

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Conference Room 1,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Thursday,
5 February 2009

Time: 1.00 p.m.

Present: Councillor L. Petterson (Chairman) and
Councillors A. Gray, T. Hogan and Mrs. E. Maddison

Independent Member

Mr. I. Jamieson

Apologies: Councillors Mrs. L. Hovvels and Ms. I. Jackson

Parish Town Council Members

Councillors J. Marr, R.S. Fleming and D. Waters

Independent Member

Mr. B. Argyle

ST.16/08

MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 30th October 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

ST.17/08

STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND - LOCAL ASSESSMENT OF COMPLAINTS - QUARTERLY STATISTICS - QUARTER 2

Consideration was given to a report of the Solicitor to the Council concerning the above. (For copy see file of Minutes)

It was reported that Sedgefield Borough Council complied with the recent change in the composition of Standards Committees.

Members were informed that there had been quite a large number of complaints received since 7th May, 2008. This may have been a result of a misunderstanding on the behalf of complainants as to the purpose of the assessment procedure. Members of the public seemed to be under the impression that the procedure was to take corrective action or punish Councillors, rather than training and ethics improvements. Members conduct outside their capacity as Councillors could not as yet be considered by Standards Sub-Committees, however, this would change in the future.

A query was raised regarding articles being published in local newspapers and whether this was done only after a judgement had been made. Members were informed that there were restrictions on publications of standards issues and that all letters sent out by the Monitoring Officer were done so in confidence. It was not the role of the Monitoring Officer to consider any instances where information had been released

inappropriately. However, anyone affected by this would be able to submit a complaint.

Members queried the average time taken to process complaints which were received. It was reported that as a result of the lack of clarity surrounding most complaints, the average time taken to prepare each one was between 5 and 6 hours. Assessment Committees usually last between 30 – 45 minutes. If a complaint was to be investigated, this would require an external agent and would be expensive. Therefore the need to properly educate people on the standards procedures was stressed.

AGREED : That the report be noted.

ST.18/08

LOCAL ASSESSMENT OF COMPLAINTS - UPDATE

Consideration was given to a report of the Solicitor to the Council updating Members on complaints that had been received during the period 8th May to 31st December, 2008. (For copy see file of Minutes).

Members were informed that 9 complaint forms had been returned, some involving a complaint against more than one Councillor. All these complaints had been determined by an Assessment Sub-Committee. A request for a review of a decision had also been made and referred to a Review Sub-Committee for re-assessment. The report gave information on the types of complaints made and the decisions made by the Assessment Sub-Committee.

AGREED : That the report be noted.

ST.19/08

REVIEW OF CONFIDENTIAL REPORTING POLICY

Consideration was given to a report of the Chief Executive Officer providing details of the findings of the review of the Council's Confidential Reporting Policy. (For copy see file of Minutes).

Members were informed that the policy had only been invoked on two occasions since its introduction in April, 2001. Minor amendments had been made to the policy since April, 2001 to represent changes in the Council's organisation structure and the constitutional requirement to review the policy annually.

AGREED : That the report be noted.

ST.20/08

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

As this was the last meeting of the Standards Committee before Local Government Reorganisation, the Monitoring Officer gave a closing statement.

It had been 8 years since the Local Government Act, 2000 brought into effect the regime for the ethical Code of Conduct for elected members. The agenda had been challenging for members of the Standards Committee as a result of the significant changes that had taken place.

The Monitoring Officer stated that it was to the great credit of all members of the Committee that they had shown a consistent and dedicated approach to implementing those changes and supporting the role of the committee as a respected, independent and impartial body within the Authority. He thanked all members of the Committee, in particular the chairman and Councillor Gray, for their continued support. He also thanked the Independent Members of the Committee who had served over the years and the support staff, in particular Julie Johnson who had stepped in as the Standards Support Officer.

Thanks were also extended to the political leadership and Chief Executive of the Council who had demonstrated a clear commitment to ensuring that the Standards Committee and its Sub-Committees could operate effectively.

The Monitoring Officer then announced that he would be leaving Local Government service at the end of March. The new Monitoring Officer from then on would be the Acting Head of Legal Services for the new authority, Lesley Davies.

Members of the Committee expressed their appreciation towards the Monitoring Officer and his staff for all of their hard work and dedication.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Miss J. Stubbs, Tel 01388 816166 Ext 4508, juliestubbs@sedgefield.gov.uk