

**BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the**

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**Held on Tuesday, 2 December 2008 at 2.15 pm in  
Norfolk Room, Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham**

**PRESENT**

Mrs J. Jenkins (Chairman)	Mr B.D Rayner
Mr D.S. Myers	Mr G. Ridgway
Mrs M. Oechsle JP	Mr M. Whittley

**Also Present**

Lady Fisher

**In Attendance**

Susan Allen	- Standards Officer
John Chinnery	- Solicitor & Standards Consultant
Elaine Wilkes	- Senior Member Services Officer

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**59/08 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**60/08 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Messrs. M. Eveling, F. Sharpe and D. Williams.

**61/08 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING**

Lady Fisher, Executive Member for Governance was in attendance.

**62/08 SCARNING PARISH COUNCIL - APPLICATION FOR  
DISPENSATION (AGENDA ITEM 6)**

**RESOLVED** that a dispensation be granted until the end of May 2011 to Mr. John McSkimming of Scarning Parish Council to enable him to speak and vote on any matters relating to Former Highway Surveyor's land at Daffy Green and the Scarning Fuel Allotment Charity.

**63/08 FEEDBACK FROM STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE (AGENDA ITEM 7)**

Mr. Ridgway reported on his attendance as a delegate at the recent annual conference of the Standards Board for England and stated that he felt it was an important element from the perspective of training. He found it very helpful in the context of networking generally, as well as being informed of national issues and having the opportunity to attend workshops.

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Mr. Ridgway said the conference had provided a more formal understanding of standards issues and the new regulations. It had highlighted the narrow legal framework within which the Standards Board and standards committees operated and helped to illustrate the scope of committees in the maintenance of standards of conduct.

Mr. Ridgway urged that all members of the committee should take turns in attending the annual conference.

A particular point of interest, which had been noted at the last meeting, related to the issue of communications and raising the profile of the committee and its work. In this regard, it was recognised that this was an ongoing area of work. Mr. Ridgway had noted from the discussions at the conference that there were wide variances of activity between standards committees in the way they handled communications, whether good, bad or indifferent. Whatever was done, however, it was felt important to use appropriate media (newsletters, press articles, etc.) to foster good relations and a good understanding of the work of the standards committee amongst elected members, staff and the public.

The Executive Member suggested that members could make use of the internal Members' Information Bulletin to give feedback on conferences, seminars etc. attended, as well as the use of Newsletters and articles in Voice (which was already done). Members could also consider using a page on the website to give wider information and publicity. In this connection, it was felt the publication of minutes of committee meetings on the website was an important element of this and it was felt that these were well received by the public.

It was also felt important that the Council's Marketing and Communications Officers were kept up to date and were well-briefed on standards activities and the regulations under which the committee operated. The Standards Consultant confirmed that press releases were prepared jointly but he undertook to ensure they were briefed on the operation of the new regulations.

John Chinnery

On the question of attendance at future conferences, the Committee agreed that members should have the opportunity to take turns to attend and the Executive Member undertook to ensure a specific allocation to fund two places for this in future budgets.

Councillor Lady Fisher

Confirmation was sought at the last meeting as to whether the work of the Standards Committee was included in the Council's annual Governance Statement. The Standards Consultant explained that the production of the Governance Statement included a series of self-assessment questions on various areas, including that of standards. If all questions could be answered, then no specific mention was required to be made.

In reply to the question raised at the last meeting about the relationship of the Committee with external partners and partnerships, the Standards Consultant advised that the Committee did not have any jurisdiction over external people or partnerships as

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such. Breckland Council representatives on partnerships or other bodies would be required to operate under the Code of those bodies, if they had such; if not, then Breckland's Code of Conduct would apply to the Breckland representatives but not to the other external members.

**64/08 MONITORING ROLE OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**  
**(AGENDA ITEM 8)**

At its last meeting, the Committee felt it would be helpful to give some thought to defining the term "monitor" in the role and function of the Committee. This had arisen from the discussions on the amendments to the Council's Constitution.

By way of background, the Standards Consultant explained that the Local Government Act 2000 stated the functions of standards committees, as set out in the Council's Constitution, included:

- Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by councillors and co-opted members.
- Assisting the councillors and co-opted members to observe the Members' Code of Conduct;
- Advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct.
- Monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct.

Standards Board for England's guidance was that standards committees needed to monitor how effectively councils were adhering to the Code, types of complaints etc., and that they might produce overview reports highlighting issues.

The question was how this was interpreted and put into action.

In discussing the issue, members concurred with the view of the Chairman that their attendance at other meetings of the Council was to gain as wide a knowledge and understanding as possible of what the Council did and how it operated at all levels. It would be very disappointing if it was thought attendance was to see that people were not doing anything wrong, which was not the case. Furthermore, the members of the Committee were as equally bound by the Code of Conduct as other elected members and fully understood the responsibilities in matters of confidentiality.

In answer to a point made that it could be argued that members of the committee might invalidate their role by being in attendance at meetings if a matter was subsequently to arise to be considered by them, the Standards Consultant advised that this was not the case. On the contrary, experience had shown that it was beneficial for members to have witnessed events and that it was valuable for non-Breckland members to be knowledgeable of the various pressures on elected members at meetings.

It was desirable that there should be a more co-operative attitude to and understanding of the role of standards committees and, as mentioned in the previous item, better communications on the operation and work of the committee would help to dispel any

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misunderstandings. The more co-opted members got to know and engaged with elected members could only assist in this.

A member suggested the Committee should be seen as “a watchdog, not a bloodhound or lapdog”.

**65/08 STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND: INVESTIGATION REPORT - JANETTE HINES, BRIDGHAM PARISH COUNCIL (AGENDA ITEM 9)**

The Standards Consultant explained the background to this matter and the report was noted.

**66/08 CONSTITUTION: CHANGE TO STANDING ORDER 43.6 (AGENDA ITEM 10)**

The Standards Consultant reported that, as requested at the last meeting, the Standards Board for England had been asked whether any other authorities had raised the question of the status of co-opted members at meetings of a principal authority and whether the Board had issued any guidance on the matter. A reply had been received that morning which was to say that the Board could not comment other than on matters in connection with the work and regulation of standards committees.

In noting the change to Standing Order No. 43.6 from that originally considered by the Committee, a point was made that while this would be easier to operate, it nonetheless was contrary to the advice originally given by the Monitoring Officer.

The position was noted.

**67/08 NEXT MEETING**

The Committee was informed that the agenda for the next meeting would include the hearing of a matter referred by the Standards Board for England. The Ethical Standards Officer dealing with the case had requested an earlier start time for the meeting to facilitate her attendance.

In the circumstances, it was

**RESOLVED** that the next meeting on 13 January 2009 be held at the earlier time of 10.00 a.m., at a venue to be confirmed.

The meeting closed at 3.07 pm

CHAIRMAN