

THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF CHESTER-LE-STREET

Report of the meeting of Standards Committee held in the Civic Centre, Newcastle Road, Chester-le-Street, Co Durham, DH3 3UT on Thursday, 21 February 2008 at 4.00 pm

PRESENT:

Miss Vera G McEwan, Mr Michael Dulieu, Councillor William Laverick and Mr James Armstrong

Officers: J Bradley (Assistant Solicitor), M Fell (Democratic Services Assistant) and S Marshall (Democratic Services Assistant)

49. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence were received on behalf of M Graham, L Henderson and G Stephenson.

50. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD 20 DECEMBER 2007

RESOLVED: "That the minutes of the meeting held 20 December 2007, copies of which had previously been circulated to each member, be confirmed as being a correct record."

51. MATTERS ARISING

In relation to previous agenda item number 45, The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised the Chair that she had spoken with the Director of Development Services in relation to obtaining car parking passes for the Members of Standards Committee and at the present time there were no passes available. The Democratic Services Assistant advised members that they were entitled to claim back car parking fees and costs incurred by travelling to and from council meetings.

RESOLVED: "That the comments made be noted".

52. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBERS

There were no declarations of interest from Members.

53. CODE OF CONDUCT

The Chair advised of three recent cases, which were listed as being heard on the Standards Board Website. The Chair also referred to a press release from January, which gave details of a councillor in Tewksbury who had been found guilty of claiming benefits fraudulently. She made reference to how a private matter can be linked to public office and in relation to the Code of Conduct how there is a link between these issues.

Discussion ensued in relation to how the case can be linked to public perception and how all councillors are subject to the Code of Conduct.

Mr Dulieu commented that other organisations such as the Fire Authorities are signing up to the Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED: "That the comments made be noted".

54. REGISTER OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

There were no comments made in relation to Register of Members' Interests.

Councillor Laverick enquired as to whether the Register is due for an update. The Democratic Services Assistant advised that the Monitoring Officer had provided her with a Work Programme, which was to be handed out to those present. She went on to advise that the Annual Reminders were due in June.

RESOLVED: "That the comments made be noted".

55. TRAINING

The Democratic Services Assistant handed out a Training Request sheet, which had been provided by the Monitoring Officer.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised the Members that the Monitoring Officer wanted them to select which training modules they would like to take part in.

Mr Armstrong queried whether they needed to select training by individual needs or by the needs of the committee.

The Chair commented that Members did need some committee training as a whole and that some of the modules should be made available to members so they can refer to any changes that may take place.

Mr Armstrong stated that they would need to know the commitment level for each module, as they may be restricted on time.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer suggested that a fact sheet could be provided for each module and then the panel could decide how and when the training could be held.

The Chair advised Members that they would not need a training session on standards itself; however Training Module Number 21 would be a priority and that she would liaise with the Monitoring Officer, as they would need to decide how the training should be delivered.

Mr Armstrong commented that the training could be added on to the end of a meeting. The Chair added that it could be carried out at the beginning of a meeting if that was more suitable for Members.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that at the present time the Monitoring Officer was attending a County Monitoring Officers meeting and that he would be able to provide feedback to the members at the next meeting.

The Chair stated that she would complete the forms and liaise with the Monitoring Officer about Members' training needs and queried whether Members were prepared to attend a training session prior to their next meeting.

Councillor Laverick queried whether the training would be available for Parish Councillors as well as themselves.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the training Modules would probably be opened up to parish councillors at a later date.

Councillor Laverick commented that the Monitoring Officer had attended Parish Council Meetings in the past and carried out training. He also stated that some Councillors are often averse to training and don't understand the implications if they don't partake.

The Chair queried if the Monitoring Officer had a training program for parishes and if he had considered how he is to deliver it.

Mr Dulieu stated that he felt his comments made at his Parish Council have made a difference and that he would like a Standards Committee representative to attend each parish council meeting to provide training on aspects of the code.

The Chair agreed that it was a good idea as the representative could take what they had learnt to others.

Councillor Laverick commented that as the Councils' move towards a Unitary Authority, the parishes would need to take a more active roll.

Mr Dulieu advised that the Parish Councils would be expected to take on a lot more responsibility.

RESOLVED:" That the comments made be noted and that a training session be arranged prior to the next meeting of the Standards Committee".

56. CONSTITUTION AND FUNCTIONS OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

The Chair advised of two on-going issues; changes to the function of Standards Committees in general and changes due to the Local Government Review.

The Chair also commented on the recent Consultation Paper, for which the deadline for consultation was the 15th February. She advised that she was

unable to respond to the deadline as an individual but felt the majority of the paper was as expected.

Mr Dulieu stated that he felt the draft consultation paper needed some work and that the consultation period didn't provide a great deal of time for individuals to respond.

The Chair commented that there seemed to be a lot of emphasis on joint working and they would have to deal with them once they came in to effect.

The Chair also advised that the changes would mean a new way of working for the Standards Committee, included the demise of the committee as it is now and the introduction of new joint committees in its place. Discussion ensued in relation to the changes the Unitary Authority will bring for Standards Committee and the implications involved.

The Chair queried when the Draft Annual Report of the Standards Committee for 2005-06 was to be submitted to Council.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the report should be going to Council in March or April and they were looking to submit a three-year report instead of the report for 2005-06.

The Democratic Services Officer advised that the three-year report should now go Council in May or June instead.

RESOLVED: "That the comments made be noted".

57. HEARINGS AND INVESTIGATIONS

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised there was nothing to report.

58. PUBLIC AWARENESS

The Chair referred to the minutes of the previous meeting, where a suggestion was made to liaise with Parish Councils in order to place information regarding Standards Committee on their notice boards.

Mr Dulieu commented that very little had changed in regulations for Parish Meetings and that the constitution should be nailed to Parish Door, although most are displayed in the Parish notice boards instead.

The Chair commented that there was a needed to encourage anything that would improve public awareness.

Mr Dulieu commented that the Committee's last case proved there is a greater need for awareness.

The Chair stated that this was why training needed to be done with Parish Councillors.

Mr Armstrong commented that if one member attended the training, they could pass on what they had learnt to the other members.

Councillor Laverick stated that there was a big difference between the Council and Parishes but ideally they all need to have the same standards.

The Chair queried how the committee could raise their profile in the community and suggested that the District News could be helpful in this instance.

She went on to advise the members that she had accessed the Standards Committee website and found it quite difficult to navigate. She also advised members that she had provided the Democratic Services Assistant with her pen portrait.

The Democratic Services Assistant advised that assistance with the website could be given to the Members if they needed it and that she only required a minimum of two lines from each Member for their pen portraits. She requested for the information to be sent in as soon as possible and she would be able to update the website accordingly. She commented that any information would be gratefully received.

RESOLVED: "That the comments be noted and Members provide the Democratic Services Assistant with pen portraits."

59. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED: "That the next meeting of the Committee be held on Thursday 24 April 2008 at 3.00pm with a 1 hour training session to be held prior to the meeting."

The meeting terminated at 4.45 pm