

## Standards Committee

A meeting of Standards Committee was held on Friday, 12th February, 2010.

**Present:** Mr F W Hayes(Chairman), Mr M Armstrong(Vice-Chair), Mrs E Chapman(Independent), Cllr Paul Baker, Cllr David Coleman, Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Ken Dixon, Mr T Bowman(Parish Representative), Cllr Terry Laing(Vice Cllr Sherris), Mr R. Mosley(Substitute Parish Representative), Mr C. Nestor(Substitute Independent)

**Officers:** I. Jones(RES), D.E.Bond, A. Squires, M. Henderson, K. Wannop(LD)

**Also in attendance:**

**Apologies:** Cllr Andrew Sherris, Cllr John Fletcher

### **S       Declarations of Interest**

**109/09**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **S       Minutes of the Meeting held on 20th November 2009**

**110/09**

The Chairman signed the minutes of the meeting held on 20th November 2009 as a correct record.

### **S       Internal Audit Report - December 2009**

**111/09**

The Committee considered a report advising Standards Committee Members of the work carried out by the Internal Audit Section in one audit within the remit of the Committee during the quarter October - December 2009.

Members were reminded that Internal Audit was an independent appraisal function established by the Council to objectively examine, evaluate and report on the adequacy of internal controls. This role ensured that there was proper economic, efficient and effective use of resources. It also ensured that the Council had adequate accounting records and control systems.

The Chief Internal Auditor presented the Committee with details of an adhoc audit relating to the Members and officer Travel and Subsistence procedures.

It was explained that the previous audit undertaken in this area had identified 9 recommendations relating to Members and 30 relating to Officers. This, most recent, audit had found that all the recommendations relating to Members had been implemented and all but 2 of the officer recommendations. The audit had revealed a substantial level of assurance.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

### **S       Local Democracy Week - Update**

**112/09**

Members considered a report which updated the Committee on the work undertaken in Local Democracy Week. Members were made aware of the activities involved and what the next steps were. Members were also made aware that the young people that had taken place in the Be a Councillor campaign were volunteers from the Youth Assembly, and that the campaign would run through to the 2011 Local Elections.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

**S**  
**113/09**      **Learning and Development Strategy for Members**

The Committee considered a report that provided Members with an update on the Learning and Development Strategy for Members.

A copy of a report relating to the Member Learning and Development Strategy, which had been considered by the Members Advisory Panel in December 2009 was provided.

The Committee was made aware of the Mandatory training which had been agreed for Members. Members were also informed of the local assessment training which had been delivered to most of the Standards Committee's Members.

As regards the ethical framework, when the revised Code of Conduct for Members was introduced, arrangements would be made to implement a programme of training and development for Members, Officers and Town/Parish Councils. A similar approach would be taken in relation to any new Employee Code of Conduct which was introduced.

The Tees Valley Standards Committees development programme was continuing. A further Independent Members Forum was proposed for 22 April 2010. This was being facilitated by Stockton. Middlesbrough was planning a Standards Committees' Workshop.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

**S**  
**114/09**      **Observing Council Meetings**

Consideration was given to a report that provided an opportunity for Members' comments about their attendance at recent Council meetings to be provided and discussed.

Planning Committee - 13th January 2010 - attended by Chris Nestor and Ian Dalgarno

Members received and discussed the assessment sheets from the above attended meeting and agreed feedback to the relevant officers/Chair.

The Committee was also provided with a letter from the Chair of Health Select Committee which thanked the Committee for its feedback.

RESOLVED that

1. The information be received
2. Feedback, as discussed, be provided to the relevant Officers/Chair.
3. Members inform the Councils Monitoring Officer of any of the Planning Committee meeting dates which they could attend.

**S**  
**115/09**      **Observing Local Strategic Partnership Meetings**

The Committee considered a report that provided an opportunity for Members who had attended meetings of the Local Strategic Partnership ("LSP") as observers, to report back on what they had observed regarding conduct and procedures at the meetings.

Western Area Partnership - 25th January 2010 - attended by Francis Hayes and Roger Mosley.

Northern Area Partnership - 1st February 2010 - attended by Roger Mosley.

Members received and discussed the assessment sheets from the above attended meetings and agreed feedback to the relevant officers/Chairs.

RESOLVED that

1. The information be received
2. Feedback, as discussed, be provided to the relevant Officers/Chairs.
3. Members inform the Councils Monitoring Officer of any outstanding meeting dates for Stockton Renaissance which they could attend.

**S**  
**116/09**      **Attendance at Town/Parish Council Meetings**

The Committee considered a report that provided an opportunity for Members' to give feedback on their attendance at Town/Parish Council Meetings in the Borough.

Grindon Parish Council - 13th January 2010 - attended by Tom Bowman

Maltby Parish Council - 19th January 2010 - attended by Francis Hayes and Chris Nestor

Members received assessment sheets from the above attended meetings and feedback was agreed to be provided to the relevant clerks.

RESOLVED that

1. The information be received
2. Feedback, as discussed, be provided to the relevant clerks.
3. Members inform the Councils Monitoring Officer of outstanding meeting dates which they could attend.

**S**  
**117/09**      **Messages from the Standards Committee**

The Committee considered A report seeking agreement of topics and the arrangements for implementing a programme of messages from the Standards Committee to Members, Officers, Town/Parish Councils and the general public. The following suggestions for messages were:-

- Personal and Prejudicial Interests
- Charitable Trustees - declarations of interest

- Freemasons and the Code
- Independent Members

All of these topics were covered in articles issued by Standards for England. It was proposed that Committee messages be developed using the relevant articles, highlighting the key elements or pertinent points and providing a link to the full article. The message would be badged with the heading of the Council's Standards Committee and would be signed by the Chair on behalf of the Committee

Members discussed the possibility of sending the information about the guidance on personal and prejudicial interests with the Members' Register of Interests form. Reminders about registering interests would be sent out to Members and Town/Parish Councils in the next couple of weeks. After this, it would however be about six months before such reminders were sent out again. It would, therefore, take some time before all of the topics specified were covered and there would be significant gaps between Committee messages. In view of this, it was suggested that Committee messages should be published every three to four weeks, as separate items, without being attached to Members' register of interests forms. This would ensure that information was disseminated in a timely way and it would also have a greater impact in terms of raising awareness about the Committee and the Standards agenda.

The Committee agreed the above suggestions and also agreed that the information that would be sent out would be agreed by the Chair, Vice-Chair and Communications team before sending it.

The Committee noted the outcomes of a Viewpoint survey that indicated a lack of public awareness of the Standards Committee and the process for submitting complaints about members. It was agreed that this needed to be addressed and would be discussed with Communications.

RESOLVED that

1. The topics specified above and at paragraph 3 of the report be agreed as messages.
2. Subject to the above, that a programme of messages from the Standards Committee be implemented in accordance with the arrangements outlined at paragraphs 4 to 8 of the report inclusively.
3. The Monitoring Officer be authorised in consultation with the Chair of the Committee and the Authority's Communications Team, to agree and to publish all of the Committee's messages.
4. The messages be reported to the next available Committee meeting following their publication.

**S**      **Local Assessment - Notifications to Town/Parish Councils**  
**118/09**

Members considered a report which provided details of the advice provided by Standards for England regarding the requirements to notify Town/Parish Councils about complaints about their members, and the procedure which was

followed in relation to allegations considered by the Standards Committee. A copy of the guidance was provided.

Members were informed that all notifications had, to date, been sent to the relevant Town/Parish Clerk. Where necessary, discussions with the Clerk had taken place to explain the purpose of the notification and to discuss what should happen regarding the information it contained. It was unclear, however, if Town/Parish Councils had considered the provided guidance note, and in particular the section on notification procedures. In view of this it was recommended that the Monitoring Officer would write to Town/Parish Clerks to highlight the guidance and to ask the Clerks to discuss their Council's notification procedures with their members.

Reference was made to the small font size used by Standards for England. It was considered that this would prove difficult for many people to read. Members requested that Standards for England be asked to consider this and increase the font size of its published documents. Officers were requested to consider what could be done to increase the font size of such documents during the printing process.

RESOLVED that

1. The Monitoring Officer write to all Town/Parish Councils to highlight the guidance and ask the clerks to discuss this with their Members.
2. Efforts, as described above, be made to increase the font size of the Standards for England documents submitted to the Committee.

**S**      **Local Assessment - Case Studies**

**119/09**

Members were asked to consider a case study. The Committee considered and discussed a summary of a Standards scenario and provided its views on what decisions it would have made.

**S**      **Information/Discussion Items**

**120/09**

Members of the Committee considered the following items:-

1. Legal Update - Freedom of Information
2. Annual Governance Statement 2008/09
3. Annual Governance Report 2008/09
4. Memorandum of Understanding - Audit Commission and Standards for England
5. Parliamentary Standards Bill - MOJ News Release
6. MPs' Expenses and Allowances - MOJ News Release
7. Local Government Ombudsman - Update

Members were informed that with regard to the Local Government Ombudsman - Update, the Ombudsman would now deal with complaints regarding schools and private care homes.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

**S**  
**121/09**      **Service Improvement Plans and Council Plan 2010/11 - 2012/13**

The Committee considered a report that provided it with the opportunity to comment on the draft proposals for the Service Improvement Plans and Council Plan which were of direct relevance to the ethical framework. These included:-

- Improving Standards
- Introduction of New Executive Arrangements
- Development of arrangements for the scrutiny of partners
- Delivery of Members' induction programme post 2011 local elections.

RESOLVED that the proposed key priorities be agreed.

**S**  
**122/09**      **Tees Valley Standards Committees' Development Programme**

Members considered a report that provided the most recent details of the development programme for the Tees Valley Standards Committee and their members. Details of a proposed North East Independent Members Forum were also provided.

A note prepared by the Committee's chair which provided details of the proposed North East Independent Members Forum was also considered.

RESOLVED that the information be noted and the Committee Chair's involvement with the North East Independent Members' Forum be supported.

**S**  
**123/09**      **Standards Committee Forward Plan 2008/2011**

Consideration was given to the updated version of the Standards Committee Forward Plan. Members were again asked to consider whether there were other matters which should be included in the programme for future meetings. Members also received the Councils Statutory Forward Plan.

RESOLVED that the Standards Committee Forward Plan and Statutory Forward Plan be noted/received.