

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

20 November 2006

FORUM OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES

REPORT OF CITY SECRETARY AND SOLICITOR

Contact Officers: Chris Ashcroft Tel No: 01962 848 284

RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Attached for Members information is a report from Prof. Johns (Independent Member) on the meeting of the above Forum, held on 23 October 2006 at Mole Valley DC offices.

RECOMMENDATION:

That Prof. Johns be thanked for his report, which is noted.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

The Council to communicate openly and honestly.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None

APPENDICES:

Report from Prof Johns

**Report on meeting of the Forum of Independent Members of Standards Committees held at 10.00 a.m. on 23 October 2006 at Council Offices of Mole Valley District Council, Dorking.**

The meeting was organised by Robert Burn, Head of Legal Services of Mole Valley District Council.

There were 26 Independent members representing 24 Standards Committees present.

The presentation, "Some thoughts on Monitoring Officers and Independent Members", was given by Mike Kendall, County Secretary of the West Sussex CC. Mr Kendall is a Past President of the Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England. For the theme of his talk, he quoted Professor Gerry Stoker who had described the role of Standards committees as being either "Lapdogs, Watchdogs or Guide Dogs".

Mr Kendall reported that a White Paper is due to be published shortly on the whole Standards Committee structure. He hoped that the numerous comments and reports on experience gained since the inception of the scheme would be taken into account and be evident in the White Paper. It was his opinion that Monitoring Officers and Chief Finance Officers are usually the first to identify any irregularities or misdemeanours. In most instances they are the appropriate people to resolve problems and usually manage to do so informally. Various combinations and merging of Standards with Governance or Audit Committees had been tried in some authorities. This may be the natural evolution of the whole scheme, which will be reflected in the White Paper. In answer to the question, what was it that Independent Members brought to Standards Committees which was of benefit to these bodies, Mr Kendall thought that it could be summed up in that they provided: an internal independent validation, specialist knowledge and friendly criticism when appropriate.

Other matters reported, discussed and debated:

One delegate observed that it was sometimes difficult to recruit Independent Members to a Standards Committee and wondered if this were a widespread finding. Generally it was not found to be a problem. It was estimated that there were now 75% of Standards Committees chaired by Independent members. It was agreed that this was to be applauded, indeed it is likely that this may well become a statutory requirement.

A verbal report was given on the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees in Birmingham. It was thought to have been a very successful meeting. There were some excellent papers presented and it provided a useful forum for debate. One of the important conclusions of the Annual Assembly was that the independent members of Standards Committees should provide the role of a "Guide Dog" rather than "Watch Dog". The role of Standards Committees, as Mr Kendall had suggested, did appear to be evolving in some authorities on the lines of an Audit Committee, overseeing the Governance of Councils.

One member raised the problem of a councillor who sat on both a parish and a district council when the same planning application was under consideration. Was it acceptable for a councillor, in such a position to take part in both meetings? Surprisingly the consensus view was that this was a quite acceptable practice. Another member raised what he felt was an inconsistency of decisions reached by the Standards Board for England. Other members cited similar experiences and in addition long delays in coming to a conclusion. It was agreed that both shortcomings were to be deprecated. As discussed at a previous meeting, it was felt that there should be a mechanism whereby

an up to date list of all the Independent Members should be maintained. An up to date list of all members should be held and available centrally. To date this has not been done. Bruce Claxton, chairman of the Isle of Wight Standards Committee, is in the process of compile a list Independent members in the Hampshire, Isle of Wight, East & West Sussex and Surrey district.

One member reported that his Council would not fund his expenses to attend Independent Forum meetings. It was suggested that if the meeting were part of a "Training Programme" then funding might be forthcoming.

RBJ  
November 2006