

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

7 April 2008

MONITORING OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS BY INDEPENDENT MEMBERS AND
PARISH REPRESENTATIVES - RESULTS

REPORT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR (GOVERNANCE)

Contact Officers: Stephen Whetnall/Chris Ashcroft Tel No: 01962 848220/848284

RECENT REFERENCES:

ST59 – Monitoring of Committee Proceedings – 15 October 2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This process was introduced in 2002 and has been repeated every two years. Meetings of Cabinet, Principal Scrutiny Committee, Planning Development Control Committee and Licensing & Regulation Committee have been monitored in the past, being those that generate the highest levels of public interest.

For the benefit of members new to the Committee, the monitoring process involved two of the Independent Members/Parish Representatives (in various combinations) attending selected committee meetings as members of the public. They were not 'mystery shoppers', as this Committee decided that everyone at the meeting to be monitored should be aware of their attendance and their role, which was to observe proceedings from the public viewpoint and make comments regarding the compliance by Members with the Code of Conduct and other protocols. The exercise also provides a useful opportunity for comment on a number of general 'housekeeping' issues, such as meeting facilities, signage and acoustics.

This year, Planning Committee, Cabinet, Principal Scrutiny Committee and full Council were monitored and some useful comments were made, which are considered below.

The questionnaire used is attached as Appendix A to this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 That the Independent Members and Parish Representatives be thanked for undertaking the monitoring of committee meetings, to ascertain the level of compliance with the Code of Conduct and other guidance.
- 2 That the Committee considers the comments made and decides whether any actions are necessary, beyond those referred to in the report.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

An Efficient and Effective Council.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Questionnaire used in Monitoring Exercise

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REPORT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR (GOVERNANCE)

DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This year, Planning Committee, Cabinet, Principal Scrutiny Committee and full Council were monitored.
- 1.2 In summary, the comments of the observers revealed no areas of concern with regard to probity and ethics. However, a few issues more related to the general management and administration of meetings were identified and these are listed below.

2 Analysis of Comments

- 2.1 It appeared to the observers that the Code of Conduct and protocols were being followed correctly, insofar as they related to the meetings and business under discussion. In addition, most reports were well written and the majority of debates easy to follow. One point made was that the agenda sheet itself could be written in plainer English.
- 2.2 **Response:** It is pleasing to note that the meetings being monitored were conducted in accordance with our agreed practices. The agenda sheet should be clear, because most of this information is for the benefit of the public; therefore the wording will be re-examined.
- 2.3 More than one comment was received about the amount of distracting movement and semi-whispered conversations between officers and Members, or Member to Member, whilst debate was taking place. Bearing in mind the relative formality of the proceedings, these 'side meetings' were seen as a little discourteous to both the Councillor who was speaking at the time in the main debate, and the public who were trying to follow it.
- 2.4 **Response:** Inevitably, during the course of debates at meetings, issues may occur where there is an urgent need to quietly convey additional information, perhaps from a Corporate Director to a Portfolio Holder before he/she speaks. However, it is probably fair to say that some 'asides' are of a far less essential nature and so the comments will be drawn to the attention of all Chairmen, who are best placed to control this situation.
- 2.5 Signage to meetings was generally regarded as adequate, but there were suggestions for additional/temporary direction signs to the Walton Room for committee meetings and whether the meeting start time could be included on the plasma information screen above the main corridor in the Guildhall. On a related point, the Councillor nameplates were not easily visible from the public gallery. There

was also a comment about not being able to hear some Members when they spoke in the Conference Chamber.

- 2.6 **Response:** the Guildhall Manager has confirmed that temporary direction signs can be provided and start times will be included on the information screen in future. With regard to the visibility of nameplates, this has been commented upon before, but due to the room layouts and the design of the furniture, there is little that can be done. There are occasional problems with the acoustics in the Conference Chamber and discussions continue with the Guildhall Manager about how these can be overcome, bearing in mind budget considerations.
- 2.7 At full Council (which was the Budget meeting), it was pointed out that the public did not receive copies of all the tabled amendments. This made the debate on the amendments very difficult to follow.
- 2.8 **Response:** where amendments are forwarded to the officers during the working day before Council (or any meeting), sufficient copies are printed to also supply the public. Unfortunately, the budget meeting in particular often has 'last minute' amendments and, whilst the political parties usually produce copies for all Members, there are often insufficient spares for the public and no time to produce more. This matter will be drawn to the attention of all Group Leaders, with a particular reminder before the next budget Council.
- 2.9 There was a general observation that, on a few occasions, the Chairmen presided over discussions which were not always clear to the public, especially when there was a heavy reliance on jargon. It sometimes gave the impression of an 'internal' meeting without due consideration as to whether or not the issues were being understood by the public.
- 2.10 **Response:** Local government is far from a jargon-free environment and, inevitably, where there are discussions on technical points, or perhaps where speakers are trying to be brief, jargon and acronyms will be used. Whilst all Members and officers can help by using plainer language, it is again primarily the role of the Chairman to assess whether what is being said is understood by everyone in the room, and all Chairmen can be reminded of this point.



STANDARDS COMMITTEE

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS' QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MEETINGS

(Please circle the best description and add further comments if necessary)

- 1. How clear was the signage at the Guildhall to indicate where and when the meeting would be held?

Completely / Quite clear / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....

- 2. To what extent was it clear who the Councillors, the officers and (if appropriate) the applicants were?

Completely / Quite clear / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....

- 3. How good were the facilities in the meeting room? (eg seating and, if appropriate, monitors, projector screens etc)

Excellent / Good / Average / Poor

Further comments.....

- 4. Were copies of the agenda and procedure leaflets available on the public seating?

Yes / No

Further comments.....

5. How clearly was the opportunity for public participation announced at the beginning of the meeting?

Completely / Quite clearly / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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6. To what extent did the agenda sheet and leaflet clearly explain the process of public participation?

Completely / Quite clearly / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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7. Were you asked directly by the Committee Administrator or the Chairman if you wanted to speak during public participation?

Yes / No

Further comments.....
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8. If others did speak, to what extent were their concerns answered fairly?

Completely / Quite fairly / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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9. How clearly could both the public speakers and the Councillors be heard?

Completely / Quite clearly / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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10. Councillors who are not members of the Committee can sometimes contribute to the debate, including Portfolio Holders, Ward Members and the Leader. If applicable, how clearly was this fact communicated to the public?

Completely / Quite clearly / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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11. Following on from question 10 above, and specifically relating to the Planning Committee, to what extent was the Planning Protocol followed (eg: Members of the Committee not voting but choosing to speak as a Ward Member to advocate a particular view)?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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12. If any Councillors declared an interest, how clear was the explanation about what the actual interest was?

Completely / Quite clear / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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13. Was it made clear whether the interest was personal or prejudicial?

Yes / No

Further comments.....
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14. To what extent did it appear that the Code of Conduct was being followed correctly?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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15. Did any Member leave the room after declaring an interest of either type?

Yes / No

Further comments.....
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16. When items were debated, how well did the Chairman achieve a fair and balanced discussion?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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17. How well did the Chairman summarise the debate prior to a decision being made?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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18. How clear was the actual decision reached by the meeting on each item?

Completely / Quite clear / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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19. Overall, to what extent was the debate and decision easy to follow for the lay person?

Completely / Quite easy / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....
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OTHER COMMENTS:

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