

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD  
SAFFRON WALDEN at 4.00 pm on 25 JANUARY 2010**

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

Officers in attendance:- R Auty (Head of Community Engagement), M Cox  
(Democratic Services Officer) and M J Perry (Assistant Chief  
Executive).

**S23 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no apologies for absence or declaration of interests received.

**S24 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2009 and the Extraordinary meeting held on 26 November 2009 were approved as a correct record.

**S25 BUSINESS ARISING**

**i) Minute S18 (i) – Probity in Planning**

It was reported that training on the new code of practise had recently been given to members of the Development Control Committee.

**ii) Minute S20 – Order of Council Agenda.**

The Assistant Chief Executive reported that the Council had been advised of the guidance and the advice would be sent to town and parish council's this week.

**iii) Minute S21 – Order of Council Agenda**

The questionnaire had been sent to the complainant and the subject members following the recent hearing. One reply had been received which expressed satisfaction with the process.

**iv) Extraordinary meeting – 26 November**

The Assistant Chief Executive reported that Councillor Hingston had resigned from the parish council following the recent hearing. Councillor Freeman had made an apology to the parish council. Training had now been given to all members of the parish council and the suspension had been lifted. Councillor Cant understood that other parish councillors might have resigned from the parish council as a result of this case. She said it should be made clear that

abiding by the Code was an individual responsibility and a councillor was not culpable for the actions of another member even if they were an associate or friend.

S26

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

The Head of Community Engagement presented a report which gave details of the Council's Communication Strategy and explained how the communications team could support the work of the Standards Committee. He said that media interest was generally confined to when there had been breaches of the Code. However, he worked closely with the Assistant Chief Executive in relation to the Standards Committee, had publicised the changes to the role of the Standards Committee and issued press releases and public notices after hearings. The website now contained all the information needed for a member of the public to decide whether to make a complaint to the Standards Committee.

The Standards Board had issued a toolkit to assist communications staff with standards issues which included definitions, explanations of the stages of investigation and a range of templates. This was currently being evaluated. Members commented that the main purpose of the publicity should be to ensure that there were fewer problems in terms of breaches of the Code.

S27

## **BRANDING THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

The Committee considered whether it would be appropriate for the Standards Committee to adopt a mission statement or a strap line. This idea had been mooted because this had been undertaken by another authority and had been praised by the Standards Board.

Members had various views on this proposal. There was some question as to the benefits of doing this and a view that it might be more productive to concentrate on communicating the committee's purpose and objectives more clearly and widely. However other members felt that if a form of words could be found, this might assist with communications with parish councils and with raising the profile of the committee. It was not clear whether the mission statement should reflect current activities or be more aspirational about what the committee was aiming to achieve. It was agreed that it would be more practical for a small group to look at the issue with the assistance of the Head of Community Engagement and report back to a future meeting.

RESOLVED that the decision on whether to adopt a mission statement for the Standards Committee be deferred to a task group to comprise Sean Brady, Councillor Lemon and Councillor Sullivan with the following terms of reference:

1. To decide whether to recommend a mission statement for the Standards Committee
2. If so, determine what the statement should be
3. To determine how the mission statement will be promoted.

## **ASSISTANCE TO PARISHES**

The Committee received a report as part of the annual work programme that considered the type of assistance that could be provided to parish councils.

It was noted that the Standards Committee had responsibility towards the town and parish councils. The Monitoring Officer for the district was also the officer for the town and parish councils and the Standards Committee had a number of the same functions with regard to parish councils as it did for the District Council. As well as a requirement to consider breaches of the Code of Conduct its functions included promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct, assisting members to observe the code of conduct, advising on the adoption of revisions to the code and advising and training members in matters relating to the authorities code of conduct.

There had been only a few breaches of the Code by town and parish councils but it did appear that some council's had limited understanding and some promotion or training might be appropriate. There had been limited take up when the new code was introduced in 2007 and training tended to be provided when problems had been identified.

The Standards for England website had given examples of good practise for lending support but Members felt that the real need was to ensure that the parish councils were aware of the Code of Conduct and understood the obligations that it placed on them. The best way to promote this would be for members of the committee to attend parish and town council meetings. Members would not be required to provide training but each member would give a pre prepared statement and circulate a quick guide to the Code. It was suggested that a small number of councils be visited as an initial trial of this approach.

RESOLVED that the suggested approach to assisting parish and town councils, as set out above, be agreed and a schedule of visits to parish councils be prepared.

## **VETTING OF COMPLAINTS**

The Assistant Chief Executive reported an approach that he had adopted regarding a complaint against a member of this council. He advised the Committee that when the Monitoring Officer received an allegation there was no discretion on whether the case should be investigated, and it had to be referred to the sub-committee for determination. However there was recently a case when the complaint was against a district member when he was acting on behalf of another authority. As the code of conduct only applied to members of an authority when they were carrying out official business of that authority, this Committee had no jurisdiction to deal with the complaint. In this case he had written to the complainant and suggested that the complaint should be withdrawn and addressed to the monitoring officer of the other authority where it could be properly dealt with. If the complainant decided not to take this advice the matter would be considered by the sub-committee in the usual way.

In order to save time in preparing papers and organising meetings it was suggested that this approach should be used in any future cases when the allegation was clearly outside the remit of the committee.

RESOLVED that the approach for dealing with particular complaints, as set out above be agreed.

S30

### **RECENT DECISIONS OF THE ADJUDICATION PANEL FOR ENGLAND**

The Committee received details of the Adjudication Panel for England cases that had been published since the last meeting.

The meeting ended at 5.35pm