

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE held in The Aquarius Room, St. Ivo Leisure Centre, Westwood Road, St. Ives on Thursday, 9 July 2009.

PRESENT: Mr D L Hall - Chairman
Councillors J D Ablewhite,
Mrs B E Boddington, P J Downes, A Hansard
and T D Sanderson.

Messrs J Alexander, P L Boothman, M Lynch,
M Reece and G Watkins.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors R S Farrer and G S E Thorpe and Mrs S Stafford.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Mr D L Hall be elected Chairman of the Committee for the ensuing Municipal Year.

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5th March 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Messrs P L Boothman and D L Hall declared a personal interest in Minute No. 11 by virtue of their memberships of the Sub-Committees in question.

4. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED

that Councillor T D Sanderson be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Committee for the ensuing Municipal Year.

5. SUB-COMMITTEE APPOINTMENTS

RESOVLED

(a) that a Referrals (Assessment) Sub-Committee be appointed comprising one Independent Member, one town and parish Councillor and one district Councillor and that Mr M Lynch be elected lead Independent

Member and Chairman of the Sub-Committee;

- (b) that a Review Sub-Committee be appointed comprising one Independent Member, one town and parish Councillor and one district Councillor and Mr P L Boothman be elected lead Independent Member and Chairman of the Sub-Committee;
- (c) that a Standards (Consideration and Hearing) Sub-Committee be appointed to comprise five Members to consider investigation reports and hold determination hearings and that Mr D L Hall be elected lead Independent Member and Chairman of the Sub-Committee;
- (d) that the Head of Law, Property and Governance and Monitoring Officer after consultation with the relevant Chairman, be authorised to convene meetings of the Referrals (Assessment), Review and Standards (Consideration and Hearing) Sub-Committees as necessary and to appoint Members to the various Sub-Committees as appropriate in accordance with the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008.

6. ETHICAL STANDARDS AND THE CODE OF CONDUCT

Further to Minute No. 47 of the meeting held on 5th March 2009, the Chairman welcomed Councillor I C Bates, Leader of the Council to the meeting and invited him to address the Committee.

Having explained that as a Cambridgeshire County and District Councillor he represented the villages of The Hemingfords, Fenstanton, Hilton and Houghton and Wyton, Councillor Bates added that he had been able to observe, at first hand, how compliance with the Code of Conduct and the new ethical regime had improved and impacted upon meetings of the various parish councils which he attended. The improvement in the administration of parish council meetings was partly credit to the requirements of the standards regime and the training offered by the Committee and had enhanced understanding of the rules regarding personal prejudicial interests on the part of the parish councillors. At this point, Councillor Bates thanked the Independent Members and parish council representatives for their valuable contribution to the work of the Standards Committee.

However, Councillor Bates expressed concern at the estimated cost of the Standards Board for England quoting figures of £9.5m in 2007/08, the impact of the 2008 Regulations on local councils and the difficulty he perceived existed in attracting and retaining individuals to serve as Parish Councillors because of the requirements in terms of the registration of interests.

In terms of the 2008 Regulations, Councillor Bates referred to the number of cases which had been considered by the various Sub-Committees thus far and the impact this new regime had had on the District Council and questioned whether these issues could be

managed in a less bureaucratic way. On the same theme, he questioned the value for money, offered by the Standards Board and their accountability.

The themes presented by Councillor Bates promoted a general and interesting debate and on its conclusion, the Chairman thanked him for his attendance and contribution to the meeting.

7. THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE (FURTHER PROVISIONS) (ENGLAND) REGULATIONS 2009

The Committee received and noted a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance and Monitoring Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) on the implications of the coming into force of the Standards Committee (Further Provisions) (England) Regulations 2009.

Members noted that the Regulations which came into force on 15th June 2009 made provision for the Standards Board for England to suspend the functions of a local Standards Committee where the Committee was failing to perform its functions satisfactorily either to discharge the functions itself or to arrange for another authority's Standards Committee to discharge them. The Regulations also give authorities the power to establish joint Standards Committees and extend the power of Standards Committees to give Members' dispensations where they would otherwise be prohibited from participating on the matter because of a prejudicial interest.

8. STANDARDS STATISTICS

By way of a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee received and noted statistical information on the performance of local authorities since the introduction of the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008 and the outcome of two independent surveys which had measured "Support for the Code of Conduct" and the "Impact and Effectiveness of the Ethical Framework in Local Government".

Having regard to the findings of research undertaken by Cardiff University and their observation that Councils with better conduct tend to make involvement in training mandatory, and whilst acknowledging that a session on the Code was included in the new Member induction programme, the Monitoring Officer undertook to look into the legality of this step and to consider whether it would be possible to vary the Constitution to make code of conduct training for District Councillors mandatory.

Similarly, the Monitoring Officer acknowledged the need to set up further refresher training sessions on the code of conduct for town and parish Councils over the Autumn.

On the same theme, the Chairman reiterated his intention to review the content of the "Standards and Conduct" pages on the District Council's website.

9. OTHER ISSUES - ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES AND DISTRICT WIDE

Having considered a report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance and Monitoring Officer (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Committee

RESOLVED

- (a) that Messrs J Alexander, D L Hall and G Watkins be nominated to attend the 2009 Annual Assembly of Standards Committees at the International Convention Centre, Birmingham on 12th and 13th October 2009; and
- (b) that the content of the article "Cracking the Code" published in the May 2009 edition of District Wide be noted.

10. LOG OF CODE OF CONDUCT ENQUIRIES

The Committee received and noted the Code of Conduct enquiries which had been recorded by the Head of Law, Property and Governance since the last meeting in March 2009 (an extract of the log is appended in the Minute Book).

11. REPORTS OF SUB-COMMITTEES

The Chairmen of the Referrals (Assessment), Review and Standards (Consideration and Hearing) Sub-Committees updated Members on the business considered by each Sub-Committee since the last meeting in March and in general terms, reported on the outcome of each case.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Thursday 3rd September 2009 at 4pm.

Chairman