

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY 8 JUNE 2010 FROM 7.30 PM TO 8.15 PM**

Present:-

Wokingham Borough Members:- *Chris Bowring, Pauline Helliar-Symons and Malcolm Storry*

Independent Members:- *David Comben and Anita H Grosz*

Parish/Town Council representatives:- *Ray Duncan and Mr J Heggadon*

*Also present:-Kevin Jacob, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Colin Lawley, Legal Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer*

PART I

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN FOR THE 2010/2011 MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was proposed by Anita Grosz and seconded by Pauline Helliar-Symons that David Comben be elected as Chairman of the Standards Committee for the 2010/2011 municipal year.

RESOLVED: That David Comben be elected as Chairman of the Standards Committee for the 2010/2011 municipal year.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN FOR 2010/2011 MUNICIPAL YEAR

It was proposed by David Comben and seconded by Ray Duncan that Anita Grosz be appointed as Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee for 2010/2011 municipal year.

RESOLVED: That Anita Grosz be appointed as Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee for the 2010/2011 municipal year.

3. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8 March 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to the correction of two typographical errors on page two.

4. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Eric Davies, John Giles, Roy Mantel and Geoff Wilde.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

7. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

8. PARISH/TOWN MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from Members of parish or town councils.

9. ROSENDALE BOROUGH COUNCIL – GOVERNANCE CHAMPIONS

Kevin Jacob commented that at its meeting in December 2009, the Committee had expressed an interest in learning more about the use at Rosendale Borough Council of 'Governance Champions' to help promote and imbed high standards of ethical behaviour within that local authority. As a result he had spoken to Officers at Rosendale Borough Council and obtained a copy of their job description for the role as set out on Agenda page 6.

He stressed that despite the use of the term 'job description' the role of Governance Champion did not imply the creation of additional dedicated posts. At Rosendale Borough Council existing members of staff had agreed to take on the role of Governance Champion as part of their existing duties and a key aspect of the rationale behind the role was that the Champions acted as a point of contact within departments for knowledge and advice concerning a range of ethical and governance issues, not only those relating to the Members Code of Conduct.

Members were informed a Corporate Governance Group had been established by Wokingham Borough Council, the function of which was to provide advice to the Officer Strategic Leadership Board (SLB) on the Councils' governance arrangements and in a number of areas there were similarities between the function of this group and the role of Governance Champions. It was felt by Officers that that there was potential for the Terms of Reference of the Group to be expanded to include the provisions of Governance Champions if it was appropriate.

In discussion a range of views were set out. A number of Members felt that it was unnecessary to create the role of Corporate Governance Champion as adequate provision had already been made within Council's Governance arrangements to ensure high standards and that these matters should be embedded anyway. It was also felt that even if no additional roles were created as a result of designating Corporate Champions, there would be an additional cost in terms of Officer time and resources, which would be hard to absorb.

Other Members felt there that the level of knowledge of ethical governance and Code of Conduct amongst middle managers and staff could be improved further and that therefore there the role of Governance Champion might be useful in highlighting issues.

After discussion it was agreed that more information on the Terms of Reference of the Corporate Governance Group should be obtained and circulated to all of the Committee and that the Chairman would update the Committee at its next meeting.

RESOLVED: That the more information on the Terms of Reference of the Corporate Governance Group be obtained and circulated the Committee.

10. UPDATE ON COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK

The Committee considered a report, (Agenda pages 7 to 8) which set out an update on complaints considered by the Initial Consideration Sub-Committee and a decision made by Standards for England in respect of an investigation they had undertaken. Copies of decision notices in respect of the individual complaints had been circulated to the Committee separately.

David Comben commented that the complaint considered by the Initial Consideration Sub-Committee was about alleged behaviour that taken place 1 year prior to its submission. The length of time between the alleged events and submission of the complaint had been a significant factor in the Initial Consideration Sub-Committee's decision to dismiss the complaint.

RESOLVED: That the update on complaint be noted.

11. APPOINTMENT OF DELEGATES TO ATTEND THE 9th STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND ASSEMBLY

The Committee considered a report, (Agenda pages 9 to 26) which set out details of the 9th Annual Assembly of Standards for England which was due to take place on 18-19 October 2010.

The item had been brought to the Committee so a decision could be taken on whether any delegates should be sent, and if so, to confirm the proposed names of Geoff Wilde, Anne Hunter one other Member of the Committee.

Kevin Jacob commented that in previous years, the Assembly had been a useful and value for money training opportunity for Members of the Committee to learn about the operation of the Code of Conduct.

He clarified that whilst it was the new Government's stated policy to abolish the Standards Board regime, there was no indication at the current time, that the Assembly would be cancelled. He did comment that he felt that in light of events, the programme might be amended to take account of the Government's announcement and what a future system might look like.

A number of Members commented that they had found the Assembly to be a useful and valuable experience and that it was important for Officers advising the Committee to be as up to date as possible. However, there was concern regarding the cost of the event and whether the £1,500 cost of sending three delegates was justified in the context of the overall financial climate.

After discussion it was,

RESOLVED: That two of the three reserved places should be allocated to Geoff Wilde and Anne Hunter, but that the third place should be offered to the Committee as a whole on a first come first served basis.

12. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND - BULLETIN 47

The Committee considered the latest Standards for England Bulletin, (Agenda pages 29 to 38). The Bulletin set out information and guidance from Standards for England, the national body responsible for Code of Conduct issues, to local Standards Committees.

Kevin Jacob introduced the Bulletin and drew Member's attention to the article on Agenda page 34 about the growing use by candidates and elected representatives of social networking. He commented that during the General Election campaign a number of prospective parliamentary candidates had been forced to withdraw or been deselected by their political party in light of indiscretions involving blogs and social networking sites. He referred to the publication of a quick guide to social networking by Standards for England

and commented that this could be distributed to members of the Borough Council and also brought to the attention of parish clerks. Members of the Committee supported this.

John Heggadon referred to the establishment of the Adjudication Panel for England as set out on Agenda pages 31 to 33 and commented that he was disappointed that given the prominence of the Standards for England's role in Code of Conduct issue, they had made a number of typographical errors in the article. Some concern was expressed that Hearings conducted by the Adjudication Panel could take place with less than three Tribunal members, as it was felt that this might weaken the robustness of any decision. However, it was noted that this provision followed similar processes within other parts of the tribunal and courts process.

13. LETTER FROM BOB CHILTON, CHAIR OF STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND CONCERNING THE FUTURE OF THE STANDARDS REGIME

The Chairman referred to the recent circulation to the Committee of a letter from Bob Chilton, Chair of Standards Committee concerning the future of Standards for England in light of the new Government's proposals within the Decentralisation and Localism Bill to 'abolish the Standards Board regime'. He commented that given the implications of this announcement, he had felt it appropriate for the Committee to hold a discussion as an urgent Agenda item.

It was noted that within the letter, Mr Chilton had commented that at present, Standards for England had not received any further information from the Department for Communities and Local Government as to what the scope or implications of the Government's proposal were. It had been made clear within the letter that in the absence of agreed legislation, the present statutory arrangements remained in place.

The Chairman commented that he felt it would be surprising if there were not to be any requirement for standards regime or equivalent arrangements, even if this were to become a matter of local discretion.

In connection with Standards for England recent document, '*Local Standards 2.0 – the proportionality upgrade?*', John Heggadon expressed concern that Standards for England had not taken due account of the particular apolitical nature of the majority of parish councils and the other unique characteristics of the make up of town and parish councils in drafting the document.

These are the Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee

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