

EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE STANDARDS BOARD

Date: 18 November 2009

Venue: East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Time: 7.30 pm

Present: Graham Blagden (Chairman)

East Northamptonshire Councillors: Glenvil Greenwood- Smith Brian Northall
Barbara Jenney

Town and Parish Councillors: Don Campbell Sue North
Prudence Goss Arthur Whittaker

Independent Members: Lance Quantrill

Also attended: Graham Matthews
(Observer – see minute 241)

PART A ITEMS

241. WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Arthur Whittaker (Yarwell Parish Council) to his first meeting of the Board and Mr Graham Matthews who attended the meeting as an observer and, subject to the approval of the full Council, would be an Independent Member of the Standards Board at the next meeting. The Board noted that the Chairman had expressed his thanks to Councillor John Denning for his eight years service as a Parish Council representative on the Board at full Council (minute 214 refers), and this had been endorsed by the Chairman of the Council.

242. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2009 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

243. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Roger Powell and Ms Hilary Daniels sent apologies.

244. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr Lance Quantrill declared a personal interest in Appendix A of item 7 as he knew the Councillor involved in the case considered by the adjudication panel report.

245. ACTIVITY REPORT OF MONITORING OFFICER

The Board received a report on the ethical matters dealt with by the Monitoring Officer since the last meeting and noted the volume and nature of activity over the period. The Board noted that the quarterly return had been submitted.

It was noted that since the last meeting, 23 enquiries had been recorded from Parish and Town Council Clerks and Councillors, District Councillors and the general public. Two refresher sessions on the Code of Conduct had been held at Raunds and Rushden and all local Councillors (Town, Parish and District) would be invited to a session on the Code of Conduct on Monday 8 February. The training held in September for existing Standards Board Members would be repeated for the new Parish Council representative and Independent Member before the next meeting and, time allowing, a new training DVD on local assessment of complaints would be shown to all Board Members after the next meeting.

The Monitoring Officer updated the Board on the focus on community engagement that was being facilitated by the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill. It was noted that the issues which would particularly impact on the Council's Constitution included, a new duty to promote understanding of the Council's democratic arrangements and how the public can be involved, and the requirement to provide an online petition facility.

The Board noted that the advice given by the Monitoring Officer and Standards for England with regard to discussions on the Manor Park Leisure Centre project and associated parish meeting had been the subject of letters and articles in the local press. Members discussed the confusion amongst residents that the coverage may have given rise to. The Monitoring Officer's suggestion that an article be placed in the Nene Valley News explaining the role of the Code of Conduct and the issue of declarations of interest was endorsed. It was also noted that the Monitoring Officer would be writing to Standards for England to express the concern of some Councillors at the way the situation had been reported.

246. THE RELEVANT AUTHORITIES (STANDARDS COMMITTEES) (DISPENSATIONS) REGULATIONS 2002

No requests for dispensations had been received.

247. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

The Board considered a summary of learning and ideas noted by the delegates to the 2009 Standards for England Assembly which had been held in October and attended by Councillor Glenvil Greenwood-Smith (District Councillor), Ms Hilary Daniels (Independent Member), Mr Lance Quantrill (Independent Member), and the Monitoring Officer.

The key learning points highlighted in the report were considered and gave rise to discussion on how proactive the Board should be in promoting its work and outcomes. It was suggested that Independent Members attend town and parish council meetings or the Council's local meetings with Parish Councils in order to engage with Town and Parish Councillors in a positive way. The aim would be to educate Councillors and clerks in the role of the Standards Board through a short

presentation and help to develop a more positive perception of the Board. It was hoped that this would lead to a greater appreciation of the value of Standards; the importance of good judgement; and the impartial role of the Independent Members, in order to redress the negative perception and distrust of the Board. A programme of visits could be built up, focussing initially on Councils where the clerk or Council had requested advice from the Monitoring Officer.

The value of local newsletters and publications as a tool for educating members of the public and Councils was also considered and it was suggested the article Councillor Prudence Goss had written for the Thrapston newsletter be circulated for publication in other parish newsletters. The value of attending the 2010 Conference was considered in the light of the likely change to national policy if there were to be a change of Government. It was agreed that this would be revisited after the general election.

The delegates expressed the view that their impression from attending the Conference was that the East Northamptonshire Standards Board was doing well and that across the country there had been an improvement in standards.

248. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The future work programme of the Board was reviewed and suggestions for future activities were discussed.

It was agreed that a meeting between the Chairman and the Leader of the Council and the possible attendance of the Chairman at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be pursued. It was noted that there were important links with other Committees, such as the Scrutiny Committee and the Audit and Risk Management Committee, through ethical framework and governance issues.

The Board considered how to facilitate good corporate governance amongst Town and Parish Councils, and the previous discussions on the attendance of Independent Members and Town and Parish Council meetings were referred to. The Monitoring Officer reported that a joint training session was being held with the National Association of Local Councils for parish clerks on procedure.

Regarding advertising the work of the Board and making it more accessible to members of the public and Parish and Town Councils and clerks, the launch of the new website in January 2010 was considered. It was agreed that the new website should include a specific page on the Standards Board to include information on the function of the Board, membership, the Code, how to complain, the role of the different members, the definition of 'Independent' and so on. The draft pages would be brought to the next meeting of the Board for consideration.

The importance of sharing the results of Assessment Sub-Committees with the rest of the Board as far as practicable to help with training and development was noted. A future report on the effectiveness and impact of the whistle-blowing policy was also discussed.

The Board considered how to review partnership working to ensure appropriate transparency and good governance, particularly as partner bodies might not be subject to professional Codes of Conduct. It was agreed that this was a difficult issue to approach and the Board would return to it in the future.

A future Town and Parish Council Audit was considered to help the Board understand where issues had arisen and which Councils to target for more training. This was considered particularly important as there was a high turnover of Parish Councillors and a number of new clerks had recently started. It was agreed that this would be revisited in a few months time after the training for clerks and Councillors planned for the New Year.

249. CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The Monitoring Officer reported that a working party had been set up to review the Constitution and the proposed changes would be brought to the Standards Board for consideration in February. It was noted that a number of changes would need to be made earlier than this. These included minor changes to the Planning Policy Committee and Licensing and Taxi Panels' Terms of Reference, a new protocol for involving Members in pre-application discussion for major planning applications, and changes to the protocol on Member access to confidential papers and remaining in meetings during the discussion of confidential items if not a member of the Committee. These early alterations would be considered by the Scrutiny and Policy and Resources Committees in December and submitted to the full Council for adoption in January.

250. STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND RECENT CASES

It was suggested that it would be useful for the Board to discuss the results of appeals tribunals at each meeting. The Chairman drew the Board's attention to the Adjudication Panel for England Appeals Tribunal Decision report which was attached as appendix A to agenda item 7. The report was discussed in detail and Members of the Board offered their views on how the complaint should have been dealt with.

Chairman