

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS' FORUM

15 March 2007

at

Castle Point Borough Council

Present:	Lorraine Browne	Solicitor to the Council and Deputy Monitoring Officer	Basildon
	Malcolm Fielding	Independent Member	Basildon
	Tony French	Independent Member	Braintree
	Andrew Smith	Monitoring Officer	Castle Point
	Jason Bishop	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Ian Clift	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Derek Connelly	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Amanda Darke	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Robert Smale	Independent Member	Castle Point
	Emma Perry	Committee Officer for the Standards Committee	Castle Point
	Myrna Liles	Independent Member	Maldon
	David Cottis	Independent Member	Rochford
	Bernard Flynn	Independent Member	Rochford

Apologies: There were no apologies given at the meeting.

23. Introduction

Andrew Smith, Monitoring Officer, welcomed everyone to Castle Point Borough Council and the fourth Independent Members' Forum. All present introduced themselves to the group.

The Rochford District Council representatives informed the Forum that Tony Comber had now resigned as an Independent Member.

24. Minutes of IMF Meeting on 3 October 2006

The Minutes were agreed as a true record.

Bernard Flynn took the opportunity to update the forum on the recent Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMSce) meeting. He felt that the meeting had been chaotic and had no direction. A number of questions had been raised by attendees that the organisers could not answer.

It was felt that the idea in its basic form was sound, although they had not carried out enough research. He had also not received any further communication from the organisers after leaving his contact details.

Tony French informed the forum that he had also attended the meeting and agreed with the comments made by Bernard Flynn and felt that nothing positive had come out of the meeting.

Andrew Smith confirmed that Castle Point Borough Council had not received any notifications from AIMScE.

25. News from 5th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

Derek Connelly and Robert Smale had both attended the Annual Assembly and the expectation was that the new code would have been approved by the Minister, however, it unfortunately was not. They both believed it was a very informative and well run conference.

Bernard Flynn, however, felt it had not been the best annual assembly he had attended, although he agreed that it was a brilliant training ground for new members and recommended all new members to attend if they got the opportunity.

The conference had been well attended by a range of authorities and it was felt very beneficial to share experiences and a good opportunity to network.

Discussion then took place on the role of the Independent Members within each of the local authorities:

Castle Point Borough Council

Castle Point Borough Council was in its first year of having an Independent Chair for the Standards Committee, in advance of the recent legislation. The Standards Committee had a total of 10 members, with 5 of these being Independent Members.

Two of the Council's Independent Members had also volunteered to undertake an ethical audit function and an ethical audit checklist had recently been agreed by the Council. The two Independent Members received a copy of the full Council despatch each week and attended Committee Meetings on an impromptu basis. The completed checklists were then passed to the Monitoring Officer. A copy of the form was circulated to the group for information.

Andrew Smith stated that this function had been established as a result of the CPA assessment and the need to improve Member decision-making. The CPA had recommended that an audit be undertaken on the decision making process and it was decided that instead of employing external auditors to

undertake this role, the Council could utilise the valuable resource of its Independent Members.

Maldon District Council

Myrna Liles explained that following attendance at the previous Independent Members' Forum meeting she had realised that every authority did things differently. She had gone back with a number of ideas following the previous meetings and the Independent Members now received a copy of all the minutes of Council meetings, which was a step forward.

None of the Independent Members from Maldon attended the Annual Assembly. She still believed that there was a feeling of mistrust from the Council towards Independent Members.

Rochford District Council

Bernard Flynn explained that he now received copies of all Council papers after requesting to receive these, although the other two Independent Members were not aware that they could receive these.

The Independent Members have to give prior notice of their attendance at any meetings. The Chairman of their Standards Committee was a Council Member. They had also increased the number of Parish Councillors standing on the Standards Committee to two.

The feeling from the Independent Members was that they generally felt unvalued.

Basildon District Council

Basildon District Council was still trying to recruit a second Independent Member and an advert would soon be placed in the Council's 'District Diary'. Due to their recruitment problems, they were very keen to look at the possibility of sharing Independent Members with other local authorities.

They were undertaking their first local investigation hearing in the near future and would review their procedures after this had taken place.

Braintree District Council

Braintree District Council currently had four Independent Members who had the agreement from the Council to attend any meeting without prior notice.

The Independent Members that attended the Annual Assembly Conference had brought back a number of recommendations to their Council.

Frequency of Meetings/Venues

A discussion took place on the frequency and venue of future meetings. Tony French stated that Braintree was happy to accommodate future meetings, although it may be considered too far to travel and make more sense to hold the meetings in the local vicinity.

It was agreed to remain with the current arrangements.

Thurrock Training

Reference was made to the mock trial training that had taken place at Thurrock Council on 13 March 2007, run by Mr Peter Keith-Lucas from Bevan Brittan solicitors. This provided Members with the opportunity to gain practical experience in conducting a local hearing and determination.

3 Members from Castle Point Council had attended, of which 2 of these were Independent Members. These Members informed the group that the event had been most enjoyable and gave valuable information on what they thought the new code would include.

They, however, stated that the event was not well attended, mainly due to the short notice and that it was held during the day. A number of Independent Members stated that they had not been informed of this event. Andrew Smith agreed to circulate papers from the session to individual Monitoring Officers for distribution to their Independent Members.

Further discussion took place on guidance given at the training session regarding Member/Officer sanctions.

27. Code of Conduct Consultation Paper

Andrew Smith informed the Forum that the closing date for representations had now passed.

28. Possible shared appointment of Independent Members

Lorraine Browne informed the group that she had been approached by the Leader of the Council regarding looking into the possibility of shared appointment of Independent Members, due to the problems Basildon Council had experienced with recruitment of their Independent Members.

Discussion took place on this and a number of views and issues were raised:-

- Logistical difficulties – easier with neighbouring Councils
- Shared appointments were already being sought in various jobs, including Basildon, Rochford and Southend Councils.

- Concerns regarding different conditions, including pay and expenses. Lorraine Browne added that Basildon Council would be willing to pay Independent Members' expenses, even though they did not pay their own.
- What the work would entail and how often would they be required.
- Felt difficult to decide without looking at the new Code.

The outcome of the discussion had been that it was felt this proposal required further examination and Andrew Smith and Lorraine Browne would now discuss this with other Monitoring Officers and come back to the next meeting with more information.

29. Any other Business

None.

30. Date and venue of next meeting

The Independent Members from Rochford District Council felt that it was Rochford's turn to host the meeting. Details of the date and venue of the next meeting would be circulated in due course.