

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STANDARDS COMMITTEE HELD IN
THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
WEDNESDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2007 AT
7.30 PM

PRESENT: District Council Members

Councillor J Warren (Chairman).
Councillor M Wood.

Town Councils' Representative

Mrs E Woods

Parish Councils' Representative

Mr B Taylor

Independent Member

Mr A Walker

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Simon Drinkwater	- Director of Neighbourhood Services (and Monitoring Officer)
Jeff Hughes	- Head of Democratic Services

376 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of
Councillor N C Poulton and Mr J Morphew.

377 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Mrs E Woods and Mr B Taylor to
their first meeting of the Committee since their

reappointment as the parish/town council representatives by the Council.

The Chairman invited Members to consider whether or not they would prefer to attend daytime meetings of the Committee. Members indicated that they would like a daytime meeting option to be available when being consulted on dates for future meetings.

378 “THE CODE UNCOVERED” – DVD PRESENTATION

The Committee watched a DVD recording entitled “The Code Uncovered”.

The recording had been produced as a training aid for local authorities. It used a dramatised scenario to illustrate the lead up to a planning committee meeting and highlighted key changes to the revised Code of Conduct. The programme examined the rules about declaring interests, disclosing confidential information and bullying.

The Monitoring Officer undertook to provide all Members with a copy of the DVD and a bullet point summary of the elements of the Code covered by the programme.

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RESOLVED ITEMS

ACTION

379 MINUTES

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 10 July 2007 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

380 LOCAL FILTERING

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report detailing the latest proposals for changes in the way complaints alleging breaches of the Code of Conduct were considered.

The Monitoring Officer outlined the key proposed changes,

ACTION

highlighting that:

- Standards Committees would be responsible for receiving allegations and deciding whether any action needs to be taken (commonly referred to as the 'local filter');
- Standards Committees must be chaired by an independent member;
- Standards Committees would be allowed to enter into joint working arrangements with other standards committees;
- the Standards Board would be responsible for monitoring and ensuring the effectiveness of local arrangements, including supporting authorities which are experiencing difficulties and driving up their performance, and
- regulations needed to be drafted to prescribe how the proposed changes would work in practice, not least the local filter and monitoring arrangements.

The Committee noted that the local filter was on course to come into effect in April 2008. The Standards Board was conscious of the need to have the legislation and guidance in place before that date.

The Monitoring Officer advised that, in preparation for the new arrangements, the Standards Board had instigated local filter and joint working pilot schemes. The findings from these pilot schemes were awaited. They would be used to inform the Standards Board's guidance to local authorities.

Members noted that the Standards Board was currently preparing guidance based on what it anticipated to be within the regulations. The final regulations would need to be in place before the guidance could be published.

ACTION

It was envisaged that the guidance would focus on five areas:

- the role and make-up of Standards Committees;
- the local filter and how it would operate;
- local investigations;
- local determinations;
- monitoring and audit arrangements.

The Monitoring Officer detailed an outline of possible mechanisms for dealing with Code of Conduct complaints. He highlighted the potential for joint working arrangements with other local authorities in respect of any appeals process.

The Committee supported the Monitoring Officer's suggestion that he be authorised to negotiate joint arrangements with Standards Committees of neighbouring local authorities to cover the issue of appeals, as detailed in the report now submitted.

In response to a question from a Member, the Monitoring Officer commented that details of the audit arrangements were awaited. Such arrangements would likely cover how the governance of the Council would be audited and the role for the Committee in this process.

In response to further questions from Members, the Monitoring Officer provided information on the likely timeframe for dealing with complaints under the local filter, any discretion that could be exercised by the Monitoring Officer to deal with frivolous complaints and other options for dealing with appeals.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be received, and

ACTION

(B) the Monitoring Officer be authorised to negotiate joint arrangements with Standards Committees of neighbouring local authorities to cover the issue of appeals, as detailed in the report now submitted.

The meeting closed at 8.45 pm.

Chairman
Date