

MINUTES OF: THE MEETING OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 16th March 2010

**PRESENT: Mr A Neville, Independent Member (Chairman)
Councillors Aldred, Cheetham, Gledhill (substituting for Sandiford), Robertson (substituting for A.Barnes), Whitworth Town Councillor D. Barnes and Mr A.Nixon.**

**IN ATTENDANCE: Stuart Sugarman, Director of Business
Carolyn Sharples, Acting Committee and Member Services Manager**

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: 1 member of the public

MINUTES SILENCE

The Chair asked Members of the Committee to pay tribute to Mr Bernard Divine who was an Independent Member of the Standards Committee by observing a minute's silence.

It was noted that the Chair and some of the Rossendale Councillors had attended the funeral on behalf of the Council.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors A.Barnes (Robertson substituting) Sandiford, (Gledhill substituting), H.Steen, P.Steen, and Whitworth Town Councillor, J Grogan.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

3. URGENT ITEMS

The Chairman reported that an article had been circulated prior to the meeting which informed members about changes that Standards for England were currently looking to introduce. A new document was available which would be tabled at the June meeting for discussion and a research summary would be circulated to members.

In consideration of the article members discussed the following:

- Expenses scandal
- Complaints procedure
- Timescales/expense
- Resolving trivial matters

The Director of Business confirmed that the document was likely to undergo further amendments. It was agreed that the document would return to the committee once there was a final version.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Standards Committee held on 12th January 2010 be agreed as a correct record.

5. CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chair informed members that he had visited Burnley Council with the Director of Business to look at joint working arrangements. The general consensus had been not to pursue joint Standards Committee working arrangements, however joint working would be considered with regard to joint working from an operational level, such as selling services to other Councils to generate income.

The Media Protocol would come back to the Standards Committee for consideration once comments had been received from the Member Development Working Group. Final amendments would then be made prior to consideration at full Council in July.

The terms of all Independent members would finish at the end of the Municipal Year and interviews for replacements would take place in due course. A copy of the advertisement had been circulated to members with a request to encourage suitable candidates to apply. The advertisement would also be in the newspaper and on the website.

In relation to the Chair's Update members discussed the following:

- Using other newspapers such as the Rochdale Observer and the Independent.

6. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

A member of the public asked a question regarding whether complaints should be sent direct to the Ombudsman or to the appropriate organisation. It was confirmed that in the first instance the complaint should be sent direct to the organisation to allow the matter to be looked into and responded to. Complaints against Councillors in relation to potential breaches of the Code of Conduct should be referred to the Council's Monitoring Officer.

7. ANNUAL REPORT – ROSSENDALE STANDARDS

The Chair of the meeting introduced the Annual Report and updated members on the achievements and work of the Standards Committee for 2009/2010.

In considering the Annual Report members discussed the following:

- Nice report in plain English.
- Two different references to political balance.
- Appointments to the committee by Group Leaders.

Resolved:

- That the report be noted.

8. VERBAL UPDATES: PROBITY IN PLANNING/ ANTI-FRAUD AND CORRUPTION/ WHISTLEBLOWING/ CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION PROTOCOL

The Director of Business updated members on items which had been to the Standards Committee previously.

Probity in Planning referred to a report done in November 2008 by the Audit Commission which identified 10 recommendations. Work had been carried out in relation to all the recommendations and work was now ongoing to ensure that the required standards of service were being met.

In relation to Anti-Fraud and Corruption, RIPA introduced new codes which would come into force on 6th April regarding covert surveillance. The Director of Business informed that we were already meeting the requirements of the new codes and that there had been 5 RIPA requests within the last year.

The Director of Business also reported that there had been no reported usage of the Whistleblowing Policy or the Confidential Information Protocol. The Confidential Information Protocol was included in the Constitution and staff were kept informed of the Whistleblowing Policy which was in the Staff Handbook in addition to a simple guide which had been distributed to all staff.

In considering the updates, members discussed the following:

- Code of Conduct for Officers
- Different methods to deal with employees as responsibility cascades down

The Director of Business informed the committee that last year the Local Government Association produced guidance for Councillors and Officers on Probity in Planning. The Chair requested that an officer look into the guidance to see whether any further changes were required and report back to the next meeting.

Resolved:

- That the updates be noted.

9. STANDARDS SCENARIO - CASE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The Director of Business gave members a case study to consider and discuss, however, since further changes had been proposed by Standards for England, it was decided to let members consider the scenarios in their own time with a view to undertaking further training once changes had been announced.

10. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Resolved:

That the public and press be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business on the grounds that it involves disclosure of exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) under Part 1 Paragraph 2 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

11. STANDARDS COMPLAINTS UPDATE

A verbal update was given to the Committee detailing the number of outstanding complaints.

In considering the update members discussed the following:

- Supporting the new approach to dealing with initial complaints.
- Ombudsman complaints.

Resolved:

- That the update be noted.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and concluded at 7.45pm)

_____ CHAIRMAN