

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE held in Room CVSO1a, Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, Huntingdon, Cambs, PE29 3TN on Thursday, 2 December 2010.

PRESENT: Mr D L Hall - Chairman

Councillors J D Ablewhite,
Mrs B E Boddington, R S Farrer,
A Hansard, T D Sanderson and
G S E Thorpe.

Messrs P Boothman, M Lynch and
G Watkins.

Mrs S Stafford

APOLOGY: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Mr J Alexander

25. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9th September 2010 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

26. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

27. REPORTS OF SUB-COMMITTEES

The Committee noted reports received from the Chairmen of the Referrals (Assessment), Review and Consideration and Hearing Sub-Committees.

28. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND - LATEST?

By reference to a press notice published by 'Standards for England' (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that latest reports had suggested that the Decentralisation and Localism Bill would now be published before the end of December.

In the absence, currently, of any further information, the Committee noted the content of a press statement issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government which appeared to suggest that it was the Government's intention to replace the current standards regime by making serious misconduct a criminal offence dealt with by the courts, that Councillors would be required to continue to register personal interests in publicly available registers and that there would be an enhancement of the powers of the Local Government Ombudsman.

29. STANDARDS UPDATE

Further to Minute No. 21 of the meeting held on 9th September 2010 and in view of the uncertainty around the Government's intention to legislate for the abolition of 'Standards for England', the Members' Code of Conduct and local standards committees, Members noted that the Chairman had decided to postpone the process for the appointment to the Committee of an additional town and parish council representative and that the Monitoring Officer had written to the six parish councillors who had submitted applications to thank them for the interest that they had expressed in the position.

It was further noted that an article had been included in the December edition of District Wide regarding the availability, online, of the Committee's 2009/2010 annual report (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

30. CODE OF RECOMMENDED PRACTICE ON LOCAL AUTHORITY PUBLICITY: CONSULTATION

The Committee was acquainted with proposals for a new Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity which had been published for consultation by the Government on 29th September 2010 (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

The Monitoring Officer reported that, regrettably, the timescale for the response to the consultation was short and that the closing date for representations had fallen outside the Committee's cycle of meetings. In terms of the structure of the proposed Code, the Committee noted that it would be under pinned by seven guiding principles which would require local authority publicity to be lawful, cost-effective, objective, even handed, appropriate, to have regard to equality and diversity and to be issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity such as election periods. To give effect to the Government's commitment to stop perceived and unfair competition by local authority newspapers, Members noted that the proposed Code also would contain specific guidance on the frequency, content and appearance of local authority newspapers or magazines. In this respect, the Code proposed that these newspapers or magazines should not appear more frequently than once a quarter, should only include material that is directly related to the business, services or amenities of the authority or other local service providers and that they should be clearly marked as being published by the local authority. It was also understood that the Code proposed to prohibit the use of lobbyists where their expenditure was intended to influence local people on political issues.

Having noted the consultation document and the response to it by the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, the Committee

RESOLVED

that no objections be raised to the principles of the new Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.

31. 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 and the Monitoring Officer since the last meeting in September 2010 (an extract of the log is appended in the Minute Book). The Committee was reminded that the area of the code which continued to cause the most concern related to the declaration of personal and prejudicial interests.

32. DUAL HATTED MEMBERS AND THE CODE OF CONDUCT

The Committee noted the content of guidance recently published by 'Standards for England' on dual hatted Members (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

33. 'STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND': CASE REVIEW 2010

The Monitoring Officer reported that 'Standards for England' had prepared a new edition of its case review which could be accessed from their website using a link which had been circulated to Members. Members further understood that 'Standards for England' would not be distributing a printed version but that the publication would be available to download from their website shortly. The latest edition also included links to the decisions that had been made by the First Tier Tribunal.

34. SUMMARIES OF RECENTLY COMPLETED INVESTIGATIONS

For training purposes, the Committee noted a case summary involving North Tynecastle Council recently published by 'Standards for England' and one which had been determined by the First Tier Tribunal General Regulatory Chamber (copies of both cases are appended in the Minute Book).

35. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held at 4pm on Thursday 3rd March 2011.

Chairman