

Standards Committee – 8 November 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on **8 November 2005** when there were present:-

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

Cllr D Merrick

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

Mr D J Cottis
Mr B M Flynn

PARISH MEMBER

Cllr R E Vingoe, Hockley Parish Council

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr C I Black, Cllr P A Capon and Mr A C Comber, Independent Member

OFFICERS PRESENT

R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration)
S Fowler - Head of Administrative and Member Services
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

433 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 July 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

434 STANDARDS BOARD FOURTH ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

The Committee received the report of the Head of Legal Services on the outcome of the Standards Board for England Fourth Annual Assembly.

In association with the report, the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) tabled the latest issue of the Standards Board document "first hand" which commented on areas covered by the Assembly.

In discussing the role of Independent Members, the Committee endorsed the suggestion of the Corporate Director that there could be merit in the establishment of an informal local forum for all Independent Members within South East Essex at which information, experience and views could be exchanged. The Corporate Director advised that he would liaise with other

Monitoring Officers within South East Essex with a view to facilitating such a forum.

It was observed that the role of Independent Members had been a theme at each Standards Board Annual Assembly, including the question of whether the positions of Standards Committee Chairman and Vice-Chairman should be filled by Independent Members. There was some indication that there may be a future requirement that Independent Members are appointed to these positions.

Referring to indications that the Standards Board could adopt a more strategic role, with local issues being dealt with at a local level, the Corporate Director advised that this would lead to questions around the mechanisms needed to drive ethical scrutiny at the local level.

Reference was made to a recent meeting held between the Independent Members and the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council on the role/involvement of Independent Members. The Meeting had helped highlight the willingness of Independent Members to take a pro-active role. One suggestion that had emanated from the meeting was the possibility that there could be a change to the format of some Standards Committee sessions, with perhaps two formal “housekeeping” sessions and two informal sessions (at which there can be broader discussion) each year. Members endorsed the philosophy of this approach. The Parish Member, Councillor R E Vingoe, indicated that it was likely that the Parishes would welcome the suggested approach and that he could seek the views of Parishes on this and questions such as the filling of the Chairman/Vice-Chairman position.

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) confirmed that it had been anticipated that the Government’s response to possible revisions to the Code of Conduct and changes to the ethical framework would have been received by now. This should definitely be available for the next scheduled meeting of the Committee. If future information pointed to a need to consider significant changes at an early stage, a special meeting of the Committee could be convened.

435 MEMBER TRAINING PROGRAMME 2005/06 – MID PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Administrative and Member Services on the mid-programme review of the 2005/06 Member Training Programme.

In presenting the report, the Head of Administrative and Member Services drew attention to the fact that some problems had been experienced with the training accommodation at the Freight House, Rochford. It may be appropriate for the suitability of the accommodation to be reviewed when consideration is given to next year’s programme.

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With regard to Appendix 1 of the report, it was noted that there had been five attendees at the specialist training for Appeals Committee Members on 7 November and nine attendees at the IT skills training session on 2 November.

Responding to questions, the Head of Administrative and Member Services advised that:-

- Whilst the wording of documentation was always under review to achieve clarity on the nature of each course, this year's programme had seen the identification of three strands (role development, technical skills and personal skills) and continued use of the mechanism whereby courses are identified on the basis of being highly recommended, recommended or optional.
- Overall, Parish/Town Council attendances had been relatively low.
- Traditionally, the Standards Committee has scheduled training sessions for three distinct periods of the year (June/July, October/November and February/March). This can always be reviewed if considered appropriate.

During debate, it was observed that it can often be the case that individuals only appreciate the amount of information that there is to be learnt on a subject when they attend a training session. Specific reference was made to the value that can be associated with working with other Council's to develop joint training sessions in the context of the joint work planned in this area with Castle Point and Basildon Councils.

The Parish Member, Councillor R E Vingoe, indicated that he would happy to highlight the availability of courses with Town/Parish Councils.

Members endorsed the recommendation in the report. The Committee also agreed a motion, moved by Councillor C A Hungate and seconded by Mr D J Cottis, relating to appropriate courses being open to all Members, including Parish Councillors and independent Members.

Resolved

- (1) That external training opportunities be made available to Members, on the basis of the following criteria:-
 - Course content relevant to the aims of the Member Training Programme and the Council's corporate priorities.
 - The reputation of the training provider in offering effective programmes.
 - Course content relevant to the role of the Member concerned.

- . Funding available in budget.
 - . The Member attending the course being asked to provide a resume of information gleaned for the Members' Bulletin.
- (2) That appropriate courses remain open to all Members, including Parish Councillors and Independent Members. (HAMS)

436 RECORD OF MEMBERS' ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

The Chairman advised that he had been approached by a number of Members on the possibility of simplifying the Members Attendance at Meetings Schedule published each year by, for example, removing reference to percentages. If the form showed, say, the number of meetings that could be attended and the number that had been, there should be no need for a percentage figure. Production of the schedule in its current form was relatively resource intensive.

One suggestion had been that the schedule comprise total Committee Meetings attended; total Sub-Committee Meetings attended; total attendance as a Substitute Member and total attendance on Committees as a non-Member.

The following observations were made during discussion:-

- . Clear distortions can be associated with the use of percentages. For example, a Member serving on only a few Committees could more easily achieve 100% attendance than a Member serving on various Committees and, if a Committee meets on only a few occasions, non-attendance at only one meeting could result in a poor percentage figure compared to non-attendance at a meeting of a Committee that meets on a high number of occasions.
- . It is important to remain mindful of the purpose for compiling statistics and whether they are capable of identifying issues of concern.
- . There have been indications that the maintenance of the statistics in their current form could be preventing some Members from increased Committee involvement on the basis that such involvement could result in a reduced percentage attendance score.
- . Committee attendance figures do not take account of Member absences due to official engagements or attendance at other fora, such as interview panels, Group Leaders panels, Party Group meetings and meetings of Outside Bodies.

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- Statistics cannot account for implications associated with application of the pro-rata rules to Committee seats and to political dimensions associated with decisions to serve.
- Difficulties can be associated with considering whether some weighting should be given to the relative importance of Committees. For example, whilst it may be considered that Full Council or Planning Committee Meetings are of significance, Members often believe involvement with the work of Policy Committees to be more significant.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director (Law, Planning and Administration) confirmed that a role of the Standards Committee was to monitor attendance at Meetings and that current practise is for any concerns that may be associated with a Member's attendance to be raised with the appropriate Group Leader in the first instance.

There was consensus that it would be appropriate to exclude percentage figures from attendance statistics and that they should be simplified to the fullest possible extent. Particular concerns could be associated with the way any attendance record mechanism can so easily be associated with statistical distortion and prove meaningless. It should also be remembered that the maintenance of attendance information is not about competition or the development of some form of league table and that concerns about attendance are always likely to be the exception rather than the rule.

On a motion, moved by Councillor D Merrick and seconded by Councillor R E Vingoe, it was:-

Resolved

That the Members' Attendance at Meetings Schedule only identify the number of meetings that is possible for an appointed Member to attend and the number attended. (HAMS)

The meeting closed at 9.36 pm.

Chairman

Date