

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 12 April 2005 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa, at 6.00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Davis, Gill, Guest and Short

Councillors Mrs A Gordon and B Smart

Apologies for absence were received from the Venerable Paget-Wilkes.

917. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

RESOLVED that, in the absence of the Venerable Paget-Wilkes, Councillor Guest be appointed Chair for the meeting.

918. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

919. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2004, having been printed and circulated, were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

920. MEMBERS' REGISTER OF FINANCIAL INTERESTS AND OTHER INTERESTS UNDER THE MANDATORY CODE OF CONDUCT

The Register containing details of financial and other interests, notified by individual Councillors, was made available for inspection by Members of the Committee.

921. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

The Committee considered a report from Legal Services on the impact of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 since its introduction on 1 January 2005.

A considerable amount of work had been undertaken during 2004 in preparation for the implementation of the Act, and Members and Officers had received training. It had been proposed that training should also be offered to Parish and Town Councils but this had not taken place since training was being organised by the Warwickshire Association of Local Councils.

Document retention and disposal schemes had been written identifying how long documents would be retained. During the discussion, the Committee was of the opinion that care would need to be given to avoid disposing of documents which were potentially of historic interest.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE MINUTES (Continued)

Between 1 January 2005 and the date of the meeting, 46 formal requests for information had been received. The subject matter had included such topics as food safety premises inspection reports, and information concerning the Warwick Mop. All requests had to be responded to within twenty working days, and the impact appeared so far to be significant. The time spent on dealing with requests was being monitored but charges could not be made for retrieving information unless this involved in excess of two and half days of work. There might then be a right to claim some of the costs imposed by the Act from Central Government.

The Audit Commission had been expected to carry out an audit of the authority regarding its systems to conform to the Act, but they had decided that this was not required as an initial assessment of the systems which had been established, had concluded that they were satisfactory.

The Council was in the process of installing a document management system and the software company involved was producing a module which would be specifically designed to assist with dealing with Freedom of Information requests.

RESOLVED that the impact of the Freedom of Information Act on the Council, both in terms of costs and types of information requested, be kept under review due to the already strong pressure which was being imposed on Officer time.

922. CODE OF CONDUCT

The Committee was informed that the Standards Board for England had been asked to conduct a review of the content of the Code of Conduct for Officers by the Minister of State for Local and Regional Government.

The Code had been introduced three years ago and the Standards Board for England believed that there was no doubt about the need for a Code of Conduct, and the link between high ethical standards and excellent service provision. However, they also agreed that Standards Committees and Councillors should be given the opportunity to raise any issues for consideration regarding the operation of, and the impact of the Code. The deadline for responses was 17 June 2005, after which recommendations for change would be made to the Government.

The Standards Board for England had issued a questionnaire containing 29 questions of which the Committee considered a sample of three.

It was agreed that the questionnaire should be circulated to all Members of the Council and a summary of their comments should be made to the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the questionnaire be circulated to all Members of the Council and that the matter be considered further at the next meeting.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE MINUTES (Continued)

923. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered items which should be contained within its work programme for 2005/06, and it was decided that this should include the outcomes of the National Fraud Initiative, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, and the process of reviewing Members' allowances. The

Committee would also be considering further the Planning Code of Conduct once the review by the Planning Committee had been completed.

RESOLVED that proposals for the 2005/06 work programme be approved.

(The meeting ended at 6.55 pm)