

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 4.00 pm on 22 JUNE 2009**

Present:- S Brady – Chairman (Independent Chairman).
M Hall and R Whitlam (Independent persons).
Councillors C A Cant, C D Down, K L Eden and R M Lemon
(Uttlesford Members).
Councillor J Clarke (Town and Parish Councils).

Officers in attendance:- M J Perry (Assistant Chief Executive) and M Cox
(Democratic Services Officer).

S1 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for absence was received from Councillor B Merrion.

The Chairman welcomed to the Committee Councillor Sullivan from Hatfield Heath Parish Council who would be attending future meetings of the committee as a Parish Council representative, subject to his appointment being confirmed by Full Council.

S2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2009 and the extraordinary meeting held on 23 March 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

S3 BUSINESS ARISING

i) Minute S24 – Member Register of Interest

It was reported that at the meeting on 24 February 2009, the Council had accepted the Standards Committee's recommendation that Member's interests should be published on the website but included a caveat that individual councillors could decide to opt out and about half the district councillors had taken up this option. Parish councils had also been invited to publish the information on their websites and one council had decided to do this.

ii) Minute S22 (i) Consultation on the Code of Conduct

It was confirmed that the proposed code of Conduct for Employees would apply to parish clerks.

iii) Minutes S25 – Training

The Chairman questioned the limited response to the recent training event on the new vetting procedure for parish councils. It was explained that there had been extensive training in the Code of Conduct for parish councils in 2007 and this had been well attended at the time. It was unfortunate that the recent

training event had not been promoted as covering a different area and many parish councils might have thought that it was a repeat of the training that they had already received.

iv) Minute 28 – Hearing and allegations of a breach of the Code of Conduct

At the hearing on 23 March a training need had been identified for the parish councillors concerned. This would now be provided prior to the parish council meeting in September.

S4

DISPENSATION

The Committee was informed of changes to the law relating to dispensations following the coming into force of the Standards Committee (Further Provisions) (England) Regulations 2009. The changes would allow for a dispensation when the political balance of a committee was affected by the mandatory conditions of the Code of Conduct. For example, if the number of members prohibited from voting would result in a change in the committee balance so that the ruling group no longer had the majority vote. As was the case for other dispensations, this would require a written request to the Standards Committee.

Members were asked if they wanted to give guidance on the operation of this new provision but found it hard to think of a situation where this might arise. Meetings of the regulatory committees, Development Control and the Licensing Committee, did not tend to vote along party lines. It was suggested that at the Finance Committee there could be issues around the sale of assets or financing of the council where some members might have an interest that would prohibit them from voting. However, although members could see the logic for preserving political balance they also said that they would feel uncomfortable about allowing a member to vote who had a clear prejudicial interest.

There was a general feeling that any request under these provisions would be an exceptional case that would need to be considered on its merits.

RESOLVED that any request for dispensation in relation to political balance received by the Standards Committee should be considered on an individual basis.

S5

ANNUAL RETURN TO THE STANDARDS BOARD

The Committee was given details of the annual return that had recently been submitted to the Standards Board for England regarding the operation of the Standards Committee. Members were given this information to illustrate the type of data that the Standards Board were looking for and to decide whether the committee should increase its activities in any of the areas.

It was felt that the response from this council was likely to be different to other councils in that it answered no to a number of questions. This probably

reflected the fact that there were fewer issues to be addressed in the district but members thought that the committee could be more proactive in putting forward initiatives. It was confirmed that the committee had an obligation to promote its activities and members were advised of the committee's wide ranging terms of reference.

Members thought that the priority should be to raise the profile of the committee so that the District Councillors, parish councillors and the public were aware of its role and purpose. It was suggested that that as part of the annual return a summary annual report should be published and distributed and the Chairman could present the report to a full council meeting.

In relation to parish councils, knowledge of the Code of Conduct appeared to vary between councils and the committee thought it could have a role in ensuring a more consistent spread of knowledge. It was suggested that it members of the Standards Committee could attend parish council meetings and promote the work of the committee. It was noted that amendments to the Code of Conduct were expected shortly and an explanation of these changes could be included in the presentation.

Members commented that it was often the parish clerks who where the most influential in the running of the council and consideration could be given to providing them with training. The Assistant Chief Executive understood that the Association of Local Councils already provided training for the parish clerks on the Code of Conduct and other aspects of the role but he would confirm this at the next meeting.

S6

WORK PROGRAMME

Members were advised that in 2009 the Local Government Chronicle had made an award for standards and ethics supported by the Standards Board for England. Six authorities had been shortlisted and the Standards Board had drawn examples of good practice and other ideas which it had published on its website. Members considered whether any of these ideas could be applied to this committee and were asked to devise a future work programme.

Following on from the previous item, members outlined the following points that could be included in the work programme. Further details would be agreed at the next meeting.

- Publish and circulate an annual report based on the annual return.
- The Chairman to present the report to full Council.
- Members of the Standards Committee to undertake a series of presentations to parish council meetings.
- To provide training where necessary.
- Consider if there were any areas within the annual return where further action could be taken by the Committee.

S7

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Chairman reported that previously he had attended the Standard Board's Annual conference every two years. He now felt that in the current financial climate it was difficult to justify the expenditure against the benefit gained. The Assistant Chief Executive agreed that the conference was of limited value and there were other more useful vehicles for discussing the issues.

The Committee agreed that the Chairman should not attend the conference this year and the decision should be reviewed for 2010.

The meeting ended at 5.05pm.