

MINUTES OF: STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 12th October 2006

**PRESENT: Mr A Neville (in the Chair)
Councillors Alcroft (for P Gill), L Barnes (for Crosta), Cheetham (for J Pawson), Smith, Thorne and Unsworth and Mr A Nixon**

ALSO PRESENT Councillor Lynskey

**IN ATTENDANCE: Linda Fisher – Head of Legal and Democratic Services
Julian Joinson – Democratic Services Manager**

BUSINESS MATTERS

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Crosta, P Gill, Heakin and J Pawson.

2. URGENT ITEMS

The Chair considered that the following two items were urgent on the grounds that a view was required about the introduction of a Members' Bulletin on Ethical Standards and information was sought as to the availability of Members to serve on Panels for Local Standards Hearings, prior to the next meeting of the Committee on 18th January 2007.

3. MEMBERS' BULLETIN ON ETHICAL STANDARDS

The Chair indicated that a Members' Bulletin on Ethical Standards across the Council was being developed by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services. A draft of the first Bulletin was circulated at the meeting and Members were asked for their comments on the document.

Resolved:

That the production of a Members' Bulletin on Ethical Standards be approved and that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services be requested to finalise the draft document.

4. PROCEDURE FOR LOCAL STANDARDS HEARINGS

The Chair informed Members that the Council had recently approved the Committee's recommendation to establish Panels to consider Local Standards Hearings. The Chair indicated that the Standards Board had suggested Panels of three with a fourth Member sitting in reserve in case of illness. It was likely that any cases would be heard during the daytime and might take longer than one day.

The Chair requested details of Members who were available during the daytime. A number of Members had work commitments during the day. It was suggested that individual Panels should be constituted on an *ad hoc* basis at the appropriate time. A discussion also took place about the need for individual Panels to be balanced. The Council had agreed that Panels would normally be chaired by an independent Member.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services reported that there were a small number of cases due to be heard in the near future. The Chair indicated that some further training about the process would be provided at that time.

Resolved:

To note the arrangements for the selection of Panels for Local Standards Hearings.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made. The Chair indicated that declarations of interest were a frequent source of complaints across all local authorities and that the Head of Legal and Democratic Services intended to circulate a guidance note to all councillors.

6. MINUTES

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22nd August 2006 be signed by the Chair as a correct record.

7. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No members of the public were present at the meeting.

ORDINARY ITEMS OF BUSINESS

8. PRESENTATION ON ETHICAL GOVERNANCE STANDARDS

The majority of members present at the meeting had already attended training sessions on 'the Principles of Public Life' provided by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and on 'Ethical Governance for Members' by the Audit Commission. Accordingly, it was agreed to defer this item and to arrange a separate training session for those members who had not yet seen the presentations.

9. CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU DISCLOSURE CHECKS FOR MEMBERS

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services on the suggestion of compulsory Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for Members. The Committee was reminded that in March 2006 it had requested clarification of the advice received from Counsel on the matter. Mrs Fisher reported that Counsel's advice remained that any CRB checks for Rossendale councillors would have to be voluntary in nature, other than for those councillors who were appointed to 'regulated' positions under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000.

Resolved:

1. That the Cabinet be recommended to approve the report and the accompanying Members' Criminal Records Bureau Guide;
2. That a copy of the Guide be forwarded to each Member; and
3. That members be requested to undergo a Criminal Records Bureau check.

10. INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services on the Members of the Independent Remuneration Panel and their work. The Democratic Services Manager outlined the key areas within the report, which included the move to locally determined Members' Allowances Schemes, the constitution and membership of the Panel, its powers and current areas of work.

The Panel was currently reviewing the existing scheme with a view to making recommendations for 2007/08. Areas interest included mayoral allowances, travel and subsistence allowances and an audit of the hours spent by Members on Council business to determine the level of basic allowance.

Resolved:

To note the report concerning the constitution of the Independent Remuneration Panel.

11. REVISED WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY

Head of Legal and Democratic Services provided an update as to revisions within the Whistleblowing Policy, formerly known as the Wrongdoing Policy. Mrs Fisher reminded Members that they had previously considered an earlier version of the policy. This had now been amended to include revised contact details. The policy would be formally relaunched within the authority.

Resolved:

To note the revised Whistleblowing Policy.

12. AUDIT COMMISSION – ANNUAL GOVERNANCE REPORT

The Committee considered the Annual Governance report issued by the Audit Commission. The Chair highlighted a number of comments within the report, including areas of concern, specific recommendations and an Action Plan. In the report the Auditor had referred to the Council's 'positive and constructive approach' to the audit. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services explained that the report related to internal financial controls, including quality and risk issues. The report had been considered by the Accounts Committee and approved. That report was now being provided to this Committee in view of its responsibility for good governance.

A further assessment on the Use of Resources was expected in November 2006. That report would be submitted to the Cabinet for consideration.

Resolved:

1. To note the Annual Governance report issued by the Audit Commission;
2. To thank the officers for their hard work, which had led to a favourable report; and
3. To request that a further report be provided to a future meeting, following publication of the Use of Resources Assessment.

(The meeting started at 6.30pm and finished at 7.15pm)