



STANDARDS COMMITTEE

10.00 p.m. – 11.35 p.m.

26 February 2010

Present: Mr P Franzen (Chair), Mr C Thrower (Vice-Chair), Councillors
Bearman Blower, Holmes, Lay and Lubbock

Apologies: Councillor Gihawi

1. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 September were agreed

4. CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS

None

5. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIR OF STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Chair of the Standards Committee outlined his annual report which provided an overview of the committee's activities and issues for the year 2009 to 2010. The report also looked forward to possible activity for the year ahead.

Members welcomed the report and supported the suggestions for making the Standards Committee role more proactive within the Council towards promoting issues of governance, ethics and standards.

The committee felt that although there had not been any standards hearings over the last 12 months this did not mean that there was not a requirement for a more proactive approach to positively enhance the way in which the Council worked and was perceived by the public.

RESOLVED to adopt the Annual Report of the Chair and request that the Council notes it at the next possible meeting;

And that The Constitution Working Party be requested to consider the following proposals:-

- (1) the Standards committee be the primary body for keeping codes of practice under review
- (2) the identification of training for members on matters regarding the code of conduct be recognised as a role of the Standards Committee
- (3) a minimum of 4 standing meetings of the Standards Committee are placed on the Council's programme of meetings to carry out ethics and governance work

6. REPORT FROM 2009 STANDARDS ENGLAND ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES, BIRMINGHAM 12-13 OCTOBER 2009

The Committee received the report of the Monitoring Officer and the Vice Chair of the Standards Committee who had attended the Annual Assembly.

The Deputy Chair and the Monitoring Officer explained that the Annual Assembly was held against the backdrop of two unknowns; the delayed code of conduct and the uncertainty of the future role of Standards for England and the governance of local standards after the General Election.

Regarding the delayed code of conduct, the Scrutiny officer reminded the Committee that the Annual Report of the Chair had updated on the situation which was that it had recently been decided that the new code of conduct for members would not be laid during this Parliamentary session.

Members noted that it was thought that a change of government may result in the amalgamation of some of what Standards for England does with the Audit Commission while devolving further the governance of local standards role to local authorities.

RESOLVED to note the report.

7. ASSESSMENT MADE CLEAR (DVD PRESENTATION)

At this point in the meeting the committee watched a DVD from Standards for England. The purpose of the DVD was to help standards committee members and local authority officers involved in the assessment of complaints. This went through the four stages of the assessment process, looking at important and contentious issues.

Members noted that the four stages of the assessment process were; pre-assessment, assessment, decision and review. The DVD helped the

members to consider the criteria that guided decisions, including whether any investigation should be conducted locally or referred to Standards for England. The exercise also allowed Members to consider when it may not be appropriate to take no action or other action such as written apologies, mediation or training.

In a brief discussion after the DVD the Committee supported the view that they should become more pro-active in the promotion of standards among peers.

8. MEMBER CONDUCT AT COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Monitoring Officer explained that this item was intended to become a standing feature for future agendas of the Standards Committee. He hoped that by looking at issues raised by Members or observations of others at the Council's meetings this would begin a dialogue in the context of any standards or ethics issues arising from meetings. The report asked what was the dividing line between what could be considered political banter and bullying/intimidation.

Members welcomed this opportunity to discuss behaviour in meetings as the attached report outlined questions that had been raised by some members regarding respect, intimidation and bullying.

The Vice Chair stated that he had attended a recent meeting of the Council as an observer. He explained that he did not witness too much in the way of over zealous banter, however he felt that stronger Chairing and the tightening up of Members knowledge of the constitution and procedures could improve the way in which the meeting ran. The Monitoring Officer mentioned recent occasions that left a question mark over the behaviour of some members towards Officers offering advice at meetings.

The Committee also noted the Scrutiny Officers view that a review of the decision making process and the current style of meetings could improve the way in which the process operated within the bounds of the Local Government Act 2000. More focussed meetings and tighter terms of reference could contribute towards improving meetings.

It was requested by the Committee that a future meeting of the Standards Committee looked at previous case studies on member conduct regarding behaviour in meetings from other authorities in detail by way of training and awareness. Another suggestion was made that training for Chairs was very important and that the more equipped and skilled a chair of a meeting was, the less likely it was that poor behaviour would ensue. In general it was felt that there was further need to give training on procedures and motions and that if members had a more comprehensive knowledge of the constitution behaviour issues could be improved.

RESOLVED that

- (1) a future meeting of the Standards Committee look at previous case studies from other authorities on member conduct regarding behaviour in meetings for training and awareness purposes
- (2) suggest to the Training and Development Focus Group that chairing of meetings skills be provided for members

9. REPORT OF THE MONITORING OFFICER – PROMOTION OF ETHICS AND STANDARDS

Members noted that the report of the Monitoring Officer followed on from the Chair's Annual Report in that it provided the Committee with sight of outline proposals and areas of best practice towards promoting ethics and standards.

The Committee were supportive of any appropriate actions that could be taken in improving the way standards issues were promoted, internally to employees and Members as well as with the media. The Monitoring Officer explained that he was working towards improving communications around standards. To this end Members encouraged the development of a relationship between the Monitoring Officer and the Communications Team to maximise the positive promotion of standards and ethics issues. This would entail; the publication of stories and the promotion of the Standards Committee in Inner City and citizen magazine, and the regular publication of standards information on the Council's website.

Communications regarding standards and the Standards Committee were an ideal opportunity to keep the focus on ethical behaviour and the Chair felt that if standards and ethics communications could be led by the Monitoring Officer this would further enhance the profile not only of his role but standards and ethics in general.

RESOLVED to support the following key principles;

- (1) All communications should be delivered in plain English and should be open and honest, explaining processes, reasons, outcomes and implications
- (2) The Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer should take the lead in identifying communications opportunities and bringing them forward to involve the Communications Team
- (3) Communications to be regular so internal and external audiences become accustomed to standards issues and information

CHAIR