

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Monday, 10th January, 2011 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 4, The Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

The Bishop of Dudley (Independent Chairman)
Councillors Burston, J.R. Davies, Hanif, Kettle and Mrs. P. Martin.

Officers:-

The Director of Corporate Resources (Monitoring Officer), Democratic Services Manager (Directorate of Corporate Resources) and the Head of Marketing and Communications (Chief Executive's Directorate).

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, the Committee observed a moment of silence in memory of the victims of a recent shooting attack, which had taken place at an open-invitation meeting in Tucson, Arizona, arranged by a United States Congressman on behalf of her constituents.

16 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillor Ms. Partridge, Mrs. V. Ainsworth and Father A. Williams.

17 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No member made a Declaration of Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in respect of any matter to be considered at this meeting.

18 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13th October, 2010, be approved as a correct record and signed.

19 **CHANGE IN ORDER OF BUSINESS**

RESOLVED

That, pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 13(c), Agenda Item Nos. 7 and 8 be considered as the next items of business.

20

SOCIAL NETWORKING POLICY

A report of the Head of Marketing and Communications was submitted on the implementation of the Council's Social Networking Policy, which was subject to ongoing consultation.

The policy recognised the significant growth and widespread use of social media, presenting opportunities to communicate with a range of diverse audiences in a new and innovative manner. However, it was recognised that this needed to be effectively balanced with the Council's duties and responsibilities, legal obligations and other objectives in the Council Plan. The policy covered the use of applications by Members and Council employees, partners and other third parties (including contractors) on behalf of the Council.

The Committee undertook a detailed discussion on the perceived advantages and potential problems relating to the use of social networking and associated electronic applications. In particular, concern was expressed that robust safeguards needed to be in place to prevent and deal with instances of abuse and misuse of computer systems for personal or non-Council related activities. A strong view was expressed that employees should only be given access to such systems where there was a clear benefit to the Council in doing so. Concerns were also expressed regarding the potential cost implications in view of the present financial constraints faced by the Council.

The Committee suggested that senior managers should consider each case cautiously, on their individual merits, and grant access to employees only where there were identified business advantages. Senior managers could consider granting approval to employees for a short trial period and adopt a process for monitoring and review to assess the effectiveness after the trial period.

The Committee also recognised the benefits of the proportional approach taken to date by the Council in terms of promotional activity, communication and the potential to deal with difficult situations by the instant provision of timely, relevant and accurate information.

The Monitoring Officer reported that processes were in place to ensure that authorised employees could only gain access to systems following the approval of the relevant senior manager. Robust criteria would be followed prior to such access being granted and any abuse would be dealt with in accordance with the Council's Employee Improvement and Disciplinary policies.

It was suggested that officers consider the inclusion of a focussed section in the Social Networking Policy on the implications for Members, with appropriate links being made to the Members' Code of Conduct. A briefing note would be circulated in due course.

The Council's corporate Marketing and Communications Team was holding social media workshops to increase awareness amongst employees. An awareness raising session would also be held for Members prior to the meeting of the Council on 28th February, 2011.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the issues referred to above, the report be noted and that officers consider the concerns and issues expressed by the Committee in the development and implementation of the Social Networking Policy.

21

STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND CASE REVIEW

The Committee considered a report of the Monitoring Officer on the details of the Standards for England Case Review for 2010. The attention of the Committee was drawn to a number of cases of specific interest.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

22

FUTURE OF THE LOCAL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the progress concerning the Government's intention to abolish the Standards Regime.

The Monitoring Officer reported on the potential implications of the Localism Bill, currently before Parliament. It was likely that Standards for England would cease to investigate complaints in late 2011 and be formally abolished early in 2012. Transitional arrangements would be put into place to deal with any cases that had not been concluded when the framework ceased to operate. The provisions in the Localism Bill would also permit local authorities to adopt local Codes of Conduct and establish local Standards Committees on a discretionary basis.

The Committee noted that further reports on the Council's future governance arrangements would be submitted to the Cabinet and Council in due course as the Localism Bill progressed through the Parliamentary process. The Chairman and Members of the Standards Committee would be kept fully informed and consulted on future developments with a view to making any recommendations as appropriate.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the Annual Review and Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2009/10.

The Committee noted the relevant sections of the report concerning local councillor allowances and the Standards Framework. The Committee on Standards in Public Life had also dealt extensively with the issue of Members' of Parliament (MP) expenses during 2009/10.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.30 p.m.

CHAIRMAN