

Standards Committee – 5 July 2007

Minutes of the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on **5 July 2007** when there were present:-

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

Cllr C I Black
Cllr P A Capon
Cllr J Thomass

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

Mr D J Cottis
Mr B M Flynn
Mr S Shadbolt

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr M J Steptoe, Barling Magna Parish Council and Cllr R E Vingoe, Hockley Parish Council.

OFFICERS PRESENT

R J Honey	-	Corporate Director (Internal Services)
D Britnell	-	PA to Corporate Director (Internal Services)
J Bostock	-	Principal Committee Administrator
M Power	-	Committee Administrator

223 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 April 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

224 ETHICAL GOVERNANCE HEALTH CHECK – MARCH 2007

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Internal Services) appraising Members of the outcome of the Ethical Governance Health Check conducted by the Audit Commission and Improvement & Development Agency in March 2007.

The report 's second recommendation (Item 2, page 6.2) stated that the Council should move to an independent Chairman of the Standards Committee and that consideration could be given to the appointment of a Chairman from members of the public, perhaps with an academic or professional background, rather than from within the current body of independent Members. In response to objections by Committee Members to this wording, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that it was his understanding that the IDeA had intended it as an option for the Council to

consider and not as a suggestion that the existing Membership was unsatisfactory.

The Committee concurred with the observation of the Vice Chairman that the Authority had undertaken a recruitment exercise and was completely satisfied with the Independent Members it had. The Corporate Director (Internal Services) agreed to contact IDeA and ask for clarification in writing as to their comments concerning Chairmanship. Independent Members of the Committee agreed to discuss any further issues they had in this respect, after the meeting, with the Corporate Director (Internal Services).

Mr Flynn wished his considerable displeasure regarding the matter to be recorded.

Regarding the IDeA suggestion that a broadening of scope and a more proactively investigative role may help to raise the profile of the Standards Committee, and of its work in maintaining high standards of behaviour within the authority as a whole, the Committee agreed that the role of the Standards Committee should be seen to be advisory, rather than authoritative. In response to a suggestion that the Committee should be fulfilling an audit role and overseeing the complaints and appeals mechanism, it was felt that the Committee was sufficiently empowered and its terms of reference satisfactory.

In response to a question about the Independent Standards Committee Members Forum, to which the Independent Members of the Standards Committee belonged and at which they met with Independent Members from other authorities to share experiences and identify good practice, it was advised that the next Forum, in October 2007, would be hosted by Rochford and that meetings were expected to be held at intervals of three or four months. It was confirmed that minutes of these meetings would be produced.

The Committee challenged the reference in the IDeA report to Independent Members of the Standards Committee failing to attend training events organised for Councillors. The Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that he would seek clarification from the IDeA on this point.

The Committee reviewed each of the points contained in the draft action plan at Appendix 2.

Point 1. Responding to questions, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that the Chief Executive had arranged formal training sessions for officers, to take place within the next month or two, with regard to the Authority's new political structure. A Members' forum would also be arranged in order for Members to discuss the operation of the new structure, and that officers could be available at this forum.

Point 3. Following discussion, a motion was moved by Cllr P A Capon and seconded by Cllr Mrs S A Harper that the current composition of the Standards Committee remain unchanged.

Point 4. In response to Members' concurrence that the Standards Committee was sufficiently empowered and that its terms of reference were appropriate, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that it would be appropriate to amend the proposed action plan documents accordingly.

Point 5. The Committee discussed alternative ways to encourage the widest take-up of Member training opportunities, including visits to best practice authorities and use of mentors. The following observations were made by Members in respect of training:-

- It was recognised that time constraints were often the reason for Councillors not being able to attend training sessions.
- The Committee regarded the quality of in-house training to be of a high standard, and in-house courses were often more popular with Members than those held with external trainers.
- In order to alert Members to training that related to, for example, new legislation, it was agreed that the current system of classifying courses **HR** (highly recommended), **R** (recommended) and **O** (optional) could be developed. This would have the effect of alerting Members to those courses that would most benefit them.
- Concern was expressed that the Standards Committee be viewed as having a controlling function in respect of imposition of Member training.
- The Committee discussed the possibility of introducing individual training plans for each Member, with possible focus on specific training for the Member Champions, although it was recognised that too 'bespoke' a training system would be complicated to administer.
- On-going training was vital to cover new legislation, particularly in the licensing and planning areas.
- Although training would be particularly beneficial to new Members, it was recognised that experienced Members would benefit from refresher courses.

Point 6. In respect of the recommendation to improve the use of complaints monitoring to inform decision-making, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that procedures were being revised following the Access to Services review and it was proposed that regular reports detailing current complaints information would be made available to the Executive Board from December 2007.

Point 7. In respect of the recommendation that channels be developed for improved consultation and feedback from residents, the Corporate Director (Internal Services) advised that the Council had the computer software necessary to carry out electronic community satisfaction surveys.

Point 9. As there was no Standards Committee meeting scheduled for January 2008, it was agreed the target date for the Standards Committee to consider outcomes of Access to Services review and make recommendations to Executive Board be amended to 'between October 2007 and April 2008' to allow consideration of both work in progress and the outcomes from the review.

Resolved

- (1) That the Corporate Director (Internal Services) contact IDeA and ask for clarification in writing as to their comments in the report regarding the appointment of an independent Chairman of the Standards Committee.
- (2) That the Corporate Director (Internal Services) seeks clarification from the IDeA as to what was meant in the report regarding the failure of Independent Members of the Standards Committee to attend training events organised for Councillors.
- (3) That the recommendations arising out of the Ethical Governance Health Check be accepted.
- (4) That the draft action plan be adopted, subject to the following amendments:
 - That the current composition of the Standards Committee remain unchanged.
 - That complaints information be made available to the Executive Board from December 2007.
 - That the target date for the Standards Committee to consider outcomes of Access to Services review and make recommendations to Executive Board be amended to 'between October 2007 and April 2008'.
 - That the proposed action plan documents be amended to show that the Standards Committee was sufficiently empowered and that its terms of reference were appropriate.

225 RECORD OF ATTENDANCE AT COMMITTEE MEETINGS 2006/2007

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Information and Customer Services relating to Members' attendances at meetings during 2006/2007.

It was noted that Members involved in the work of the Rochford Housing Transfer Members Panel had seen intensive work activity that would not be reflected in the attendance figures.

It was agreed that, in the interest of openness and transparency, Member attendances should be published on the Council website. It was further agreed that although the figures should be excluded from 'Rochford District Matters', they should remain in the Members' Bulletin.

Resolved

- (1) That the summary statistics relating to Members' attendances at meetings during 2006/2007 be received.
- (2) That the record of attendances be published in future on the Council's website and in the Members' Bulletin.

226 DOWN TO DETAIL – SIXTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND (SBE)

The Committee considered the programme and representation at the SBE Annual Conference to be held in Birmingham on 15-16 October 2007. Cllr J Thomass and Mr D J Cottis agreed to attend. Mr B M Flynn was also willing to attend but, as he had been to four previous conferences, proposed that his name be held in reserve subject to the third place being offered to other Members first.

Resolved

That Cllr J Thomass and Mr D J Cottis attend the conference with Mr B M Flynn as reserve subject to the third place remaining vacant.

The meeting closed at 8.49 pm.

Chairman

Date

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