

Standards Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 2nd April, 2007.

Present:-

Co-opted Independent Members:-

The Reverend Paul Lipscomb (Chair), Mr Fred Ashmore and Mike Field

Elected Members:-

Councillors Mohammed Aziz, Khan, The Reverend Paul Lipscomb (Chair) and Mann

Parish Councillor Representative:-

Apologies for Absence:- John Finn and Rasib and Parish Councillor Laurie Tucker

PART 1

23. Declarations of Interest

None.

24. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27th April, 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

25. Future Committee Work Programme and Action

At the Standards Committee meeting held on 15th January, 2007, the Chair and Monitoring Officer had identified a number of matters which they proposed the Committee should pursue in the forthcoming municipal year. Detailed proposals in respect of each of these initiatives were submitted, and it was

Resolved –

- (a) That, in respect of its Annual Report for 2006/07 and future years the Committee adopt a similar format to that of South Gloucestershire's Standards Committee's Report.
- (b) That consideration be given to the Annual Report in its new format being distributed to all staff with their monthly pay slips.
- (c) That the Committee be actively involved in setting its aims and objectives for the forthcoming municipal year and based, upon these, a programme of work be drawn up, agreed and incorporated into the Committee's Annual Report.

- (d) That twice a year after the formal business of the Standards Committee meeting is concluded, short training sessions be held for Committee Members, these to include looking at relevant Standards Board for England case studies.
- (e) That, when the necessary primary legislation is introduced giving Standards Committees responsibility for the initial assessment of all allegations of misconduct, an informal reconciliation / mediation process be drawn up in consultation with the Group Leaders for submission to the Committee for approval.
- (f) That the Officers submit to the Committee annually, for information, details of gifts/ hospitality registered by Members during the preceding municipal year.
- (g) That the Officers submit to the Committee regular progress reports on the implementation of the Committee's agreed Work Programme.
- (h) That the Committee at its next meeting consider and approve arrangements for Committee Members and the Monitoring Officer to attend Parish Council Meetings and for the Independent Co-opted Members to attend Council and Committee meetings of this Authority.
- (i) That a review of the Committee's current terms of reference be incorporated into its Work Programme for 2007/08.
- (j) That, subject to the agreement of the Member Panel on the Constitution, Council be recommended to amend paragraph 7 (relating to the Standards (Local Determination) Sub-Committee) of Article 9 of the Council's Constitution to read as follows:-

"7. The Standards (Local Determination) Sub-Committee shall be chaired by the Chair of the Standards Committee. In his/her absence the Chair for the hearing will be appointed from one of the non-elected Independent Members present)".

26. Audit Commission's Ethical Governance Report

Mike West and Rachael Cobley of the Audit Commission, the Council's External Auditors, attended the Meeting to present the results of the Ethical Governance Diagnostic Survey which had been commissioned by the Standards Committee in October 2005. The survey was carried out in January/February 2006 but only 11 Members and 97 Officers responded. This was too small a sample to be a representative and accordingly, the survey was re-run in September 2006 with Officer involvement being limited to the top three tiers. In the second survey 23 Members and 35 Officers responded.

The survey gave a snapshot of perceptions within the Council at a particular point in time and the results were benchmarked against a number of other authorities who had also completed the survey.

The main conclusions drawn from the results of the survey were that there were several good policies and practices in place in Slough and in a number of areas, relating to policy and training, Slough was near to the national benchmark, and in some cases exceeded the national average. However, where questions referred to Member behaviour, Slough was behind the benchmark in a several respects. Ethical Standards as a whole did not appear to have been embedded into the Council's culture especially in respect of Members.

In the light of these survey findings, the Auditors had made a number of recommendations which were as follows:-

1. Further training should be offered to all Members on the provisions of the Code of Conduct, in particular emphasising and exploring how the Council's ethical culture needs to be developed.
2. The Standards Committee should consider how it might use internal and external auditors to promote higher Ethical Standards across the Council.
3. The Standards Committee should promote its work more widely across the Council.
4. The Council should consider whether Member training could be made compulsory.
5. The Council should review training for Officers to include awareness of the Officer Code of Conduct and carry out a risk assessment of training required for legislation.
6. The Council should ensure that all Members are fully aware of the content of the Code of Conduct and the impact it has on their duties.

The Auditors recommended that the Council should have regard to the results of the survey and use them to inform the drawing up of an action plan with timescales. They also recommended that the Council should consider methods of training and raising of awareness of Officers and Members.

The survey results and actions recommended by the Auditors were considered and the following initial action was identified:-

- (i) That the Council's Internal Audit Section should take a more active role in the training and development of both Officers and Members e.g. provision of training on the Anti-Fraud and Corruption Strategy.

- (ii) That a meeting of the three Group Leaders, the new Chief Executive and new Chief Internal Auditor and Chair of the Standards Committee should be arranged to seek agreement to strong and effective action being taken to address the issues raised by the Survey, in particular the behaviour of Members and their poor record of attendance at training sessions.
- (iii) That the Monitoring Officer should draw up an action plan based on the Auditors' findings and recommendations for consideration at the Standards Committee Meeting on 18th June, 2007.
- (iv) As a first step forward, the Auditors indicated that they were willing to run a training seminar for all Members in which scenarios showing how the Code could be applied in real life would be played through. It was suggested that this seminar be held in September after the local elections and completion of the Council's Member Induction Programme.

Attention was drawn the Committee's earlier consideration of its work programme and the future action it had agreed which would make a contribution towards addressing the issues raised by the survey.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Ethical Governance Report now submitted and the recommendations contained therein be noted and accepted.
- (b) That the actions now outlined above in (i) to (iv) above be approved and adopted.

27. Vote of Thanks

Resolved – That the Committee place on record its thanks and appreciation to The Reverend Paul Lipscomb for the courtesy and impartiality he has demonstrated as Chair of the Committee during the past municipal year.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.15 pm and closed at 7.30 pm)