



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Held: WEDNESDAY, 3 OCTOBER 2007 at 5.30pm

P R E S E N T :

Mrs Sheila Brucciani (Independent Member)

Councillor Draycott

Councillor Mugglestone

14. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Coley.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were requested to declare any interests they may have in the business to be discussed and/or indicate that Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 applied to them.

No declarations were made.

16. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a correct record.

17. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Item 8

It was reported that following the decision to increase the number of independent members applications had been submitted. It was predicted that there was a possibility that the number of meetings would increase due to the Standards Board reducing their workload, which would put unnecessary pressure on the independent member who was required to attend. It was also predicted that the amount of elected members at the meeting could increase and as the minimum number of independent members was a quarter this would be a problem without the increase. Members agreed that two reserve Independent Members would be necessary.

Item 9

The Service Director for Democratic Services reported that there were still a

large number of Members who had not undertaken the code of conduct training. There had been four sessions and more had been planned. The importance of member attendance was to be processed through the group whips. It was noted that there was a video available from the code of conduct and possible reference information could be created for group leaders and whips.

18. COMPLAINTS RELATING TO ELECTED MEMBERS

The Service Director for Democratic Services stated that there had been no new complaints. It was noted that a number of complaints that had been lodged before the 2007 election had been addressed through internal and external resources. The next stage was a report to be submitted to the Standards Committee who would either agree or disagree with the recommendation on how the case would proceed. It was felt that these would come up in the next month and that an additional meeting would be arranged.

19. CORPORATE GOVERNANCE: ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2006/7

The Corporate Director of Resources submitted a report, Annual Corporate Governance Review for 2006/7. Peter Nicholls, Service Director for Legal Services, outlined the report explaining that the Council had adopted a Corporate Governance Framework five years previously based on The Chartered Institutes of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) contemporary guidance. An annual review had to be carried out each year in accord with the Framework; this was the fifth Annual Review. It was explained that Corporate Governance, in essence, was the way in which the Council managed and controlled the way in which it delivered services, it was essentially a process system, a framework which covered all the Council's operations, and had a direct impact on service delivery. It was important for Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) purposes. The District Auditor had also commented favourably on the Council's Framework, Leicester's being well developed compared to most other Authorities.

The Council's Framework consisted of a range of key policies and procedures, identifying a lead officer for each. The lead officers needed to provide an assurance in respect of their responsibilities, these were included in the report. If this could not be given they were required to provide an action plan to ensure necessary improvements within a reasonable timescale. It was confirmed that each lead officer had signed a hard copy, as recommended by Internal Audit. Appendix 1 of the report summarised the assurances given showing that in respect of most the position is "green" or "green/amber", although for a couple the position is "red/amber".

The overall position was positive, although the Committee's attention was also drawn to the report's reference to a draft DA reporting regarding the Housing Department.

The Chair asked how risk was identified; in response it was suggested that she meet with the lead officer responsible, i.e. Laurie Goldberg, Head of Audit and

Governance. Peter Nicholls agreed to arrange this meeting.

Concern was expressed that lead officers should take into account public perception when completing assurance statements.

It was noted that the report included the full detail together with a summary in Appendix 1. The Committee welcomed proposals to further develop presentation so as to highlight key issues. The Chair requested that lead officer responsibilities be grouped together to make the appendices easier to read and Peter agreed to do this.

CIPFA had published new guidance, as explained in the report. Now was an appropriate time for the Council to review and improve its Corporate Governance Framework. It was explained that CIPFA had recommended that the outcome of the proposed review of Corporate Governance arrangements ought to be presented to full Council for approval.

The Chair expressed concern that the six "core principles" for good governance would have been difficult to measure against and asked how these were incorporated. Peter explained that the principles were at "high level" and that the Council would be required to set measurable standards and targets.

It was mentioned how the Council would go about introducing a new Framework. Peter explained that the Audit Commission had produced guidance and that there would be representation at the forthcoming Standards conference in Birmingham when they would be able to learn about the latest best practice. A review would be completed before March to enable the next Annual Corporate Governance Review for 2007/8 to be based on the new standards.

The Committee also reviewed the position with regard to complaints to the Ombudsman and noted that there were a large number of premature complaints which perhaps could be avoided if complainants were encouraged to use the Council's own complaints system rather than going straight to the Ombudsman. It was noted that there was a gap in the Council's current arrangements in that there was not a single point for complaints. This had already been identified and action had been taken to tackle this and the need to reduce the number of premature complaints.

RESOLVED

1. that the Committee noted and supported the report
2. that it be recommended to the Audit Committee that the Chair of Standards Committee be invited to attend for matters relating to Corporate Governance including risk management.
3. that the Service Director for Legal Services arrange for the Chair of the Standards Committee to meet with Laurie Goldberg, Head of Audit and Governance, to enable the Chair to gain a greater understanding as to how risk assessments are carried out in practice.

20. ETHICAL GOVERNANCE - REVIEW AND INITIAL ACTION PLAN

The Corporate Director of Resources submitted a report which provided a background to reviewing key elements of ethical governance within the City Council and identified the actions necessary to ensure the maintenance of the highest standards. Charles Poole, Service Director for Democratic Services reported that before and after the election the issues around ethical governance had changed with the significant amount of new elected members. He stated that paragraph 3.5 incorporated suggestions for assisting members that were put forward at the Members Code of Conduct training, which the committee were to take into consideration. These included a specific web/intranet site (incorporating a number of issues), a revised code of conduct pocket reference, distribution of register of members interests to all members and creating a more user friendly documentation for members.

The Committee was asked what they felt could be done to raise the profile of standards and make members more comfortable with the issues. It was suggested that speakers could be brought in to discuss this with member. Tom Stephenson, Corporate Director of Resources, noted that the Audit Commission were carrying out an audit on Ethical Governance within the Council, which would help to see a consolidation across the authority.

Members of the Committee expressed concern over that new members were not aware of the serious aspect of declaring interests. It was felt that members were often put in difficult situations where they were offered hospitality off a developer or made to express an opinion, especially on Planning matters.

The Chair suggested that one to one training was more effective, if that could be made available. In response it was noted that members could be reminded of where they could go for information.

It was suggested that information could be distributed to through the member's bulletin, providing different information each week. Members agreed that training was time consuming and that information provided in a different format, such as 'tip of the day' or 'frequently asked questions' on a webpage, would be more appropriate. Tom suggested that the best way forward would be by using something that already existed and felt that it would be hard to condense all the information into a pocket guide.

A Member of the Committee asked about the Code of Conduct for officers and requested that this be discussed at the next meeting. In response Tom noted that these were in the terms and conditions for officers.

RESOLVED:

that the Committee agreed that the items identified under paragraph 3.5 needed to be pursued.

21. STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND ADVICE: PREDISPOSITION, PRE-DETERMINATION OR BIAS

The Corporate Director of Resources submitted a report that considered the issue of predisposition, predetermination or bias and the Code of Conduct. Members of the Committee expressed concern that it was difficult to enter a meeting with absolutely no pre-determination on how they were to vote. It was felt that many members were cautious in what they said outside of meetings so not to jeopardise their participation in the meeting.

It was suggested that a short talk at Full Council could be useful when all the Members would be present. Members discussed where the potential item would be placed and it was felt that the item might be more productive at the group meetings.

RESOLVED:

1. that the report be noted.
2. that the Standards Board for England Advice predisposition, predetermination or Bias and the Code of Conduct be discussed with members at their political group meetings.

22. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 6.41pm.

