

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

29 March 2010

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:

ST77 – Monitoring of Committee Proceedings – 30 November 2009

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 Sub-Committee have been monitored in the past, being those that generate the highest levels of public interest.

As a reminder, the monitoring process involved 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 provided a useful opportunity for comment on a number of general 'housekeeping' issues, such as meeting facilities, signage and acoustics.

This year, Planning Development Control Committee, Cabinet, Principal Scrutiny Committee and Licensing Sub-Committee were monitored and, as ever, there were some useful comments made which are considered below.

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

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.
- 3 That the content of this report and any additional comments from the Committee be drawn to the attention of all Group Leaders and chairmen.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND CORPORATE BUSINESS PLAN (RELEVANCE TO):

An Efficient and Effective Council.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

None.

RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Returns from the Independent Members and Parish Representatives

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Questionnaire used in Monitoring Exercise

## STANDARDS COMMITTEE

29 March 2010

### MONITORING OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS BY INDEPENDENT MEMBERS AND PARISH REPRESENTATIVES

#### REPORT OF CORPORATE DIRECTOR (GOVERNANCE)

##### DETAIL:

##### 1 Introduction

1.1 In summary, the comments of the observers revealed no areas of concern with regard to probity and ethics, and this is a pleasing outcome. However, a few issues more related to the general management and administration of meetings were identified and these are listed below.

##### 2 Licensing Sub-Committee – 4 January 2010

2.1 Regarding Governance issues, the following summary comments were made:-

‘The Chairman made a thorough commentary of the decision against the required criteria. A well handled meeting. Good to see manual signatures deleted from written evidence.’

2.2 Other comments made were as follows:-

- The Guildhall meetings information screen gave two locations for the meeting and this was confusing.
- Due to bad weather, the meeting started 20 minutes late and, whilst the delay was understandable, the public should have been more clearly informed. Coffee and tea for the public on such a day would have been welcomed, especially when the Sub Committee retired to consider the case.
- There was a considerable amount of paperwork which could have been better presented/ordered.

2.3 **Response:** The point about the two meeting locations is well made and exactly the type of issue which this monitoring exercise helps to identify. The second room listed on the meeting screen was that to be used for the Sub-Committee’s private deliberations, but the potential for confusion is acknowledged and, in future, the board will only show the main meeting room.

2.4 The point about communicating clearly to the public when circumstances force a change in arrangements is also noted for the future. Regarding the

refreshments, the Council has always adopted a very modest approach with, for example, no biscuits, pastries or sandwiches being made available to Members at shorter meetings. In addition, refreshments are rarely provided for the public, although the adoption of a more flexible approach in the circumstances of that day was a fair comment and will be mentioned to staff.

- 2.5 On the final comment about paperwork, collating all the information into one pack is designed to help all parties, but we will re-examine whether the page numbering etc can be improved to aid cross-referencing, together with clearer maps.

### 3 Cabinet – 13 January 2010

- 3.1 Regarding Governance issues, the following summary comments were made:-

‘A well managed and communicated meeting, fully meeting public expectations. Paperwork was easy to follow and officers contributed well. Good dialogue and a fair appreciation of views.’

- 3.2 Other comments were made as follows:-

- The Guildhall meetings information screen is not always immediately visible in its location above the main corridor doorway.
- For public participation, the Chairman did not always made clear who was being called to speak.
- An important appendix for one item did not seem to be available to the public.
- Whilst acknowledging the complexity of some issues, a slightly more informative approach about the processes that were being followed would help the public.

- 3.3 **Response:** the current refurbishment programme for the Guildhall will see a new reception area with information about meetings being more conveniently displayed.

- 3.4 All public documents considered by Cabinet should be available in hard copy at meetings and this was an oversight.

- 3.5 The two points on clearer communication (especially from the chair) have been raised before and could probably relate to many council meetings across the country. 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 primarily the role of the Chairman to assess whether what is being said is understood by everyone in the room. We do have annual chairman training courses which

cover this issue, but the above comments will be relayed to all chairmen as a reminder.

#### 4 Principal Scrutiny Committee – 18 January 2010

4.1 Regarding Governance issues, the following summary comments were made:-

‘The process of each item was clearly understood and easy for a lay person to understand. Questions posed were on the whole quite searching and the following debate was polite and orderly.’

4.2 Other comments made were as follows:-

- Directional signing to rooms not always adequate
- There was no microphone for members of the public and it was not clear whether the audio loop was only for those with a hearing aid, or for the hard of hearing as well.
- The late alteration of an exempt item to an open item did initially cause some tension, but was dealt with satisfactorily.

3.6 **Response:** the current refurbishment of the Guildhall will provide clearer signage throughout the building.

3.7 A dedicated table and microphone is provided for the public at Planning Committee (when there are always representations) and at Cabinet. At other meetings, members of the public are often invited to sit at the meeting table to speak, as numbers and space usually allows this. The audio loop is intended for those with hearing aids, when the aid is turned to the appropriate position.

3.8 The final point about the exempt embargo being lifted from a report was an unusual occurrence but the point is noted.

#### 4 Planning Development Control Committee – 28 January 2010

4.1 Regarding Governance issues, the following summary comments were made:-

‘The Chairman was experienced and handled the meeting competently, ensuring that issues were fully discussed and explored.’

4.1 Comments made were as follows:-

- The meeting did not appear on the meetings board.
  - The three minutes allowed to speakers for and against each application was fully enforced by the Chairman, which at times seemed unfortunate as some speakers still appeared to have points to make.
  - Conversely, no time constraints appeared to apply to Committee Members and the debating process appeared leisurely, with brevity not coming easily to most.
- 4.2 The omission of the meetings information was an error and has been drawn to the attention of staff.
- 4.3 The three minute period for public participation is that used by most councils when dealing with planning applications and, with good preparation, most speakers manage to get their key points across. The comment about the length of committee debates is not new, but it does seem to be the nature of the Council's Planning Development Control Committee that, at many meetings, it averages about one application per hour.
- 4.4 Training and analysis has been undertaken in recent years, with the aim of shortening debates, but with limited success. Whilst accepting that the determination of planning applications is a very important function, this matter will be raised again with relevant Members, to investigate once more whether proceedings could be made more concise, without sacrificing the quality of decision.



# Winchester City Council

## STANDARDS COMMITTEE - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MONITORING MEETINGS

**(Please circle the best description)**

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

Excellent / Good / Average / Poor / Very Poor

Further  
 Comments.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

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

Completely / Quite well / 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 / Very Poor

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

Yes / No

Further  
 comments.....

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

Completely / Quite well / 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 well / 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 well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....

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- 9. How well could both the public speakers and the Councillors be heard?

Completely / Quite well / 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 well was this fact communicated to the public?

Completely / Quite well / 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 well was it made clear what the actual interest was (i.e. personal or personal and prejudicial and a brief mention of the circumstances)?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further comments.....  
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13. Did any Member leave the room after declaring an interest of either type, perhaps after making a statement under Public Participation as permitted by the Code of Conduct?

Yes / No

Further  
comments.....  
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14. 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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15. 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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16. How clearly did you understand the actual decision reached by the meeting on each item?

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

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

Completely / Quite well / Partly / Not at all

Further  
comments.....  
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**OTHER COMMENTS:**

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