

Standards Advisory Committee – Meeting held on Wednesday, 18th June, 2014.

Present:- Councillors M Holledge (Chair), Matloob (Vice-Chair), A S Dhaliwal, Dhillon, Sandhu, Roberts, Sunderland, Parish Councillor Bryant and Gahir

Co-opted Independent Members:-

Ronald Roberts and Alan Sunderland

Parish Council Members:-

Parish Councillors Bryant and Gahir

Apologies for Absence:-

Councillor Usmani
Fred Ashmore (Independent Person)

PART 1

1. Introductions

As it was the first meeting of the new year, the Chair introduced himself to the Committee and invited all Members to do the same.

2. Declarations of Interest

None was declared.

3. Minutes of the last meeting held on 18th March 2014

Resolved - That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 18th March 2014 be approved as a correct record.

Arising from minute 13 [The Localism Act 2013 – Raising the Standards?] the Committee was informed that it was proposed to bring forward a paper about anti-corruption measures in local government to both this Committee and the Audit and Risk Committee in September 2014, with the possibility of a joint meeting of the two Committees if this was appropriate. With regard to the suggestion about the possibility introducing a maximum period of service on Planning Committee, it was noted this would require an amendment to the Council's Constitution. This would be raised as an item for the Member Panel on the Constitution, but Members were invited to discuss support for the matter at political group level.

With reference to minute 14 [Draft Annual Review May 2013 to March 2014] this had been received and endorsed by the Council at its meeting on 22nd April 2014.

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4. Introduction to the Role of the Committee

Kevin Gordon, the Council's Monitoring Officer, gave a presentation introducing the role of the Committee. Article 9 of the Constitution set out the composition, roles and functions of the Standards Advisory Committee and the Standards Determination Sub-Committee (convened to consider and determine complaints following an investigation).

Members were reminded of the importance of the Code of Conduct, adopted in its present form in July 2012, which set out the conduct the Council expected of its Councillors. The Code began by laying down some overarching principles and included sections on how members conducted relationships with others, their interests, and how they managed information encountered in their duties as a Councillor.

The adoption of the new Code of Conduct had been as a result of a revised standards regime for local authorities introduced by the Government. This had included changes to the way complaints about Councillors were submitted and dealt with. The Monitoring Officer explained the procedure in place to deal with complaints when they were submitted, beginning with an initial assessment of a complaint by him, in consultation with the Council's Independent Person. If it was considered that there had been no breach of the Code (for instance if the complaint was trivial or was not in relation to the subject member's role as a Councillor) then no further action would be taken other than to record the complaint and report it to the Committee on the periodic activity report. Where there was concern that there may have been a breach of the Code, the Monitoring Officer could seek an informal remedy of the complaint by speaking directly to the Member concerned and/or the relevant political group leader. For more serious allegations, including those where more information was required to reach a conclusion, the Monitoring Officer would refer the matter for investigation. Following receipt of the Investigating Officer's report, containing a finding that the Code had been breached, a Standards Determination Sub-Committee would be called, unless (in consultation with the Independent Person) a local resolution was considered to be appropriate, for example training for the member or mediation. Where a Standards Determination Sub-Committee was convened, there was a limited range of actions that could be taken, as set out in paragraph 6.14 of Part 5 of the Constitution, and examples of such actions were noted. The Committee also noted that if a complaint identified any criminal conduct or breach of other statutory obligations, then this would be referred to the Police or other agency as appropriate rather than dealt with under the Council's local complaints procedure.

The Committee received answers to a number of questions on the complaints procedure, including the timescales within which they were dealt with. It was noted that where an investigation was necessary, this could result in a complaint taking up to three months to dispose of. It was hoped to reduce this time through the use of external investigators where appropriate.

Resolved - That the presentation be noted.

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5. Appointment of Independent Person

The Committee was informed that following advertisement of the position, a strong candidate had applied for appointment as the Council's Independent Person. Following interview by the Group Leaders, however, the applicant had withdrawn on account of the time commitment involved.

It would now be necessary to re-advertise the position, but in addition it was proposed to enlist the assistance of consultants specialising in advice to local authorities on standards issues, to help find a suitable candidate(s). In the meantime, Fred Ashmore, who was re-appointed at the Annual Meeting, would continue in the role of Independent Person.

6. Review of Standards Training for Members

The Committee considered a report about training in relation standards matters. A Member development session on *Standards Training and the Code of Conduct* was held on 3rd June 2014 specifically targeted at newly elected Councillors, but open to all members to attend. The session was attended by all 13 newly elected Members and 18 re-elected Members comprising a facilitated 1½ hour session using case studies and practical examples.

To support facilitated sessions, some informal learning activities were being developed, including e-learning, to reinforce good practices. A dedicated Members' portal was also being set up to enable easy access for viewing relevant resources, documents and materials on the slough.gov website.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

7. Schedule of Activity - Code of Conduct

Consideration was given to an update on the activity undertaken by the Council's Monitoring Officer in relation to complaints received under the Code of Conduct.

A summary of the complaints received in the calendar year 2014 to date showed that just two had been received, both against Borough Councillors. No further action had been taken on the first complaint since the investigation had concluded that no breach of the Code had taken place. The Investigating Officer's report was awaited in respect of the second complaint; a meeting of the Standards Determination Sub-Committee would be called to determine the matter, if required, dependant on the finding of the report.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

8. Members Attendance 2013/14

Resolved - That the Members' attendance record be noted.

9. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 10th September 2014.

Chair

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