

MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

6 March 2006

Councillors: *Haley, Makanji, GMMH Rahman Khan, Reynolds, Rice, *Robertson, *Williams and *Winskill.

Independent members: *Mr N. Weber (Chair), Ms I. Francis (Deputy Chair), Mr R. Lovegrove and Ms I Francis.

* Members present.

SC35. APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Rahman Khan, Irene Francis, Roger Lovegrove and Cllr Reynolds.

SC36. URGENT BUSINESS:

The Chair agreed to take a late item; 'Member Learning and Development: 2006 Induction Plan and on-going Development Programme'. This had been emailed to members for information after the agenda despatch.

SC37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

Mr Weber declared a personal interest in respect of item 9 as an independent member of the Standards Committee.

SC38. MINUTES:

Matters arising

In response to members' questions about the £25 hospitality threshold, the Monitoring Officer advised that it was difficult to be prescriptive about this. For example; event tickets may have a retail price of around £25 but a black market price considerably higher. Members noted that they retained personal responsibility to declare their interests or the Monitoring Officer would do this for them; if asked specifically. She also offered to check any discrepancies which members raised.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Standards Committee held on 5 December 2005 be confirmed and signed as accurate record; subject to an amendment on page 2 (para 3) which should state that all independent members declared an interest and left the meeting.

SC39. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS:

The Chair offered a Vote of Thanks to retiring Councillors Makanji and Robertson for their work on the Standards Committee.

SC40. NEW ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS (Agenda Item 10 – the Chair changed the order of business to consider this item):

The Member Services Training Officer introduced this report which advised Standards Committee members of the plans for member induction and training following the May 2006 Local Elections. Members noted that it was a working document, open to further suggestion and comment. In response to members' questions; the officer advised that training would mainly be delivered in-house and members were encouraged to feedback after all sessions. In response to a request from the Chair it was agreed that page 2; para 6.1 (aims and objectives) would be strengthened with regard to Code of Conduct training. Members commented that this was a valuable and comprehensive piece of work.

SC41. REVIEW OF CODE OF CONDUCT AND THE NEW ETHICAL FRAMEWORK:

The Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer introduced this item which informed Standards Committee members of the Government's proposals to amend the ethical framework. Members noted the main changes to come into effect from 2008; ie that the Standards Board would have a more strategic role with all Code of Conduct complaints against councillors being dealt with by the Monitoring Officer and that the Standards Board would only consider the most serious allegations. The Standards Board would, however, retain a 'policing' role and could withdraw this responsibility from Council's who did not perform. Members noted the resource implications in that the Standards Committee may have to meet more frequently to meet the 10 working days response deadline. In answer to members questions; the Monitoring Officer advised that different members should be involved at the sifting and hearing stages, therefore reinforcing the necessity for more members on Standards Committee. It was also noted that the process must be a member decision (peer judgement) and not officers. However, there would no longer be a 'duty' on members to report colleagues unless it was felt to be serious misconduct; ie fraud, and members could still bring their role into disrepute if they failed to do so.

Members were advise that some of the model Code of Conduct changes were already in place in Haringey; there would be a new offence for bullying and a new Code of Conduct for Officers (enforced by the officer disciplinary code) and members could not be investigated on 'inappropriate' behaviour outside their role of Councillor unless it was unlawful. It was noted that the rules on bias with regard to Quasi-Judicial committees would remain separate and there would be more dispensations on declarations of interest; which were currently felt to be quite limited, and a third category of interest (public sector) in addition to personal and prejudicial.

Members felt they would benefit from more guidance with regard to Outside Bodies and the Monitoring Officer advised of an ongoing project considering the membership of these. The Monitoring Officer agreed to speak to the Training Officer about including outside bodies in the Development Programme.

In response to a question about indemnity insurance, members were reassured that the Council's insurance covered their legal costs accrued during an investigation if they were found not to have breached the Code of Conduct.

The Monitoring Officer advised that she had already responded on the amendment to the Code of Conduct and sought members agreement to comment on this document.

RESOLVED

It was agreed that:

- A definition of 'bullying' was required.
- A definition of 'friend' would also be useful; as councillors were generally well known by a wide sector of the community.
- The profile of the National Whip's Disciplinary Code should be raised at a local level.
- Declarations of interest were important but members should be encouraged to participate in debates wherever possible.
- Members agreed that the training video they had seen before the meeting was useful and should be available to all members.

SC42. ETHICAL GOVERNANCE AUDIT:

The Monitoring Officer advised that this was still 'in internal processes' and unlikely to be available before the commencement of Purdah on 24 March 2006; so publication may be delayed until after the Local Government Elections on 4 May 2006. Members were reminded of the Purdah restrictions whereby only factual information could be published and the exclusions on anything which could be perceived to influence political opinion.

SC43. MONITORING OFFICER'S REPORT ON REFERRALS RECEIVED FROM THE STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND:

No new referrals were reported.

SC44. UPDATE ON RECRUITMENT OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS FOR STANDARDS COMMITTEE:

The Chair declared a personal interest in this item as an independent member. The Monitoring Officer confirmed the appointments of Roger Lovegrove, Irene Francis and Nick Weber and the current vacancy. The Chair welcomed two prospective candidates to the meeting.

SC45. DATE OF NEXT MEETING: 26 June 2006

Note: The meeting ended at 8.25pm

NICHOLAS WEBER
Chair

