

At a meeting of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on FRIDAY, 27TH MARCH, 2009 at 2.50 P.M.

Present:-

Mr. G.N. Cook in the Chair

Councillors Forbes, Gofton, Wakefield and Wares, together with Mr. J.P. Paterson, Mr. C. Stewart and Councillors G.W.K. Hepple and A.R. Wilkinson (Hetton Town Council).

The Chairman apologised for the delayed start time of the meeting to those Members who had been kept waiting, which he explained was due to the meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee taking longer than anticipated.

Councillor Gofton suggested that as this had happened before, meetings of the Standards Committee be diaried to take place prior to those of the Audit and Governance Committee for the next municipal year.

The Chairman agreed to the above suggestion.

Apology for Absence

An apology for absence was submitted to the Committee on behalf of Councillor Charlton.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 28th November, 2008 (copy circulated) were submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

Handbook on Complaints against Councillors

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) seeking the Committee's approval to the contents of a handbook dealing with complaints against Councillors.

(For copy report - see original minutes).

The City Solicitor outlined the composition of the proposed handbook. He briefly explained the scope of each procedure and highlighted that Section 4 was new and that it was based on information from the Standards Board website and gave information about an investigation by an Ethical Standards Officer. The City Solicitor stated that it was intended that Members would bring along the handbook to future meetings for reference once it was published.

Mr. Stewart enquired whether the meetings would take place out of office hours and with respect to his own availability stated that he may find it hard to attend meetings.

In response, the City Solicitor advised that the initial assessment of a complaint would be considered by the Assessment Sub-Committee. As these meetings were not subject to the Access to Information rules, they could ordinarily be convened at relatively short notice and would probably be held during the day when most Members of the Standards Committee would be available and could be of considerable duration. The Chairman of the Standards Committee would normally attend these meetings. However, the City Solicitor added, that Members would be given as much notice as possible of the dates of meetings in order to improve the chances of them being able to attend.

2. RESOLVED that the procedures for dealing with complaints against Councillors and the production of a handbook be approved.

Summary of the Case Tribunals (England) Regulations 2008

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) informing the Committee of the Case Tribunals (England) Regulations 2008 which came into effect on 12th December, 2008 and which introduce provisions relating to matters which have been referred to a case tribunal of the Adjudication Panel to deal with and setting out the detail of the Regulations.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Report on the Work of the Standards Committee

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) providing a summary of the work of the Committee over the last civic year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Gofton referred to Section 3 of the report which provided details of the dates when the five meetings of the Standards Committee had been held over the last civic year. She commented that the spacing between meetings was irregular. It was explained that in part this was due to the degree of common membership of the independent Members of this Committee and the Audit and Governance Committee and their convenience and also influenced by the dates when accounts had to be approved by that Committee.

The Committee having discussed the above point, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that:-
 - i) consideration be given to scheduling meetings of the Standards Committee more evenly over the next civic year; and
 - ii) the remainder of the report be noted.

2009 Annual Assembly of Standards Committees – Bringing Standards into Focus

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) providing details of the 2009 Annual Assembly of Standards Committees entitled "Bringing Standards into Focus" to be held on 12th and 13th October at the International Convention Centre, Birmingham.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The City Solicitor advised that he would be attending the Conference and invited Members to contact him in the next few days if they wished to attend.

Mr. Stewart having stated that he would like to attend the Conference, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that:-
 - i) the Chairman, Mr. Stewart, and the City Solicitor be authorised to attend the 2009 Annual Assembly of Standards Committees; and
 - ii) any further Members wishing to attend contact the City Solicitor in the next few days.

(Signed) G.N. COOK,
(Chairman).