

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Monday, 18th December, 2006, at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 4 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

The Bishop of Dudley (Independent Chairman)
Councillors Mrs Dunn, Male, Ms Partridge and Tyler; Miss L. Smith

OFFICERS

The Director of Law and Property and Mr. J Jablonski (Directorate of Law and Property)

13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ms Craigie and Fraser-MacNamara.

14 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.

15 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 25th September, 2006, be approved as a correct record and signed.

16 COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE – PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONDUCT IN PUBLIC LIFE: 2006 NATIONAL SURVEY

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted on the outcome of the National Survey on Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2006. The Executive Summary of the report commissioned by the Graham Committee on Standards in Public Life (formerly known as the Nolan Committee) was attached as Appendix 1 to the report submitted.

The Monitoring Officer in his introduction of the report, and Appendix to the report submitted, referred to the findings regarding the percentage of people who would trust people in public life to tell the truth in particular the figures for senior managers in local councils and local councillors which were 36% and 43% respectively. At a local level the professional groups with the highest creditability ratings were local police officers (77%), head teachers in schools (84%) and family doctors (93%).

Arising from the survey the Graham Committee drew various conclusions, as set out in paragraph 4 of the report submitted, including those to the effect that the integrity of those who hold public office matters to the public and that truthfulness was highly prized. Also that, whilst only a minority were confident that the authorities would generally uncover wrongdoing or that they would punish those in public office who were caught wrongdoing, four out of five said that they had confidence in the ability of the media to uncover wrongdoing by people in public office. This might explain why a majority also considered that local councillors and senior public officials must expect at least some media scrutiny in their private as well as public lives.

It was though stressed that this survey was about public perception as opposed to reality and that it was a national survey. However, in the absence of any local analysis it was considered safe to assume that the survey reflected local views. On that basis there was undeniably a reasonably high level of public scepticism about standards in public life, trustworthiness and accountability and the survey demonstrated that there was much to do to improve the public's perception of the overall standards of conduct of public office holders.

Ways in which the public's perception might be improved were also referred to and could include the canvassing of the views of various community groups including young people through the Youth Parliament and the involvement of the Citizens Panel. It was also considered that consideration of these matters should be included in a member training seminar as part of the Council's commitment to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

It was also noted that the report submitted would also be considered by the Council's Corporate Board and the Assistant Directors Group in view of the implications for senior managers.

Arising from the initial comments made it was considered that there were issues of perception and trust that needed to be addressed as it appeared that the greater the face to face contact with the person the greater the degree of trust expressed. This could also explain the difference in the findings in respect of trust between head teachers in schools and senior managers in local councils. A lack of knowledge by local people about who senior managers were was also indicated especially such managers below director level.

Members also accepted that local councillors and senior public officials must accept at least some media scrutiny in their private as well as public lives but considered that this should not extend to their families.

The ways in which the conclusions drawn from the survey might be addressed was also considered and the suggestions referred to in the initial comments made were endorsed.

Other suggestions made related to the need for the Council to promote itself and make the work of Councillors and Officers more visible by:-

- increased use of member websites
- the use of the annual Local Democracy Week, held in October, to raise awareness
- additional publicity in connection with meetings held in localities, for example Partners and Communities Together and Tenants and Residents Association meetings
- the use of all forms of local media and existing publications such as Dudley Matters and related Directorate publications
- reference to work undertaken in other local authorities; and
- consideration of recent publicity on the knowledge of the public of leading Members of the Council

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report, and Appendix 1 to the report, submitted on the outcome of the National Survey on Public Attitudes towards Conduct in Public Life commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2006, be noted.
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be requested to arrange for the inclusion of the report in a member training seminar as part of the Council's commitment to the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct and that further consideration be given to the various suggestions made at this meeting, as outlined above, including the raising of questions with the Citizens Panel, and as indicated in paragraph 11 of the report submitted relating to the Youth Parliament, at that seminar, together with views expressed arising from consideration of the report by Corporate Board and the Assistant Directors Group.

The meeting ended at 6.45 p.m.

CHAIRMAN