

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Monday, 17 December 2007

PRESENT: Mr I Harley (Independent Chair); Mrs Edwards (Parish Council Representative); Councillor Capstick, Hawkins, Matthews

1. APOLOGIES

Apology for absence was received from D Hughes (Parish Council representative).

2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18 SEPTEMBER 2007

Minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2007 were agreed and signed by the Chair.

3. DEPUTATIONS / PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

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

There were none.

5. INDEPENDENT MEMBER RECRUITMENT

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council presented the report stating that the Council had undergone a recruitment exercise for 3 independent members, however only one member had been recruited at the time. The other two were placed in a 'pool', out of which one candidate had withdrawn their application. Another recruitment drive had been undertaken, and only 5 applications out of 200 invitations had been received. He proposed that the 6 candidates be interviewed, out of which two be immediately appointed and a further two be reserved for post April 2008 requirements.

The Committee discussed the initial turnout of applications. It was noted that although high expression of interest was received, the commitment required from the members, especially after April 2008 had disinterested some candidates, as did the evening meetings of the Committee.

The Committee discussed financial remuneration for independent members, should they be required to undertake additional work. They felt that members undertaking additional work and the unsociable hours would be another factor that would cause disinterest.

The Committee discussed the current timing of the Standards Committee. Some members felt that the 5pm meeting time was considered to be neither evening nor daytime. The Committee agreed that the Standards Committee timing could be reviewed once it reached its full membership. F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council commented that with the new structure, and the requirement of sub-committees from April 2008, the

panels could meet at the convenience of individuals, as they would be arranged on an adhoc basis.

RESOLVED: That the recommendations outlined in the report be agreed.

6. STANDARDS BOARD UPDATE

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council presented the report and the Standards Board bulletin that had just been published.

The Committee noted that the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 had been passed. The Department for Communities and Local Government was expected to commence the consultation in December 2007 on the proposed new regulations and orders that followed from the Act. It was suggested that the Committee might wish to respond as a group.

The Committee noted the findings of the pilot Local assessment of complaints, in which 38 standards committees took part.

The Bulletin provided a checklist and a good practice guide for local authorities in the run up to April 2008. This included the size, structure of the committee, training needs and role of the monitoring officer. It was noted that this Committee was working towards some of the requirements, and had already elected an Independent Chair, and two Parish Council representatives.

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council commented that there was currently a difference of opinion between the legal profession and the Standards Board in relation to the involvement of a member both at the assessment and the hearing stage. The Standards Board did not see any reason why a member could not to be involved at both stages whilst the legal profession reviewed it as a potential conflict of interest. He advised that they should have three sub-committee to avoid any conflict of interest.

In response to a query about appointing a Deputy Monitoring Officer, it was anticipated that Legal Services was in the process of recruiting a number of positions. The post would be in place by the requirement date, however failing recruitment of the post they would look for an interim solution in-house.

The Committee discussed the training aspects and the need for a comprehensive induction for newly appointed members. It was noted that further training for Standards Committee members would take place around March 2008.

The Committee noted that at the next Annual Assembly would take place on 13th and 14th October 2008 in Birmingham. In light of the last event being fully booked, it was suggested that the Committee consider at their next meeting who would be attending the event.

ACTION: That the Committee at their next meeting consider attendance at the October 2008 Annual Assembly event.

[All]

RESOLVED: That the report and comments be noted.

7. STANDARDS COMMITTEE NEWSLETTER

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council presented the report and the draft newsletter for the Committees approval. It was noted that the newsletter would be circulated to the Northampton Borough Councillors and Northampton Parish Councils.

The Committee had a discussion on the content and length of the newsletter. There was a discussion of whether there should be a fourth page added to the newsletter, rather than leaving it blank. The Committee agreed that as it was the first newsletter and the information outlined was vital, they should have a three-page newsletter, including another page would make it too lengthy and the impact of some of the key issues might be lost.

The Chair read out his introductory speech that would be included in the newsletter. The Committee felt that whilst the introductory paragraph clearly set out the role of the committee, there needed to be a paragraph about the Chair's personal background emphasising the 'independent' aspect of the Committee. The Chair commented that the current membership of the Committee comprised a variety of backgrounds and personal experiences that enabled them to carry out their role on the Committee. He requested that members if possible could provide information about their experiences, so that they could be included in the newsletter.

The Committee agreed with the layout of the newsletter and commented that it was excellent short and sharp. It was agreed that the newsletter with the inclusion of the introduction from the Chair be published.

The Chair suggested that a humorous page on 'things that got members into trouble' could be looked into to raise awareness amongst Members and Parish Councillors.. It was agreed that this could be considered for inclusion in the next newsletter.

RESOLVED: That the newsletter, subject to the inclusion of the introductory paragraph from the Chair be approved and published.

8. WORK PLAN 2007 ONWARDS: UPDATE

(A) REVIEW OF REGISTER OF INTERESTS AND GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY FOR EMPLOYEES AND MEMBERS

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council presented the report stating that they had conducted a review of the Register of Interest and Gifts and Hospitality. In order to ensure that Members had a clear understanding of the requirements, various training sessions had been arranged for them to raise any issues.

The review meant that all members had to sign up to the new code. The deadline to complete their new declarations was 18th September 2007. To date there were two outstanding declarations.

The Committee queried if the non-completed forms had an impact on being a Councillor. F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council confirmed that it would have an impact, however Councillors normally signed up to it at the time of election, so technically they had signed

up, and it was a matter of updating their declarations. He added that the two outstanding cases did have exceptional reasons, and that the matter had been brought to the Chief Executive, group leaders and whips attention.

The Committee discussed their role in this matter. It was noted that whilst the Committee could monitor the progress on returns, the responsibility rested with the Monitoring Officer.

It was agreed that F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council would update the Committee members, on the progress for two outstanding declarations.

ACTION: 1. That the Committee members be updated on the progress of the two outstanding declarations

[F Fernandes]

RESOLVED: 1. That the report be noted and

2. The recommendations below be accepted:

(a) That the Monitoring Officer write to all Parish Councils to remind them of the requirements to register gifts and hospitality

(b) That a further review of the register be included in Standards Committee's work plan for 2008/2009

9. STANDARDS BOARD DVD

F Fernandes, Solicitor to the Council proposed that the Committee could set aside some time prior to the next meeting to see and discuss the Standards DVD. The Committee agreed to meet at 3.30pm prior to their next meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Committee meet to view and discuss the Standards DVD prior to their next meeting on 10th March 2008.

10. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

There were no items for discussion in private.

The meeting concluded at 18:40