

**Minutes of a meeting of the Mid Sussex District Council
Standards Committee held on Wednesday 17th March 2010
From 7.00pm to 8.00pm**

Present:- Sir Roger Sands (Chairman)

David Brown (Vice– Chairman)*	Cllr Gordon Marples	Trevor Swainson
Ian Church	Cllr Heather Ross	Cllr Mike Watts
Parish Cllr Jenny Forbes*	Cllr Susan Seward	Parish Cllr Pat Webster
Town Cllr Richard Goddard*	Cllr Christopher Snowling	

* Absent

25. SUBSTITUTES

No substitutions were notified.

26. CHANGE OF MEMBERSHIP

A minutes silence was held in memory of Cllr Brenda Binge. Cllr Susan Seward was welcomed to the Committee.

27. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from David Brown and Cllrs. Forbes and Goddard.

28. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 9th February 2010 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

29. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2009 – MARCH 2010

The Chairman noted that the information presented in the report pertained to two written reports: the first, the Annual Return to Standards for England, needed to be completed prior to the next meeting of the Committee. The second, the Annual Report of the Committee, would be brought before the Committee before being presented to Full Council.

The Monitoring Officer took the Committee through the questions posed in the report point by point.

Communication – Forward Work Plan

A Member stated that the Committee was reactive in nature, though there could be some merit in a training plan and a schedule of presentations to parish councils. Another Member commented that a work plan could benefit the structure and content

of agendas. The Chairman commented that although the standards committees of some local authorities were more proactive in their activities the local view of the Committee was more modest. He commented that activities such as his meetings with the Chief Executive and group leaders could be documented in a plan and that future intentions, such as the annual case review, could be included in this.

Members agreed that the intentions of the Committee could be documented, though this could be worked into the committee minutes rather than a formal work plan.

Communication – Publicity Relating to the Annual Report

Members commented on the obligation for the work of the Committee to be visible to the public. It was noted that simply placing the Annual Report on the website would ignore local residents who do not have access to the internet. A Member asked whether information about the report could be included in the Mid Sussex Matters publication. The Chairman replied that this had been tried unsuccessfully before.

Members agreed that a press release pertaining to the Annual Report should be issued locally.

Communication – Provision of Complaint Form

The Committee felt that anyone making a complaint relating to the Code of Conduct should not be required to use a template form. The Chairman suggested that one could be made available for use by anyone who wished to. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a standard template could be made available on the website.

Members agreed that a complaint form be made available online.

Communication – Publication of Assessment and Review Sub Committee Findings

The Chairman noted that the Committee's current practice seemed to be out of line with some other local authorities, who do publicise the results of assessment and review sub-committees. He commented that it did seem odd to publicise a situation which had not resulted in an investigation. Members expressed concern that any publicity that an assessment of complaint had taken place could damage the reputation of the member in receipt of the complaint, even if it was found that no breach of the code could have occurred. In response to a question from a Member the Monitoring Officer confirmed that if an investigation takes place and no breach of the code is found then the member in receipt of the complaint decides the level of publicity to be given to the result.

Members agreed that the Committee should continue with its policy of not giving any publicity to assessment and review sub-committee findings.

Communication – Measuring Satisfaction with the Complaint Process

The Monitoring Officer commented that the number of reviews of assessment hearings could be taken as an indicator of satisfaction. The Committee asked whether the process was reviewed and whether feedback on the procedure should be requested. It was noted that the length of the process could lead to dissatisfaction. The Chairman commented that although he agreed with the idea of requesting feedback any questions asked required clarity if they were to be effective. He suggested that the annual review be used to examine the process, though noted an inherent difficulty as Mid Sussex had not had to carry out any full hearings.

Members agreed that the complaints process be examined at the annual review.

Communication – Public Access to Information

The Chairman commented that navigating the council website to the Code of Conduct and information on making complaints was not intuitive.

Members agreed that a link from the service complaint page of the council website to the Code of Conduct page be added, in addition to a downloadable version of the complaint form.

Influence – Member/Member Protocol

Members commented that member to member protocols were required not just between political party groups, but also to deal with issues outside the group structure involving independent or lone party members. It was noted that group leaders could only discipline their particular members.

The Chairman asked whether the Constitutional Working Group had discussed this matter. A member responded that the Committee needed to request that the Working Group draw up such a protocol.

Members asked whether member to member protocols from other authorities could be obtained and evaluated. The Monitoring Officer responded that he would investigate this.

In response to a question the Monitoring Officer confirmed that breach of a member to member protocol would be a breach of the Code of Conduct. The Chairman noted that a complaint relating to the breach would still be required before the Standards Committee could become involved.

Members agreed that examples of member to member protocols be obtained, and the Constitutional Working Group be asked to draw up such a protocol for Mid Sussex.

Relationships with Town and Parish Councils

It was noted that only one complaint relating to a parish councillor had been received during the council year. Some members commented that there was a difference between town councils and parish councils in engagement with the committee. It was noted that previous joint training and presentations to the Mid Sussex Association of Local Councils had been successful.

The Chairman asked whether the committee should work more closely with MSALC to engage with parish clerks. A member commented that further training for town and parish councils should be looked at in terms of MSALC's requirements.

30. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Chairman informed the Committee that he had attended the Independent Standards Committee Forum for the South of England recently. He commented that some other authorities do not inform members in receipt of a complaint prior to the assessment phase as they felt it led to fewer issues at that stage. He informed the Committee that the forum had included a training session relating to the 'other action'

sanction, and that there appeared to be no consistency in the use of this by other authorities.

Chairman