

Standards Committee – 30 January 2003

Minutes of the meeting of the **Standards Committee** held on **30 January 2003** when there were present:

Cllr C C Langlands (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

Cllr C J Lumley
Cllr M G B Starke
Cllr Mrs M S Vince

PARISH MEMBER

Cllr M Steptoe, Barling Magna Parish Council

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS

Mr A C Comber
Mr D J Cottis
Mr B M Flynn

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from District Councillor T G Cutmore

SUBSTITUTES

Cllr C A Hungate

OFFICERS PRESENT

R J Honey - Corporate Director (Law Planning & Administration)
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

37 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 July 2002 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With regard to Minute 336/02, the Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) updated the Committee on the Council's most recent decisions relating to Member remuneration. Reports on remuneration would be brought forward as appropriate.

38 TRAINING FOR MEMBERS OF STANDARDS COMMITTEE/NEW REGULATIONS

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) advised that the question of identifying appropriate training for Members of the Standards Committee was closely allied to the position relating to the provision of new regulations and guidance from the Standards Board for England. Whilst a number of bodies such as the Law Society and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy had produced outline training programmes, the majority had been cancelled pending the publication of new regulations.

The publication date had been put back on more than one occasion. From latest indications it appeared unlikely that regulations would be available before Easter 2003. The timeframe would be even longer should primary legislation be required. It was clearly the intention of government to extend the statutory terms of reference of Standards Committees but the Committee's precise role could not be established until the Regulations were available.

The Committee concurred with a view of the Corporate Director that it would be inappropriate to pursue external training arrangements until the position pertaining to the Regulations was clearer. Members also agreed that it would be of value to invite Rayleigh Town Councillor R H Boyd, who is a lay member of the Adjudication Panel for England, to address the Committee on the role of that body in the new ethical framework.

Despite a level of confusion with regard to new regulations, the Standards Board was functioning under the existing legislation. The Corporate Director advised that, to date, three case summaries had been published relating to investigations undertaken by the Standards Board for England into allegations involving Essex Councillors. Also, the Adjudication Panel had commenced work and dealt with one case so far in England where a Parish Councillor had been disqualified from office for one year for refusing to complete the Register of Members Interests

Responding to Member questions, the Corporate Director confirmed that, at present, any complaints about Councillors under the Code of Conduct had to be in writing direct to the Standards Board for England.

Resolved

- (1) That the implications of the new regulations be considered once they are received.

- (2) That no further action be taken on identifying an external Member training arrangement until the position pertaining to the new regulations is clearer.
- (3) That Rayleigh Town Councillor R H Boyd be invited as a guest speaker to a meeting of the Standards Committee to outline the role of the Adjudication Panel for England. (CD(LP&A))

39 MONITORING OF MEMBERS ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS AND TRAINING SESSIONS

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) on the effective monitoring of attendance at meetings and training sessions and how it might be implemented.

Minimum levels of Competency Training for Members

The Corporate Director reminded the Committee that it was their function to ensure that the type and amount of training available to Members was sufficient for the purpose and to monitor attendance both at meetings and training sessions. It was not the Committee's responsibility to monitor whether or not an individual Member had attained a minimum level of competency.

During debate of the year's training programme, it was observed that, given the work and other commitments of many Members, it would be preferable if the December period could be avoided. The year had seen a number of learning challenges, particularly associated with the adoption of a new political structure. It could be helpful to distinguish between training sessions that are for the purposes of induction and those that address basic competencies and a programme tailored accordingly. Such an approach could assist the throughput of training in that a longer-term view could be taken for some competency subjects (induction training needing to be completed as early as possible following Councillor appointment). Reference was made to the value of introducing training on the application of Rules of Procedure (formerly Standing Orders).

Responding to Member questions, the Corporate Director advised that-

- The induction element for the current year had been particularly intensive in view of all-out elections.
- The Parishes had been included in some planning training. This Committee could recommend that Parishes be invited to other training sessions.

- It would be appropriate to identify specific date periods to cover induction and competency training as follows:-
 - May/June/July (Induction)
 - October/November (Competency)
 - February/March (Competency).

Monitor of Members Attendance at Meetings and Training Sessions

The Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration) advised that it would be possible to produce a record of attendance for training sessions to co-incide with the completion of the training blocks identified above. This would enable the Standards Committee to comment should any particular issues be identified.

Responding to Member questions, the Corporate Director advised that-

- the monitoring of Committee attendance was already used internally as an aid to identifying whether a Member may be reaching six months absence, which would disbar him/her from the Council.
- should this Committee set training attendance criteria and be unhappy it was being met, it would be possible for the Committee to invite the appropriate Member/s to a meeting for the purposes of explanation.
- the Council has sanctions in terms of being able to agree the role which Members can play in the work of the Authority.
- the Council had agreed that the Standards Committee should be responsible for determining minimum levels of competency training and monitoring attendance.

It was noted that Council had decided that attendance records should take account of absence due to special circumstances.

Monitoring of Planning Training Sessions

Arising out of Environmental Overview & Scrutiny Committee in September 2002, the Standards Committee had been requested to give particular attention to planning training issues. It was recognised that, given the quasi-judicial nature of planning, appropriate planning training was important. The planning function was invariably more in the public spotlight than other service areas.

In discussion as to whether any training sessions should or could be made compulsory the Committee endorsed the view of a Member that the Standards Committee should indicate the importance it placed on a session by categorisation as either “Recommended” or “Optional”. The Standards Committee would expect all Members to make an effort to attend “Recommended” sessions. It would also be appropriate to indicate that a Member should attend at least one planning related session every year.

A Member questioned whether special training was necessary for the Chairman of Planning Services. It was noted that, compared with other Chairmen, the Chairman of that Committee spent quite intensive sessions with Planning Officers in advance of meetings to assist their understanding of the subject. The Corporate Director advised that it would be possible to identify whether specific external training was available, although one factor was the short timescale between appointment at Annual Council and the first meeting.

Resolved

- (1) That summary reports be received in November and April of each year on Members’ attendance at meetings and a summary report on Members’ attendance at training sessions at the end of each programme of courses.
- (2) That, in future, training be divided into two types - Induction and Competency, sessions to include the application of Rules of Procedure and to be as follows:-
 - May/June/July (Induction)
 - October/November (Competency)
 - February/March (Competency)
- (3) That invites be extended to the Parish/Town Councils to attend training sessions as considered appropriate.
- (4) That, in deciding forthcoming training sessions, the Standards Committee will indicate whether attendance is ‘Recommended’ or ‘Optional’, subject to each Member being expected to attend at least one planning related session per year. (CD(LP&A))

40 NEXT MEETING

The next Meeting was provisionally scheduled for Thursday 10 April, commencing at 7.30pm in Committee Room 4, Civic Suite, Rayleigh.

The Meeting closed at 8.45pm

Chairman

Date