

Minutes of a meeting of the Mid Sussex District Council Standards Committee held on Tuesday 14 February 2017 from 6:00 p.m. to 6:21 p.m.

Present: Cllr Pete Bradbury (Chairman)
Town Cllr Christopher Ash-Edwards (Vice-Chairman)

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| Cllr Liz Bennett* | Cllr Heidi Brunsdon* | Cllr Anne Jones |
| Parish Cllr William Blunden | Parish Cllr Maria Fielding | Cllr Gordon Marples |
| Cllr John Belsey | Parish Cllr Stephen Hand | |

* Absent

Also Present: Anthony Cox and Dr David Horne, Independent Person on Standards Matters.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Liz Bennett and Councillor Heidi Brunsdon.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. MINUTES

Following an amendment to spelling on page 5, and the inclusion of Councillor Belsey in the list of Councillors present, the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 18 October 2016 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4. TO CONSIDER ANY ITEMS THAT THE CHAIRMAN AGREES TO TAKE AS URGENT BUSINESS

None.

5. STANDARDS COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2016

The Solicitor to the Council introduced the report. He confirmed that following discussion by the Committee, the finalised version will be presented to Council on 29 March 2017, along with the Code of Conduct Criteria which are used when assessing Code of Conduct Complaints.

He noted two main items from the Annual Report. One was concerning complaints around a Worth Parish Councillor's Declaration of Interest form which relates to a private matter and is not related to Parish Council business. The other relates to Horsted Keynes formulation of their Neighbourhood Plan, which is a local dispute and no longer a Code of Conduct Complaint.

The Solicitor also drew Members attention to the Policy Context section of the report to clarify the reference to criminal sanctions. It is rare for sanctions to be implemented as it requires the Director of Public Prosecutions approval and would be related to a serious concern when a Member has used their role to enhance their financial position in a substantial way. It could also relate to Members declaring interests inaccurately or incorrectly at meetings or on the Declaration of Interest Forms. He will undertake to write to Members and Parish Clerks to remind the need for individual Declaration of Interest forms to be reviewed on a regular basis.

The Independent Person for Standards suggested an amendment to the Report, to include the fact that two new Independent Persons were appointed as Members of the Committee in 2016. He also proposed including that the Independent Persons are attending specific training in March which shows the commitment of the Committee in maintaining their skills in this area.

The Chairman raised the possibility of the whole Committee attending a dedicated training session in-house, focussing on some individual case studies, with expert advise on how to respond. This was welcomed by the Members. A Parish Councillor confirmed that the Sussex Association of Local Councils and the National Association of Local Councils provide annual training which includes a half hour session on Standards matters. The County Council has also provided similar courses in the past. One Member highlighted that a similar course had been successfully facilitated for the Scrutiny Committees, in partnership with Arun District Council and it was agreed that contact would be made with neighbouring Sussex Authorities to see what training options may be available.

On a separate matter, a Member proposed that the Annual Report includes a simple breakdown of the number of complaints received and how they were progressed. This was echoed by the Independent Person for Standards who also queried whether there could be a comparator against the number of complaints received by Parish Councils. After discussion, it was agreed that the breakdown of complaints received would be included in the report, but that there would not be a requirement for a comparator to Parish complaints.

A Member queried section 9 of the report, seeking clarification on how other Councils deal with Standards issues as part of the audit function. As membership of the Audit and Standards Committee appear to differ, it was debated that the one meeting was perhaps two separate meetings running consecutively.

The Solicitor highlighted that the system currently in place for dealing with complaints is effective, as the District Council works well with the Parish Councils to discuss issues before they progress to formal complaints.

To summarise, the Solicitor confirmed that the Annual Report would be amended to include the criteria for assessing code of conduct complaints, to acknowledge the new Independent Persons and their training, to include reference to training for the remainder of the Committee and to provide a breakdown of complaints received.

The Chairman proposed that the Annual Report be approved subject to the above amendments being made and that the finalised copy be circulated to Members by email to check and agree. This was approved unanimously.

RESOLVED

That the Annual Report be approved subject to proposed amendments prior to being referred to Council.

6. QUESTIONS PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10 DUE NOTICE OF WHICH HAS BEEN GIVEN

None.

Chairman