

## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

### **Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held on Thursday, 25 March, 2010 at 6.00 p.m. at Civic Offices, Telford**

**PRESENT:** Councillors D.G. Allen, R. Aveley, R.E. Groom, C.R.P. Mollett, H. Rhodes and A.J. Stanton  
A. Simpson (Chairman), B. Bayley, F. Beasland and A. Selvaratnam (Independent Members)  
Councillor D. Edwards (Parish Council representative)

#### **ST-25        MINUTES**

In relation to Minute ST-24(b) – Update to Local Investigations and Hearings Procedures, the Legal Services Manager reported that Cllr V.A. Fletcher, while being unable to attend the meeting due to illness, had sent an e-mail to express her view that Members had intended for any amendments or departures from the procedures to be reported to the Committee (and subsequently Council). The Head of Governance advised that the Committee would be notified informally of any changes made under delegated powers, and Members were satisfied that the minute accurately reflected the decision that was made.

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on 10 December 2009 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

#### **ST-26        APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Councillors V.A. Fletcher and K.S. Sahota (TWC); Councillors R. Wickson and R. Williams (Parish Council representatives)

#### **ST-27        DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

#### **ST-28        STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND – MONITORING OFFICER'S ANNUAL REPORT**

The Legal Services Manager presented the report of the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer which provided Members with details of the information to be included in the annual return which the Monitoring Officer had to provide to Standards for England.

This year, Standards for England had provided advance notice of the information they were seeking. This was in the form of a series of questions, which were attached to the report along with some brief guidance notes. The questions were divided into five sections – communication, influence, training & support, investigations, and relationships with town and parish councils.

Members had also been sent copies of the Committee's 2009 Annual Report in order to provide some context to this exercise.

Bearing in mind the amount of information requested, the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer proposed that a draft Return be prepared by officers (as far as they were able) and then sent to Members for comments, before being submitted to Standards for England. It was expected that the submission window would be late March or early April 2010. In relation to training and support, it was suggested that some narrative should be added to the more "tick box" responses in order to reflect concerns at the numbers of members in the Borough who had not attended some form of code of conduct training. During discussion on this issue, the Monitoring Officer added that the primary responsibility to provide training for town and parish councillors rested with himself, but that maybe existing local council networks (eg Shropshire Association of Local Councils) could be used more to promote and provide training.

**RESOLVED – that the Monitoring Officer prepare a draft Annual Return for circulation to the Committee for comments, prior to submission to Standards for England.**

#### **ST-29            JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE - UPDATE**

The Legal Services Manager presented the report of the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer, which provided an update on discussions regarding a Joint Standards Committee with the Shropshire & Wrekin Fire Authority, along with proposals to recruit a new independent member.

Following the decision of the Committee to look into the possibility of establishing a Joint Standards Committee, the Fire Authority's Standards Committee had endorsed the suggestion to explore the matter further. Some initial work had been undertaken, including speaking to Shropshire Council, who were unable to provide a commitment at this stage. However, it was now considered that it would take a significant amount of resources to set up a Joint Committee, and that it would be difficult to allocate such resources to this project at this time. It was therefore proposed to put any further work on hold, and set the matter for review later on in the next Municipal year.

Due to the potential for a combined Joint Standards Committee, work had not been undertaken to recruit a vacancy which was due to be created as a result of the Chairman standing down following completion of his two terms of office. If the work on a Joint Committee was to be put on hold, it would be necessary to commence a recruitment process in order to ensure that the full complement of independent members was maintained.

In response to a question about the vacancy for a parish council representative on the Committee, the Legal Services Manager advised that a recruitment process was currently being organised.

**RESOLVED –**

- (a) that the work to develop a Joint Standards Committee with the Shropshire & Wrekin Fire Authority be put on hold;**
- (b) that the Monitoring Officer be instructed to commence a recruitment process for a new independent member of the Standards Committee.**

**ST-30            CODE OF CONDUCT TRAINING 2009/10**

The Legal Services Manager presented the report of the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer which updated Members with regard to the recent Code of Conduct training seminars, and sought views on arrangements for further training.

Three Code of Conduct training sessions took place during February and March 2010, following a new format previously agreed by the Committee. The training was in a workshop style, and included case studies and more feedback from participants than in previous years. The report contained details of the number of participants at each session, along with a summary of the feedback received. Overall, the feedback was very favourable.

Members were agreed that the training sessions had been excellent, and perhaps this blueprint could be used for future training events. It was felt that Members were particularly engaged if the content focussed on practical issues and relevant case studies. It was also suggested that Standards Committee members could benefit from further training on the assessment and determination of Code of Conduct complaints, based on the experiences gained over the first 12 months of the new framework. Members again raised the issue of attendance at the training events, and a number of suggestions were made to try and increase participation, particularly those who had never attended such training. These included the possibility of making a video of a training session, and making it available online; using peer pressure through the political Groups; emphasising to Councillors that, if they were subject to a complaint about an alleged breach of the Code, they would not be able to use the excuse that they had never been provided with training; and writing to Parish Clerks to make them aware of those Members (if any) from their Council who had attended for training.

The Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer added that he would take account of the comments made by Members, and bring a training plan/programme to the next meeting.

**RESOLVED –**

- (a) that the report be noted;**

- (b) that the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer draw up a programme/plan for future Code of Conduct training, taking account of the comments/feedback from Members, for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee;
- (c) that Parish Clerks be notified of the names (if any) of their Council's Members who had attended for Code of Conduct training.

**ST-31            CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS MADE TO THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE – QUARTERLY UPDATE 1 OCTOBER – 31 DECEMBER 2009**

The Legal Services Manager presented the report of the Head of Governance & Monitoring Officer which detailed the complaints about elected Members which had proceeded to the referrals sub-committee during the period 1 October to 31 December 2009.

During that period, two complaints were received and proceeded to local assessment. The complaints were made by the Monitoring Officer. The Review Sub-Committee considered one review application made by a Borough Councillor concerning three Borough Councillors. The Sub-Committee decided to uphold the original decision that no further action was required. A quarterly return had been sent to Standards for England.

Members considered whether the information contained in the report could be provided in some other, more timely, way, but on balance it was agreed that the current reporting process should be retained.

**RESOLVED – that the report be noted.**

The meeting ended at 6.48 pm

**Chairman:** .....

**Date:** .....