Mr B M Flynn.

OFFICERS PRESENT

J Honey	-	Corporate Director (Internal Services)
S Fowler	-	Head of Information and Customer Services
D Britnell	-	PA to Corporate Director (Internal Services)
M Power	-	Committee Administrator

332 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 July 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

333 STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND DVD 'THE CODE UNCOVERED'

The Committee viewed a DVD, produced by the Standards Board for England, entitled 'The Code Uncovered', which the Standards Board had recommended should be viewed by every Councillor and which contained information on the local government Code of Conduct. A fact sheet relating to topics covered by the DVD and 'The Code of Conduct' pocket guide was also provided for each Member of the Standards Committee and each District Councillor.

The Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that he would review Members' current declarations of interest and write to each District Councillor, drawing attention to any specific items needing consideration. The Parish Members of the Standards Committee would be included in this review. The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Audit Commission had recommended that Members' declarations regarding membership of Outside Bodies be placed by the monitoring officer on the Council's website. Although there was provision for this within the system, it would be preferable to obtain Member approval before implementation.

In response to a question, the Committee was advised that the DVD could be made available to Parish Councillors when District Council Members had seen it. It was further agreed that Parish Clerks should have the opportunity to view the DVD, and the Corporate Director (Internal Services) agreed to contact Parish Clerks for this purpose. The Standards Board had offered to sell additional copies; the cost of purchasing these would be identified. It would also be ascertained whether it was permitted to make copies of the DVD.

Following discussion regarding declarations of interest, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised the following:-

- Unless the Parish Council itself was the applicant, District/Parish Councillors were entitled to debate and vote on District Council development control matters: they had to declare a personal interest only as a Member of the Parish Council unless they, or a close member of their family, were financially affected by the planning application.
- Where Members were both Parish/Town Councillors and District Councillors they were permitted to express a view when discussing planning applications at Parish Council level, but should make it clear that they would reserve judgement until the full debate had been heard at the District Council. Members must not hold pre-determined views prior to the debate taking place.
- There was a distinction between membership of a body, as set out in paragraph 2 of the form of Declarations, where Councillors held a position of real influence or control and that on which they were ordinary members, the latter instance did not require a declaration to be made.
- It was no longer the case that Members were excluded from voting where a planning application was near to where they lived unless it affected the financial interests of the Member or a close family member.
- Councillors should declare their interests at every tier: on the Town/Parish Council and the District Council.

334 INDEPENDENT MEMBERS' FORUM MINUTES 15 MARCH 2007

The minutes of the Independent Members' Forum held on 15 March 2007 were received.

335 MEMBER TRAINING PROGRAMME 2007/08 – MID PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Information and Customer Services containing the mid-programme review of the 2007/08 Member Training Programme.

Discussion ensued relating to the suggestion by the Peer Review team that the Council would benefit from setting targets in Member development and maximising the potential of Members through investing in their development. Other Peer Review suggestions were the introduction of personal development plans for all Members and the adoption of the IDeA Charter for Member Development.

It was agreed that a decision to adopt the IDeA Charter should be deferred, due to capacity and budget issues. However, the Committee wanted to reserve the option of considering the adoption of the IDeA Charter at a future date. In response to Member concern that there would be implications if the Council decided not to adopt the Charter, the Head of Information and Customer Services stated that the adoption of a suitable alternative approach should be sufficient to satisfy the IDeA. However, it was recognised that justification would need to be made to the Audit Commission regarding how the issues surrounding Member development arising from the Peer Review had been progressed.

An alternative option was detailed in the report, whereby Members would identify specific individual training needs via a self-assessment questionnaire. Where there was sufficient demand, a general training course for all Members could be offered. In addition, tailored programmes could be arranged for individual Members. This 'bespoke' training for individual Members, however, would be available only after the general Member development programme had been funded and would be dependent on requests not exceeding the overall Member training budget. Requests would be assessed on the following criteria: contribution to corporate objectives and to an individual's role on the Council. A financial ceiling would be allocated to each Member unless there were exceptional circumstances.

Doubt was expressed as to the extent that the Council would benefit from emphasis on individually tailored training. The Head of Information and Customer Services advised that it could be made a condition that each individual request for funding be reported to the Standards Committee for approval and that 'reasonableness' and 'relevance' would be key factors in any decision to grant funding.

It was noted that Parish Councillors on the Standards Committee were invited to attend all District Council training. It was requested that, where relevant, handouts from the training sessions be sent to Parishes. It was also noted that in-house 'officer-run' courses were often very flexible and questions on specific issues could be put to officers.

It was felt that additional training in Chairmanship Skills was a necessity, due to the increase in publicly chaired meetings, such as the recently introduced Area Committees. It was also felt that Member Champions should have the opportunity to visit other Councils to see how similar authorities operated. The programme for training in early 2008 did propose provision for Member Champions, as well as for the Executive Board and Area Committee Members. It was noted that positive feedback had been received from Members of the Review Committee who had attended the RADA 'Communication Skills for Scrutiny' training on 28 September 2007. RADA would be delivering a course for all Members entitled 'Communication Skills for Meetings' on 14 November 2007.

There followed discussion about the low level of attendance by Members at the Member Development training sessions offered to date. It was suggested that gaining better attendance at the group training sessions organised for Members should be a priority and that Members should attend certain group training sessions before individual requests for training were considered. A suggestion was that one criterion for judging an individual's suitability for individual training could be their attendance at a specified number of group training sessions. There was concern that there should be an equal opportunity for each Councillor to have access to training. It was recognised that new Members needed induction training and that it would benefit them if long-standing Council Members also attended induction sessions to give new people advice and support.

In view of budget constraints it was concluded that a Member request for individually tailored training support could not be agreed.

The Committee agreed a motion, moved by Cllr P A Capon and seconded by Cllr Mrs S A Harper, that a decision on personal development plans be deferred pending the receipt of additional information from Council officers.

Cllr P A Capon expressed an interest in becoming involved in the National Councillor Mentoring Programme, organised by the IDeA, which offered the Council around 12 days of free mentoring support for Members.

Resolved

- (1) That the 2007/08 Mid-Programme Review be noted.
- (2) That the proposals for part 3 of the Member Training and Development Programme, as set out in paragraph 4.3 of the report, be endorsed.

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- (3) That the proposals for joint work with Basildon and Castle Point Councils, as set out in paragraph 5.2 of the report, be endorsed.
- (4) That adoption of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) Charter be deferred but that it be reconsidered, as appropriate, in the future.
- (5) That a decision regarding an alternative approach to personal development plans be deferred, pending the receipt of additional information to be brought to the next meeting of the Standards Committee.
- (6) That the opportunities provided by the National Councillor Mentoring Scheme and the Modern Councillor e-learning service, as set out in paragraphs 6.9 – 6.13 of the report, be pursued and that it be noted that Cllr P A Capon wished to become involved in the IDeA National Councillor Mentoring Programme. (HICS)

The meeting closed at 9.32 pm.

Chairman

Date

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