

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the Wantsum Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 15 July 2010.

PRESENT: Miss R MacCrone (Chairman), Mr L Christie, Mr D S Daley, Mr J F London and Mr P Gammon, MBE

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs T Dean, Mr A J King, MBE and Mrs F Leathers

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr G Wild (Director of Law and Governance) and Mr P Sass (Head of Democratic Services and Local Leadership)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Substitutes/apologies

(Item 1)

An apology from Mrs Ahmed was received.

It was also noted that Mr Alex King was present on behalf of Paul Carter.

2. Declarations of Interest

(Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest by Committee Members in any item on the agenda, but Mrs Dean asked the Committee to note that she was the subject of an ongoing complaint to Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2010

(Item 3)

Resolved: that the Minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. Annual Meeting with the Group Leaders

(Item 4)

The three group leaders had been invited to their annual meeting with the Standards Committee to discuss the promotion and maintenance of ethical standards in the authority. It was noted that the Deputy Leader, Alex King, was in attendance in place of the Leader, Paul Carter, who was representing the County Council at an external meeting.

The Chairman commented on the impending demise of Standards for England and that it was currently unclear what might happen to serious complaints that couldn't be dealt with at a local level.

Mrs Leathers stated that she did not support the recent views of the junior Minister about Independent Remuneration Panels.

Mrs Dean stated that the Local Government Association itself might take over responsibility for dealing with serious complaints about Member conduct, or alternatively, to expand the existing powers of the Local Government Ombudsman.

Mr Gammon stated that the existing arrangements that KCC had with the London Borough of Bromley and the Fire Authority could be extended for the purposes of dealing with serious complaints.

The Chairman stated that it was currently a confusing picture because the First Tier Tribunal was not being abolished.

Mr King stated that the new coalition Government appeared to be content for local authorities to manage their own arrangements for dealing with ethical standards. He added that he would be reluctant to lose the Independent Remuneration Panel, which did a valuable job for KCC.

In response to a question about the timescale for any changes to the process for dealing with complaints, Mr Wild stated that there would be a formal consultation period in the autumn, prior to the changes taking effect during 2011. He added that, in the meantime, the existing arrangements would still apply.

Mr Gammon suggested that the existing template for the annual return to Standards for England could be used as a self-assessment tool for the Standards Committee.

Mrs Dean stated that she was pleased to see a higher return rate for the Members' Annual Reports, but questioned whether they serve the purpose they were originally intended for. She added, however, that it was useful to have the Independent Remuneration Panel's feedback on good and not so good reports.

Mr Christie stated that a key value of the Members' Annual reports was that it allowed important "one-to-one" time with the Group Leader to discuss performance and one's role in the activity of the Group. In relation to the future, he wondered if elected Members should serve on a Standards Committee at all and suggested that there should also be regional arrangements to deal with serious issues.

Mr King stated that he was impressed that the Leader had managed to have 73 "one-to-one" meetings with his Members and that such meetings were especially important in a larger group.

Mr London stated that he saw little value in the Members' Annual Reports and that they were not seen by the electorate to be useful either.

Mr Daley stated that the Members' Annual Reports were a good discipline for Members and also enhanced the reputation of KCC. Most Borough and District Councils had no such process.

Mrs Leathers stated that she was heartened by the largely positive comments from Members about the Annual Reports and undertook to look again in the autumn at the content and guidance to see if they could be improved yet further.

Mr Sass undertook to find out whether it was possible to find out how many hits there were on the Annual Reports on KCC's website and also to enquire whether the forms could be pre-completed as far as possible, especially in relation to meeting attendance.

The Chairman stated that more should be done to market the availability of the Annual Reports, perhaps via "Around Kent". This suggestion was supported by the Group Leaders.

Mr Gammon stated it was important to have elected Members on Standards Committee, in order to provide information about the Member role – he added that he didn't think Standards Committees could function effectively without elected Members.

Mr Wild stated that, from his point of view as Monitoring Officer, the Standards Committee was working effectively and he was satisfied with the progress made on all fronts. He added that there would continue to be a focus on proper governance and that the Committee was well-placed for the future.

Mr Gammon stated that both he and Mrs Ahmed would find it useful to shadow key elected Members to find out more about what they do. Mr King, Mrs Dean and Mr Christie all agreed that they would be more than happy to be shadowed. Mr Sass undertook to arrange for this to happen.

The Chairman thanked the Group Leaders for attending the meeting and assured them that the points raised in the discussion would be taken forward.

(Mr King and Mrs Dean left the meeting).

5. Complaints Monitoring

(Item 5)

Mr Sass updated the Committee with regard to complaint KCC/01/2010, which had resulted in no action being taken by the Assessment Sub Committee and was now subject to the review period.

There was a general discussion about the effectiveness of the Monitoring Officer Protocol. It was accepted that the balance between fact-finding and "investigating whether to investigate" was a delicate one but, on the whole, the Protocol appeared to be working well.

Resolved: that the contents of the report be noted.

6. Standards Committee Work Programme and future meeting dates

(Item 6)

It was noted that Mr Gammon would be presenting the Committee's Annual Report to the County Council meeting on 22 July.

Mr Gammon also suggested that there should be a standing item to each meeting on the future of the standards regime, post Standards for England.

Resolved: that the contents of the report be noted.

7. Any other urgent business

(Item 7)

There were no urgent items.

8. Date of Next Meeting

(Item 8)

The Committee noted that its next meeting was on Thursday 18 November 2010.