

# **EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE STANDARDS BOARD**

**Date:** 3 February 2010

**Venue:** East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

**Time:** 7.30 pm

**Present:** Graham Blagden (Chairman)

**East Northamptonshire Councillors:** Glenvil Greenwood- Smith Barbara Jenney

**Town and Parish Councillors:** Prudence Goss Arthur Whittaker

**Independent Members:** Hilary Daniels Graham Matthews  
Lance Quantrill

## **PART A ITEMS**

### **340. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2010 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

### **341. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Councillors Brian Northall, Roger Powell, Sue North and Don Campbell, and Keith Osborne, Deputy Monitoring Officer, sent their apologies. The Chairman welcomed Graham Matthews to his first meeting of the Board.

### **342. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No interests were declared.

### **343. ACTIVITY REPORT OF THE 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.

The Board noted that local Council Clerks had been invited to a Parish Update evening on 21 January hosted by the Council and Ncalc, which included feedback from the internal auditors, information on the power of wellbeing, meeting procedures, declaring interests and an opportunity to ask the experts on the panel. Training for new members of the Standards Board took place on 16 December 2009 and a training session for Town and Parish Councillors on the Code of Conduct, aimed at new Councillors and those who would like a refresher session, would be

held at East Northampton Council on 8 February. It was reported that so far fifteen councillors had expressed interest in attending.

The Monitoring Officer reported that potential conflicts of interest and vacancies at Parish Council level were a particular concern to some clerks. It was also noted that five Parish Councillors had not returned their initial Declaration of Interest forms, which was cause for concern as technically this would constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct. The Board was concerned that some councillors were possibly intentionally failing to return their initial Declaration and considered how to convince the councillors of the necessity of doing so. The Board commented that there was no formal mechanism for it to take the issue up formally without the Monitoring Officer submitting a complaint, which would disqualify her from giving advice through the assessment, investigation and hearing stages. The Monitoring Officer agreed to ask Standards for England for advice on how this difficulty had been overcome elsewhere, and to mention the Board's concerns in a reminder letter to the councillors and Councils involved.

The Board noted that no news of progress on the revised Code of Conduct had been received and it seemed unlikely that it would be implemented before the General Election.

The Chairman reported back to the Board on his meeting with the Leader and Deputy Leader. The Chairman felt it had been a positive meeting and reported that the Leader had expressed the view that, regardless of any change of national government, a form of Standards Board was needed and he respected the need for an independent view. The Leader and Deputy Leader had raised concerns about Independent Members visiting Town and Parish Councils. This issue was discussed in depth. The Board confirmed its intention for such visits to be a mechanism for raising the profile of the Board, good governance and high ethical standards. It was noted that visits would always be made with the agreement of the clerk and Chairman. The Board asked the Monitoring Officer to let the Town and Parish Councils know to expect visits in the future and to ask the Councils to let her know if any wished to volunteer for an early visit. The Monitoring Officer agreed to draft a short presentation for use at such visits and circulate it to the Independent Members for comment.

#### **344. CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES RELATING TO THE STANDARDS BOARD**

The Board considered changes to its Terms of Reference proposed by the Constitution Review Group. The Group proposed to include requirements for independent members of the Board to not be a current member of a political party and to take up residence within 20 miles of the district within six months of taking up the post of independent member. It was also proposed to amend the quorum rules from any four members, to four members to include at least one District Councillor, Town or Parish Councillor and an Independent Member. The Board accepted these proposals.

The Constitution Review Group had also proposed that the recruitment panel for Independent Members, which had previously informally consisted of the Monitoring Officer, a District Councillor and the Chairman of the Board, be formalised as a panel in which District Councillors had a majority. The Group had felt that this would reinforce District Councillors' confidence in the Board. The Board disagreed strongly with this proposal and asked that the following concerns be communicated to Council when the amendments were proposed:

- The proposal contradicted the principle of the Standards Board not being a political body.
- The perception of the public and need to be independent – it might be perceived that the District Councillors wished to have influence over the Board.
- If the proposal was based on the issue of confidence in the Board, confidence of Parish and Town Councillors in the Board, as well as the public, should have been taken into account.
- If one member of the recruitment panel had concerns about a candidate then the other members of the Panel would take their views very seriously, therefore there would be no need for a majority of District Councillors.

The Board also suggested some minor alterations to update the Terms of Reference and requested clarification from the Monitoring Officer on the meaning of the requirement for Independent Members not to be a Councillor or Officer of 'any other body having a Standards Committee'. It was agreed that the Board would consider all areas of the Constitution concerning the Standards Board at the next meeting.

## **PART B ITEMS**

### **345. ANNUAL REPORT 2009**

Members considered a draft Annual Report, which had been prepared by the Chairman, detailing the activity of the Board during 2009 and agreed that, with the amendments suggested by the Board, the report be approved and presented to the Council and, thereafter, publicised widely (including on the Council's website, and circulated to Town and Parish Councils and the Press).

#### **R.11 RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:**

That the Council receive the Standards Board's 2009 Annual Report as set out at pages 488 to 491.

**Chairman**