

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Monday, 14 June 2010

PRESENT: I. Harley (Chair); Mrs Moss (Deputy Chair); D Hughes, T Morris, M Edwards, Councillor J Hollis, Councillor P Flavell and Councillor T Scott

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies. The Chair welcomed Councillor Scott as a new member of the Standards Committee and was a replacement for Councillor Capstick. He expressed his gratitude to Councillor Capstick for all her support and wished her well for the future.

2. MINUTES

3. DEPUTATIONS / PUBLIC ADDRESSES

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

5. MATTERS OF URGENCY WHICH BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THE CHAIR IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED

6. VISION FOR THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Monitoring Officer submitted a paper regarding the vision statement and elaborated thereon. He asked for advice of Committee Members for any amendments or improvements they wished to make.

RESOLVED: That the Vision statement be as follows;

'To develop an ethical agenda into Northampton Borough Council with the understanding, consent and support of elected members, officers, employees, citizens and media to the benefit of the public and Council in particular and the democratic process in general'.

It was agreed that Members would correspond with the Monitoring Officer with any comments on the contents of the Visions statement. The Monitoring Officer would consider the comments made and make the appropriate revisions to the document and seek the Chair and Vice Chairs agreement.

7. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report, which sought approval on the content of the Draft Communications Strategy. It was explained that following the Standards Committee away day it had become apparent that Members wanted to raise the profile of the Ethical Agenda and were enthusiastic in wanting to achieve democratic engagement, both internally and externally.

The Chair noted that when looking at the context of the standards scenario in 2004, NBC was a Council rated as 'poor' but notable progress had been made having been short-listed for Council of the year 2009. He further reported that the Corporate Plan should be seen as a great support to the Council and should be taken to the wider public arena. He explained that Councillors, as elected leaders, should be respected and it would be disappointing if any elected Member did not support it.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that once the draft report was agreed it could be

developed further. It was explained that developments on the intranet and internet allowed people to access information relating to Standards and that during training sessions in the Induction Process emphasis would be placed on trying to embed the importance of ethical governance.

The Chair asked for feedback of the experiences of the selection process of elected Councillors. Councillor Flavell explained that during her selection process she had not been asked about standards or about her background. Councillor Hollis concurred that little thought had been given to the 'Standards' process and arguably it should be at the top of political parties' agendas.

Councillor Scott suggested that whilst there is a lot of talk about *Councillors* bringing the parties in to disrepute by not maintaining a high level of standards, it should be regarded as bringing the *whole* Council into disrepute. She explained that once she had become a Councillor she had undertaken Code of Conduct training which was not compulsory nor was it Standards specific.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Members about the uncertain consequences of the proposed changes the Coalition Government would make to Standards. The Committee would not have the ability to enforce compulsory training on Standards, but they would be able to heavily encourage and promote it. It was noted that the Standards for England would be terminated, but there was no clear guidance on what or whether it would be replaced.

The Chair advised that there had been a consistent pattern of distrust and little belief in Local Government. It would therefore be necessary to engage with the public by noting their opinions to ensure there was an awareness of people's attitudes.

In response to a question raised, the Monitoring Officer explained that proportionality did not apply to the Standards Committee. However, it was noted that a general approach could be adopted whereby Independent Members could be invited to sit on the Committee and participate in discussions. However, it was confirmed that they would not have voting rights.

Councillor Hollis explained that it would be a positive step to involve independent members to ensure transparency and improved representation and to demonstrate their own commitment to working towards improving standards. In response, the Monitoring Officer stated he would discuss this with the group leaders and would update Members.

In relation to the Standards Committee Communications Strategy, the Chair stated that the answers would be in the results with emphasis placed on the need to work together in order to make progress. Enthusiasm and support would be required from Members and Officers,

RESOLVED: That Members be given the opportunity to consider the detail of the Strategy and respond to the Monitoring Officer on any relevant issues within 14 days. The Monitoring Officer would make any appropriate amendments to the Strategy and seek relevant approval from the Chair and Vice Chair with regards to the changes.

8. MONITORING REPORT

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report and confirmed that the Monitoring Report would be performed at every Standards Committee. The report provided Members with statistical analysis of data supplied to Standards for England from NBC for 2009/10. It was confirmed that Northampton Borough Council had received no review hearings during this period, which was regarded as highly satisfactory.

The Chair explained that he would like to see the public encouraged to communicate with the Council when they have experienced good service from an individual Councillor. Councillor Scott concurred that Standards should also recognise high standards as well as identifying areas for improvement. Councillor Scott requested that the figures for the next Monitoring Report be broken down further so that specific problem areas/members could be identified.

The Committee was informed that the comparisons between Councils could not yet be made as the Standards for England had not published its findings, but would be reported on when the information was available.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

9. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND BULLETIN: FEBRUARY 2010

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that 'The Annual Assembly of Standards Committees – A place for Standards' arranged for the 18th and 19th October to be held at the ICC in Birmingham, which was the first item mentioned in the Bulletin had been cancelled due to Government changes.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted the Bulletin's item on social networking and the continuing obligation of Members to observe the Code of Conduct.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

10. THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS FOR THE FUTURE OF STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report that informed Members of a letter that had recently been received from the Chair of Standards for England that confirmed the new Government's proposals for the Standard Board regime. It was noted that the forthcoming Standards for England Conference had been formally cancelled as mentioned above due to the Government changes. The committee noted the contents of the bulletin

The Committee would consider the impact for the 'ethical governance' agenda and would discuss any developments between members of the Committee about the effect on the work to be done by the Committee over the next municipal year (2010-2011)

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

11. LOCAL ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report on the draft Local Assessment Criteria that would set out the approach and criteria to be used by the Assessment Sub-Committee and the Review Sub-Committee when deciding whether to accept a complaint made against a subject Member or to take no further action on it. It was explained that if the Committee approved the draft Local Assessment Criteria a greater level of transparency would be achieved.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the Monitoring Officer, Chair and Vice Chair of the Standards Committee incorporate any necessary amendments and report back at the next meeting.**
- 2. That following the retirement of the position of Vice Chair (Glenice Moss) Trevor Morris would immediately take on the role.**

12. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND- LOCAL STANDARDS 2.0- THE PROPORTIONALITY UPGRADE

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report on the Standards for England – “Local Standards 2.0 – the proportionality upgrade?” It was explained that the Standards for England conducted a review of how the local standards framework had been working since its introduction in May 2008 when local authorities’ standards committees had become responsible for receiving and assessing complaints about Members and co-opted Members.

REOLVED: That Members be minded to note the report. However, as the report related to the previous Government, patience was requested whilst the position of the Standards for England was established.

The meeting concluded at 19.12

M6195