

Standards Advisory Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 18th March, 2014.

Present:- Councillors Grewal (Chair), A S Dhaliwal, M S Mann, Matloob and Strutton

Co-opted Independent Members:-
Ronald Roberts and Alan Sunderland

Parish Council Members:-
Parish Councillors Bryant and Gahir

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Minhas, Fred Ashmore and Parish Councillor Finn

PART 1

10. Declarations of Interest

None was declared.

11. Minutes of the last meeting held on 3rd October 2013

Resolved - That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3rd October 2013 be approved as a correct record.

12. Membership

The Committee welcomed Cllr Scott Bryant, appointed by Colnbrook with Poyle Parish Council, to his first meeting.

13. The Localism Act 2013 - Raising the Standards?

Consideration was given to a report covering a number of pieces of work and research undertaken, looking at how the standards regime was working, in particular since the changes introduced by the Localism Act 2011.

The Local Government Lawyer magazine had published the results of a survey of its readers around the dismantling of the old standards regime and its replacement with a 'lighter touch' system. The verdict from respondents was mixed but a majority considered the change had not affected the number of complaints submitted. 85% of local government lawyers and governance officers had said that the current sanctions available to deal with member misconduct were now inadequate. For Slough it was considered that the overall number of complaints had not significantly changed under the new system, with approximately 50% of complaints from the public and about 50% from members about members.

The report referred to the position in Thanet Council, where the four Independent members on the Standards Committee had considered that the

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behaviour of councillors in being distrustful of each other and of the public was so poor that they had issued a report to the Council calling on all members to demonstrate respect in all their dealings with each other and the public in order to restore confidence and esteem in the conduct of councillors.

The most recent report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life called for greater openness by (Government, Parliament and) Local Government around lobbying of public office holders arising from a concern that some individuals or organisations may have greater access to policy makers because of the way lobbying may be carried out. The Committee noted that in Slough, the locally adopted Code of Conduct for Councillors and Officers in relation to planning and licensing matters contained clear guidance for members on how they should respond to lobbying.

The fourth piece of work referred to related to a report from Transparency International UK on corruption in local government. This warned that care was required to ensure that some of the changes taking place in local government were not inadvertently creating an enabling environment for corruption. It was recommended that authorities should consider carrying out periodic corruption risk assessments in relation to their own functions and operations. It was proposed to the Committee that a more detailed report on this should be prepared for consideration both by this and the Audit and Risk Committee, possibly at a joint meeting.

The Committee discussed a range of issues and asked a number of questions in relation to the transparency of decision making, decisions on reports subsequently found to be inaccurate or having insufficient information, and around decisions relating to planning or licensing matters. In relation to the Transparency International UK report, the Committee took the view that it (and the Audit and Risk Committee) should have the opportunity to consider a report from its own perspective, followed by a joint meeting of the two Committees.

Resolved –

- (a) That the more detailed report about the recommendations as regards anti-corruption measures be prepared for consideration of the Committee at its next meeting in June (and by the Audit and Risk Committee), to be followed by a joint meeting shortly thereafter.
- (b) That further information be provided as to the possibility of introducing a maximum period for service on Planning Committee as opposed to the advantages of continuity of service.

14. Draft Annual Review May 2013 to March 2014

The Committee considered a report containing a draft Annual Review 2013/14, to meet the requirement in the Council's Constitution for an Annual Review of its work to be produced.

The draft summarised the activity and action over the last year, looked ahead to activities planned in the year ahead and included:

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- Introduction by the Chair
- Roles and functions of the Committee
- Activity and action in 2013/14
- Committee Membership 2013/14
- Complaints activity
- Future training

It was reported that the last two complaints referred to in the Complaints Activity section, each of which had been referred for investigation, were now close to being finalised. The Committee was concerned to note that complaints where an investigation was involved tended to take in the region of three months to complete. It was suggested that if it was possible to appoint an external investigator (rather than rely on the limited resources of the Head of Legal Services) this could assist in speeding up the time taken to deal with complaints.

Resolved –

- (a) That the draft Annual Review 2013/14 be approved for submission to the Council.
- (b) That consideration be given to making resources available for the appointment of an external investigator, where appropriate, to carry out investigations expeditiously.

15. Independent Person Appointment

The Committee was informed that advertisement of the position of Independent Person for the Council had commenced in February 2014, with a view to appointment of a successor to Mr Fred Ashmore, to be confirmed at the Annual Council on 5th June 2014.

16. Members Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Members' attendance record be noted.

17. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 18th June 2014.

18. Last Meeting

As this was the last meeting of the municipal year, the Committee recorded its thanks to the Chair, Cllr Grewal, for his leadership over the past two years, to the Vice-Chair, Cllr M S Mann (who was not standing for re-election to the Council in May 2014), and to the officers for their support to the Committee.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.25 pm)