

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

**Held on Tuesday, 27 April 2010 at 2.15 pm in
Room 217, Breckland Business Centre, Dereham NR19 1FD**

PRESENT

Mr M.D. Eveling JP

Mrs J. Jenkins (Chairman)

Mrs S.M. Matthews

Mrs M. Oechsle JP

Mr B.D Rayner

Mr G. Ridgway

Mr F.J. Sharpe

Mr M. Whittley

In Attendance

Susan Allen

Dominic Chessum

John Chinnery

Diana Dring

Helen McAleer

- Standards Officer

- Marketing & Communications Officer

- Solicitor & Standards Consultant

- Committee Officer

- Senior Committee Officer

Action By

23/10 MINUTES

Subject to an amendment to the second line of page 2 of the minutes to clarify that it was the Chairman's term as Independent Member that was reaching a conclusion, the minutes of the meeting of 15 March were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

24/10 APOLOGIES

No apologies were received

25/10 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

26/10 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

27/10 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING

None.

28/10 TRAINING PROGRAMME

The Chairman asked if there was any information on training for Parish Councillors or on proposals for joint training with other Local Authorities. She acknowledged that most councillors had been in place for two thirds of their term and that it might be better to introduce a new programme after the local elections in 2011.

The Standards Officer felt that it was difficult to start planning before details of the new Code of Conduct were available.

Action By

The Solicitor suggested that both District and Town and Parish Councillors needed reminding of the requirements of the Code, as even experienced Councillors could forget what it said. It was suggested that briefings, rather than formal training sessions could be arranged and should include examples of what could happen if Councillors did not adhere to the Code. The Standards Board for England had provided some examples on their website and other useful information was provided through Town & Parish Council's Direct.

Information could also be provided through the new Media Strategy, Members Bulletin and Town & Parish Council newsletter.

The Solicitor asked Members if they were interested in taking part in the Council's Personal Development Plans, which would identify their training needs. They would then be invited to join training sessions on a variety of topics including word-processing, chairing meetings, communication skills, dealing with media, etc. All Members expressed an interest in this and were advised that the Member Training Officers would be in touch with a questionnaire for them to complete prior to an invitation to take part in training.

Annalisa
Graziano,
Leanne
Neave

In response to questions about the complaints process the Solicitor explained that the process was totally confidential. A summary of the complaint was sent to the person about whom the complaint had been made, but no response was expected. The information remained confidential so that if no Breach of the Code was identified, it did not become public. However if the complaint did progress to a full hearing this was usually heard in open session.

There was concern that in some instances, others were aware that a complaint had been made, but did not get informed of the outcome. The Solicitor said that it was up to the individuals involved who they notified. Some Members did request that the result was made public and in such instances, notices were placed in the local press.

29/10 PARISH NEWSLETTER

The Standards Officer reported that she was still working on the Parish Newsletter and hoped to have it ready for distribution in May.

It was suggested that a piece about Village Greens and other items from the Standards for England website should be included, such as information about Trustees and Charitable Institutions.

On completion the Parish Newsletter would be distributed to Standards Committee Members and all Town and Parish Councillors. The Standards Officer would also look into making a copy available on the Breckland website.

30/10 MEETINGS ROTA

The Solicitor invited members to notify him or the Standards Officer of any Council meetings they might wish to attend and then the Chairman of the meeting would be informed, as a matter of courtesy. Members would be expected to wear their identity badges at such meetings.

Action By

It was agreed that rather than a formal attendance programme, Members would make arrangements to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis. The Chairman was keen for Members to attend all the different types of meetings.

31/10 JOINT MEETING WITH EXECUTIVE BOARD

It was felt that attending the Executive Board meeting had been useful, particularly in breaking down any misconceptions about the role of the Standards Committee. A Member commented that it had been time well spent and the Chairman agreed and said that future invitations might follow.

The Solicitor pointed out that one of the positive outcomes of the joint meeting was that the Standards Committee had been asked for comments on the Social Media policy.

32/10 NEW WEBSITE AND MEDIA STRATEGY

The Marketing and Communications Officer gave a report on the guidance to staff using Social Media networks.

He said that Social Media was becoming one of the dominant forms of communication and was a good way of keeping in touch with constituents; useful for consultation purposes, gathering information and cross constituency working. It could be used as an additional tool rather than a replacement for other methods.

Social Media helped to engage with people on a number of levels, particularly groups that were currently left out such as young people or the retired.

There were numerous examples of Councillors already using Social Media but it was important that where people were identified as Councillors they must follow the Code of Conduct as the same standards would apply.

There would be two levels of Council sites: those set up by individuals for personal use and the Council site where certain messages could appear but with restricted access.

Use of Breckland Council computers by Councillors was governed by the terms of use for internet access, which all Members had signed. Use of the equipment for personal or political reasons was restricted.

Members felt there was a danger of undermining the Council's ICT policy by using the Social Media sites and that a change in the policy would be needed to enable Councillors to use the Council's equipment. The Marketing and Communications Officer said that he would look into this.

The Marketing and Communications Officer pointed out that as soon as a message was posted on a Social Media site it no longer belonged to the sender but became the property of the company running the site.

Dominic
Chessum

Action By

It was intended that the Breckland Social site and new website would be launched at the same time and both would be operational by 31 August 2010. The Social site would be manned during working hours; otherwise messages would be left so that customers were informed that their matter would be dealt with during office hours.

The Solicitor referred Members to the Blogging Quick Guide, produced by Standards for England. The IDeA guide (pages 17/18) provided advice about how the legal difficulties and pitfalls could be avoided and how the Members' Code of Conduct applied.

The need for training was raised and the Marketing and Communications Officer said that he had provided workshops to businesses which had been well received and that a programme of Workshops for officers was being rolled out in June/July. It was felt that the training should be made available for Members and that examples of the pitfalls should be included in the training. Having 'buddy' groups to mentor/advise Members would be beneficial.

The Standards Officer suggested that part of the Workshop should involve Standards training, particularly in relation to how the Code of Conduct applied to Councillors using Social Media sites.

The Marketing and Communications Officer informed Members that the Council's Social site would be monitored but this would only screen information in the public domain. It was not possible to screen content before it was posted and therefore rigorous training would be given to staff to emphasise the fact that there was no return once a message was sent.

The Solicitor was concerned about the use of the Council's equipment and potential problems of liability for the Council. He suggested that Councillors should be advised to use a disclaimer and the Marketing and Communications Officer said that one could be designed for each individual site if Members wanted.

In conclusion it was suggested that the following areas needed to be addressed:

- (1) Clarification of the Terms and Conditions of use of the Council's computer equipment by Councillors for Social Media communication.
- (2) Investigation of the inclusion of a disclaimer on each individual's Social Media sites.
- (3) Standards training, emphasising that the Code of Conduct applied when individuals were representing the Council and/or commenting in their capacity as a Councillor when using Social Media sites.

The Chairman thanked the Marketing and Communications Officer for his presentation.

Dominic
Chessum

Action By

33/10 CONSTITUTION

The Solicitor reported that there had been some relatively small changes made to the Constitution such as updating titles and grammatical corrections. If there had been any major changes of principal they would have been referred to the Standards Committee.

There was an addition to the Standards Committee's powers concerning Appeals for Politically Restricted Posts. Previously the Committee's involvement depended on the level of salary for the post but it would now depend on the type of job. If an Officer found his post has been assessed as politically restricted he could appeal.

Other amendments related to:

- (1) items that changed regularly, such as portfolios, which would now be listed separately;
- (2) additional wording from the relevant statute being added to the Overview and Scrutiny information; and
- (3) in relation to Standing Orders, the specific number of members on Committees had been removed to allow for future changes.

34/10 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting on 1 June 2010 were noted.

The meeting closed at 3.50 pm

CHAIRMAN