

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 13th October, 2010 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, Mrs. Martin and Ms. Partridge;
Father A. Williams.

Officers:-

The Director of Corporate Resources, the Interim Assistant Director Legal and Democratic Services and Mr. J. Jablonski (Directorate of Law, Property and Human Resources).

8 WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed those present to the meeting, in particular Councillor Hanif on the occasion of his first attendance as a Member of the Committee.

9 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Mrs. V. Ainsworth.

10 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.

11 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22nd June, 2010, be approved as a correct record and signed.

12 CONFIDENTIAL REPORTING POLICY

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the monitoring of the operation of the Council's Confidential Reporting Policy.

The Monitoring Officer in his presentation of the content of the report and Appendix 1 to the report submitted, which was a copy of the Policy with proposed amendments, referred in particular to the addition to Section 7 of the Policy in relation to linkages to Safeguarding Children Procedures.

Arising from the presentation given Members commented on various procedural matters in relation to the Code and in response to a question asked the Monitoring Officer reported that should an employee approach a Councillor regarding the code the employee should be advised that, if they did not wish to refer the matter to their usual managers, they should refer the matter to the Chief Executive or Monitoring Officer.

A query was also raised regarding reference to breaches in respect of equality and diversity issues and it was agreed that specific reference to these issues should be included in the Policy.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report, and Appendix to the report, submitted on the outcome of the recent monitoring of the Confidential Reporting Policy, be noted, in particular that Section 7 of the Policy now contained linkages to Safeguarding Children Procedures, and that, in the light of the comments made at the meeting, the Monitoring Officer be authorised to update paragraph 2.2 of the Policy by the addition in the first bullet point in that paragraph of the words “and equality and diversity issues”.

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ANNUAL REPORT: MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the Annual Report on the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct.

Arising from the presentation and consideration of the content of the report submitted, it was

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report submitted, on the Annual Report on the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct, be noted, with particular reference to the action points set out in paragraphs 12 to 14 of the report, and that the report be referred to the Council for approval.

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CODE OF CONDUCT FOR EMPLOYEES

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the current position concerning the Code of Conduct for Employees, a copy of which was attached as Appendix 1 to the report submitted.

Arising from the presentation of the content of the report, and Appendix to the report, submitted Members made a number of comments relating to performance and communication issues with particular reference to:-

- The need for a dedicated telephone line for use by Elected Members when contacting the Council.
- Concerns raised about blockages in communication especially in the late afternoons and in the obtaining of information.
- The need for random sampling among employees of each Directorate to ascertain the extent of their knowledge/awareness of the code.
- That, in response to a point made, Members were asked to raise any perceived failures in the manner in which officers conducted themselves or in the level of performance given direct with the relevant Assistant Director or Director, if appropriate, whilst informal complaints should be directed to the appropriate Line Manager.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report, and Appendix to the report, submitted on the current position concerning the Code of Conduct for Employees, be noted and that the Monitoring Officer be requested to arrange for random sampling of employees in each Directorate to ascertain their knowledge/awareness of the Code.
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be requested to email a questionnaire to all Elected Members of the Council, arising from the concerns expressed at the meeting by some Members, about blockages in communication, including in the obtaining of information, when contacting the Council and when using Dudley Council Plus, with a report to Corporate Board and to a future meeting of this Committee with the findings.

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UPDATE FROM THE MONITORING OFFICER

A paper was circulated at the meeting by the Monitoring Officer on recent announcements made by Ministers concerning proposed changes to the way in which the conduct of elected Members would be dealt with in future.

Indications were given that the forthcoming Localism Bill would abolish the current centrally prescribed code of conduct for Members, Local Standards Committees and the Standards Board for England .

The new legislation, it was further indicated, would make certain acts by Members a criminal offence, require Councillors to register certain personal interests in a publicly available register, give the public greater confidence to challenge poor local services through the ballot box and for the first time legally compel local authorities to implement the findings of the Local Government Ombudsman.

RESOLVED

That the information as circulated at the meeting on recent announcements from Ministers regarding change proposals to current arrangements and future proposals to hold Elected Members to account be noted and that the Monitoring Officer be requested to submit a report to a future meeting of this Committee when details contained in the Localism Bill were available.

The meeting ended at 7.10 p.m.

CHAIRMAN