

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
Standards Committee
Meeting held at Headquarters, Shrewsbury
on Monday, 26 October 2009 at 5.15 pm**

Present

Members

Councillors Davies, Mason and Mellings and non-elected Independent Members, Mr Brereton (Vice-Chair) and Mr Tebbutt (Chair)

Officers

Chief Fire Officer, Corporate Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer

1 Election of Chair

It was proposed by Councillor Mellings and seconded by Councillor Mason

That non-elected Independent Member, Mr Tebbutt, be elected Chair of the Standards Committee to hold office for the ensuing year

There being no other nominations, on a vote, with all Members in favour, Mr Tebbutt was duly elected Chair.

2 Appointment of Vice-Chair

It was proposed by Councillor Mason and seconded by Councillor Davies

That non-elected Independent Member, Mr Brereton, be elected Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee to hold office for the ensuing year

There being no other nominations, on a vote, with all Members in favour, Mr Brereton was duly elected Vice-Chair.

3 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence had been received.

4 Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members that they should declare any personal and/or prejudicial interests at this point and that they should leave the meeting room before any item, in which they had a prejudicial interest, was discussed.

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Minutes

Members received the minutes of the last meeting of the Standards Committee, held on 2 March 2009.

It was proposed by Councillor Mellings, seconded by Councillor Mason and

Resolved that the minutes of the last meeting of the Standards Committee, held on 2 March 2009, be agreed and signed as a correct record

6 Public Questions

There were no questions, statements or petitions from members of the public.

7 Register of Members' Interests Form

This report asked the Committee to review the current Members' Register of Interests form and to consider and decide whether it wished to adopt a new form.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that the changes proposed were predominantly to reflect changes in the Code of Conduct. Specifically, there was now a section for declaring gifts and hospitality over the value of £25 received in the last three years and a section on what Members should do, if they wished to withhold sensitive information. The opportunity had also been taken to provide more detailed explanation on what must be included and additional space for the information required.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer confirmed that Members would not be required to complete the new form immediately but would need to do so, if a change in their details were to occur.

Members approved the new form but asked for the membership section on page 5 to be increased.

Subject to the above, it was proposed by Councillor Mellings, seconded by Councillor Mason and

Resolved that the Committee approve the new Members' Register of Interests form, attached at Appendix B to the report

8 Protocol on Gifts and Hospitality for Members

This report asked the Committee to review the Protocol on Gifts and Hospitality and to decide on any changes to be made.

The Deputy Monitoring Officer pointed out the proposed amendments to the Protocol; the first reflected a requirement in the new Code of Conduct; and the second, the decision by the Fire Authority that gifts and hospitality refused should be recorded. It was also proposed that a note be included regarding the cumulative value of gifts and hospitality, which was considered to be good practice. Finally, the report asked the Committee to consider whether the maximum value of £10 for a modest working lunch should be increased.

Members had a detailed discussion about the above issues and agreed the amendments proposed in the report and also that the maximum value for a working lunch be increased to £20 to reflect current costs.

In addition, they felt that the wording of the following in the Protocol was rather confusing and could be clearer:

- The first sentence in (b) on page 2 regarding 'commensurate benefit';
- 2 (a) (i) on page 3 regarding 'civic hospitality'; and
- 2 (a) (iii) on page 3 regarding 'cultural and entertainment events'.

They, therefore, asked officers to reword these sections to provide absolute clarity and to bring their proposals to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration.

It was proposed by Mr Brereton, seconded by Councillor Mason and

Resolved that the Committee agree that officers reword the sections referred to above and bring their proposals to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration

9 Dispensations

This report provided the Committee with details of the new rules for dispensations and updated the process for making dispensation applications.

Members agreed that the proposed dispensation request form and guidance were helpful. In response to a question regarding a sub-committee the Deputy Monitoring Officer said that it was advisable for the minimum membership to be three. This was the quorum for the Standards Committee itself, so there would be no advantage in establishing such a sub-committee.

It was proposed by Councillor Davies, seconded by Councillor Mellings and

Resolved that the Standards Committee:

- a) Approve the new dispensation application and guidance, attached at Appendix B to the report; and
- b) Agree that it not be necessary to establish a dispensations sub-committee

10 Joint Standards Committees

This report provided further information relating to Joint Standards Committees and set out issues and proposals for consideration by the Committee.

A wide-ranging discussion took place regarding the advantages and disadvantages of establishing a Joint Standards Committee. In principle Members were supportive of a joint approach, particularly as it would provide a larger pool of experience in dealing with Code of Conduct complaints. They did, however, have concerns about the possible dilution of transparency to the public and the benefits in relation to the costs. Furthermore, Telford & Wrekin Council officers currently provided legal, clerking and monitoring services to the Fire Authority but, if that were no longer the case, would that be an issue?

Members agreed that they needed further information, particularly in relation to costs, before they could make an informed decision or complete the checklist, attached at Appendix B of the report.

Councillor Mason felt that it would be useful for the Standards Committees of the Fire Authority and Telford & Wrekin Council to meet informally to discuss Members' thoughts on the issue. That said, if a Joint Standards Committee were to be established, he would be in favour of Model C.

Councillor Mason left the meeting at this point (6.15 pm).

Members agreed that Shropshire Council should also be approached to find out whether it would wish to be involved. If it did not, the Committee would still be interested in exploring a joint approach with Telford & Wrekin Council, adopting Model C, a Joint Standards Committee to carry out all functions of a Standards Committee granted by legislation.

Members then discussed timescales and agreed that it would be helpful for officers to prepare more detailed information, relating to structures, procedures and costings by January 2010. These would be brought to a meeting of the Standards Committee (a Special Meeting would be arranged for this purpose, if needs be) for consideration prior to any recommendations being made to the full Fire Authority.

It was proposed by Councillor Mellings, seconded by Mr Brereton and

Resolved that the Standards Committee:

- a) Recommend to the Fire Authority that it considers in principle establishing a Joint Standards Committee with Telford & Wrekin Council and Shropshire Council;
- b) Express a preference for Model C, a Joint Standards Committee to carry out all functions of a Standards Committee granted by legislation;
- c) Not set out the responses to the checklist, attached at Appendix B regarding the likely format for the Joint Standards Committee.; and
- d) Instruct the Monitoring Officer to prepare structures, procedures and costings for the Joint Standards Committee for the further consideration by the Standards Committee

11 Annual Report of the Standards Committee

This report advised of the work carried out by the Fire Authority's Standards Committee since October 2008.

In presenting the report the Deputy Monitoring Officer highlighted the questions raised in section 5 and asked the Committee for guidance.

Councillor Mellings asked for the Annual Report to be in the name of the Standards Committee and presented to the Fire Authority by Mr Tebbutt, as Chair of the Committee. Members concurred with this request and then went on to discuss the issues raised in section 5.

Members agreed that they did want to do more to promote standards but required guidance from officers as to how this could be done. They felt that it was not necessary for the Committee or its Chair to have discrete meetings with the Chair of the Fire Authority or the Chief Fire Officer, as both were available for discussions when required. It would, however, be useful for the Committee Chair to attend Fire Authority meetings to present the Committee's minutes, as this would give him the opportunity to liaise with all Members and senior officers. Members agreed that the Register of Members' Interests and gifts and hospitality entries should be placed on the Fire Authority's website but that Members should be given discretion as to whether their contact details were published.

It was proposed by Councillor Mellings, seconded by Mr Brereton and

Resolved that the Committee:

- a) Approve the draft version of the Annual Report of the Fire Authority's Standards Committee, subject to replacing 'Report of the Clerk and Monitoring Officer' with 'Report of the Standards Committee'; and

b) Agree:

- To do more to promote standards to Members and officers of the Authority and to the wider public with guidance from officers as to how this could be done;
- That the Chair of the Committee attend Fire Authority meetings to present the minutes and Annual Report of the Committee and discuss issues with Members and senior officers;
- To recommend to the Fire Authority that:
 - The Register of Members' Interests be placed on the Fire Authority website, subject to individual discretion regarding publication of their contact details; and
 - Details of gifts and hospitality declared by Members be placed on the Fire Authority website

12 Code of Conduct Training Update

This report provided the Committee with details of the Code of Conduct training provision for 2009/10.

The Chair commented that the recent training for Independent Members, provide by Telford & Wrekin Council officers had been extremely useful and probably the most practical session he had attended.

Resolved that the report be noted

13 Standards for England Annual Assembly

The Standards for England Annual Assembly of Standards Committees took place on 12 and 13 October 2009 at the International Conference Centre, Birmingham and was attended by the Chair of the Fire Authority's Standards Committee and its Corporate Services Manager.

The Committee Chair and Corporate Services Manager gave a brief overview of the issues considered at the Assembly, full details of which can be accessed via the following web link:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Eventpresentationsmaterials/>

The meeting closed at 6.55 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....