

**Minutes of the Meeting of
Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
Standards Committee
held at Brigade Headquarters, Shrewsbury
on Monday 16 April 2007 at 5.15 pm**

Present

Councillors Mrs Holyoak, Hussey, Mellings and Morgan (Vice-Chair) and non-elected Independent Members, Mr Tebbutt (Chair) and Mr Webb

1 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence had been received from Members.

Elaine Adams, Media Consultant to the Fire Authority, was to attend the meeting to discuss how the Committee might raise the profile of local authority standards and ethics with the public. Unfortunately, owing to prior commitments she was unable to attend and had tendered her apologies.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes

Members received the minutes of the Standards Committee meeting, held on 11 October 2006.

Resolved that the minutes of the Standards Committee meeting, held on 11 October 2006, be agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record

4 Public Questions

No questions, statements or petitions had been received from members of the public.

As agreed at the last meeting, the procedure for raising a public question has been set out on the Fire Authority's website and can be found at the following link:

<http://www.shropshirefire.gov.uk/Management/CFA/public-participation-at-meetings.htm>



5 Ethical Governance Toolkit

This report advised the Standards Committee of the contents and purpose of the Ethical Governance Toolkit and sought Members' views on whether the Fire Authority should be recommended to participate in any of its elements.

The Corporate Services Manager presented this report to the meeting and informed Members that the final paragraph of Section 6 of the report was out of date. The Audit Commission had now published the findings of the various assessments, which included governance arrangements, that had been undertaken in 2006 and Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority had scored 3 which is defined as consistently above minimum requirements, performing well.

Members discussed the elements of the Ethical Governance Toolkit. Councillor Hussey felt that the Light Touch Health Check would be best in terms of cost. Councillor Mellings and Mr Tebbutt felt that the Self-Assessment Survey would be better, as the cost was still reasonable but it would allow any problem areas to be identified. This would then enable the Fire Authority to set up their own workshops to address any issues. It was also felt that this option would involve the least onerous workload for officers and would have positive implications for the Use of Resources audit.

The Corporate Services Manager explained that whatever option the Committee recommended would need to go to the Fire Authority for agreement. The Treasurer would also need to be involved, as there was currently no provision in the budget for this work.

Councillor Hussey asked about the implications of the forthcoming elections and the possible change of Members of the Committee. Mr Tebbutt asked what the timescale was between the elections taking place and the decision about the Toolkit elements being made. The Corporate Services Manager was not aware of any deadline when the service would cease, so postponing the decision until after the elections should not create a problem.

Councillor Mellings proposed that the Fire Authority be recommended to participate in the Self Assessment Survey element of the Toolkit with the timing to be decided after the Fire Authority meeting on 13 June 2007. This was seconded by Councillor Morgan and it was

Resolved that Members note the report and recommend that the Fire Authority participate in the Self Assessment Survey element of the Ethical Governance Toolkit

6 Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

This report advised Members of the main issues discussed at the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees.



Mr Tebbutt had attended the Assembly with the Corporate Services Manager and commented that he felt that the event had grown to an unwieldy size. He felt that smaller regional events may be of more use.

Resolved that Members note the report

7 Standards Board Bulletin

The latest Bulletins (no. 31 – November 2006 and no. 32 – February 2007), issued by the Standards Board for England, were brought to Members for discussion, as previously agreed by the Committee. Copies of the Bulletin had been emailed to all Members (including the two Independent Members of the Standards Committee).

The Group Solicitor drew Members' attention to the item requesting volunteers for pilot schemes on page 8 of Bulletin no. 32. The Standards Board is seeking volunteers to work with them as pilots for the following topics: joint arrangements for standards committees; operating the local filter and developing the Standards Board's monitoring and auditing role. The Telford & Wrekin Council has volunteered and the Committee was asked to consider whether the Fire Authority should also volunteer.

Councillor Morgan felt that providing that the capacity of officers can accommodate it, the Committee should look to engage in this because of the benefits it would bring to the Fire Authority. The Corporate Services Manager felt that more information was needed from the Standards Board but that the Fire Authority could volunteer with the proviso that, should there be too much work involved, then it would withdraw. There was also the option to engage in joint working with the constituent authorities.

The Group Solicitor explained that the Fire Authority would be volunteering to take part as a pilot site for the operation of the local filter. This would mean that case scenarios and processes would be provided for the Committee to work through. More definitive information is, however, still needed. Councillor Mellings asked how many authorities have volunteered so far. The Group Solicitor believes that about 30 authorities have volunteered but he is not aware if there are any fire authorities in this number.

The Chief Fire Officer believed that this would be a good opportunity for the Committee to practice as it has not yet heard any cases. Councillor Morgan felt that this would fit well with the potential change of Members that could occur after the May elections and also that it was an excellent opportunity to demonstrate joint working.

The Committee agreed that the Fire Authority should volunteer with the proviso that the Authority reserves the right to withdraw, if it appeared, once more information was available from the Standards Board, that participation would be too onerous.

Resolved that Members note the contents of the bulletins



8 Ethical Standards Bulletin

The Winter 2006/07 edition of the Ethical Standards Bulletin, published by Telford & Wrekin Council, was brought to Members for discussion, as previously agreed by the Committee. A copy had been emailed to all Members (including the two Independent Members of the Standards Committee).

The Group Solicitor informed the Committee that the Bulletin had now been published. Mr Tebbutt commented that he had found it to be lively and interesting.

Resolved that Members note the content of the bulletin

9 Members' Allowances

At its meeting in December 2006 the Fire Authority agreed its 2007/08 Scheme for the Payment of Members' Allowances. One of the changes introduced relates specifically to allowances payable to Independent Members of its Standards Committee. Currently, the Scheme provides for an additional allowance of £50 for up to 4 hours and £100 for over 4 hours to be paid to the non-elected, Independent Members of the Fire Authority's Standards Committee, should they be required to determine locally any allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct (if they incur a financial loss or represent a small organisation, which would otherwise have to bear the cost). The Fire Authority has agreed with effect from 1 April 2007 to delete the words in brackets and insert instead 'subject to application by individuals'.

Resolved that Members note the changes to the Scheme for the Payment of Members' Allowances 2007/08

10 West Mercia Independent Members' Forum

The Fire Authority hosted a meeting of the West Mercia Independent Members' Forum on Friday, 26 January 2007 at the Shropshire Education and Conference Centre, Royal Shrewsbury Hospital, Shrewsbury. Patricia Hughes, Deputy Chair of the Standards Board for England, gave a talk about recent developments, including the White paper, and also about the workings of the Board itself. The Fire Authority's Clerk and Monitoring Officer, Corporate Services Manager and Management Support Officer were present to provide support throughout the meeting. Members received a copy of the draft minutes of the meeting.

The Corporate Services Manager reported that the talk by Patricia Hughes had been very useful and informative. Also the discussion on recruitment of independent members had been eye-opening.

Mr Tebbutt commented that the Independent Members' Forum was worthwhile and helpful. Councillor Morgan agreed that the Forum was useful



but that it needed to ensure that it maintained its independence for it to continue to be effective.

Resolved that Members note the contents of the draft minutes of the West Mercia Independent Members Forum meeting

11 Timetable of Meetings

Members received the timetable of Standards Committee meetings for 2007 and 2008, which was agreed by the Fire Authority at its meeting in December 2006.

Members agreed that the start time of future meetings should be 5.15 pm.

Resolved that Members note the dates of the Standards Committee meetings in their diaries

12 Revised Model Code of Conduct

12a Consultation on Revised Model Code of Conduct

On 22 January Communities and Local Government published a consultation paper seeking views on a draft new Model Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members, responses to which were required by 9 March 2007. This report summarised the more significant changes proposed and set out the Fire Authority's response to the consultation paper.

The Corporate Services Manager explained that matters have moved on considerably since this paper was originally written. Substantial changes have been made to the Revised Code of Conduct and it has gone before Parliament. The Code will be in place by 3 May 2007 and needs to be formally adopted by authorities within six months. It is proposed that a report on the Revised Code will be brought to the Standards Committee.

Councillor Morgan asked when the six months period in which the Code needed to be adopted began. The Group Solicitor explained that it was six months from when the Code was laid before Parliament. In order to comply with this timescale and to make allowances for the forthcoming elections, a special meeting of the Standards Committee will be held between 13 June 2007 and 18 July 2007. This will allow Members to consider the Code and make recommendations for its approval to the Fire Authority meeting on 18 July 2007.

Mr Tebbutt commented that the document appears to be full of common sense and shows a move in the right direction, which is encouraging. The Group Solicitor will ensure that the Revised Code is circulated to Committee members by email. As yet there is no guidance available from the Standards Board but it is believed that this will be published in early May.

Resolved that Members note the report, including the Fire Authority's response to the consultation paper, which is attached as an appendix



12b Training in Revised Model Code of Conduct

Telford & Wrekin Council has arranged for training in the revised Model Code of Conduct to take place on Monday, 18 June 2007 at the Civic Offices, Telford. There will be two identical sessions: one in the afternoon and one in the evening, to allow as many Members as possible to attend. All Members of the Fire Authority, including the two Independent Members of the Standards Committee have been invited. To date responses have been received from half of the Fire Authority Members.

Councillor Mellings commented that it was appropriate for the importance of this training, which will cover the Revised Code, to be reinforced to Members. The Committee agreed that those Members who have not yet responded to the invitation to the training sessions should be sent a follow-up letter from the Chair of the Standards Committee. Members also agreed that officers should attend the training, if they wished.

Resolved that Members note the details of the training in Revised Model Code of Conduct

Committee Clerk's Note

Since the meeting of the Standards Committee the date of the training has been deferred to 19 July 2007.

13 Standards Board Roadshows

The Standards Board for England will be holding a series of roadshows during June to address the revised Code of Conduct. Members received a flyer advertising the roadshows.

Members agreed that 3 places should be booked provisionally for the roadshow that will be held in Birmingham on 14 June 2007. Any Members who wish to attend should let the Corporate Services Manager know.

Resolved that Members note the dates of the roadshows

14 Annual Assembly

The Sixth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees will take place on 15 and 16 October this year at the International Convention Centre, Birmingham. Two places have been booked, one for a Member of the Standards Committee and one for an officer of the Fire Authority. It is proposed that whoever is the Chair of the Standards Committee at that time should attend. Members were asked to agree this proposal.

Resolved that whoever is Chair of the Standards Committee at the time of the Annual Assembly, should attend together with the Corporate Services Manager



15 Raising the Profile of Standards and Ethics

As Elaine Adams, the Fire Authority's Media Consultant, was unable to attend this meeting, Members agreed that this item should be postponed to a future meeting.

The meeting closed at 6.15 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....

