

## **SOUTH RIBBLE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **Standards Committee**

**Meeting, held at 4.30pm on Thursday 3 September, 2009 in the Wheel Room**

Mr R Atkinson (Independent Chairman), Mr J Holt (Independent Member), Councillors J E J Breakell, F Heyworth, K W Palmer, Mrs M J Robinson, Parish Councillors Mrs M Gelder and Mrs E Houghton.

#### **In attendance:-**

John Dakin (Corporate Director (Policy and Neighbourhoods)), Maureen Wood (Head of Corporate Governance), David Whelan (Legal Services Manager) and Carol Eddleston (Democratic Services Officer).

#### **Public attendance:-**

1 member of the public was present from 4.55pm until 5.55pm.

#### **Other officers:-**

2 other officers were present.

<b>Minute No.</b>	<b>Description/Resolution</b>
15	<b>Apologies for Absence</b>  Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Yates.
16	<b>Minutes of the Last Meeting</b>  The minutes of the last ordinary meeting (22 July 2009) were approved as a correct record and signed by the chairman.
17	<b>Request for Dispensation - Penwortham Priory - Dual Use Centre</b>  The Legal Services Manager presented a report outlining an application from Town and borough Councillor Mrs Buttery for a dispensation to enable her to take part and vote on any consideration of possible financial assistance in support of the revised access project at the Penwortham Priory Sports and Technology College.  RESOLVED:  1) that Councillor Mrs Buttery be granted a dispensation to allow her to take part in, and vote on, any debates relating to the issue of making a financial contribution to works to be undertaken at Penwortham Priory High School and Penwortham Leisure Centre, and  2) that the dispensation granted in 1) above be valid from the date of this resolution (3 September 2009) until 22 January 2010.
18	<b>Public Perception of the Ethical Behaviour of Councillors</b>  Members considered the findings from a piece of national research commissioned by Standards for England into the levels of public trust in member behaviour and integrity; levels of public confidence in the accountability mechanisms for dealing with instances where member behaviour had not met the required standard and public expectations of the behaviour of members.

	<p>Members considered that the results of the research were disappointing but not surprising, especially given the fact that the research had been conducted at the height of the MPs' expenses scandal. The media undoubtedly often played a role in promoting negative messages about MPs and local councillors, but the reality of what individual residents actually believed often varied quite significantly from what they read and saw in the media.</p> <p>The committee believed that members of this council were trying to do a job, and did that job honestly. They were aware that South Ribble councillors had a particularly good reputation among other local authorities.</p> <p>Members were pleased to note that awareness raising among members, officers, employees, partners and members of the public was a major element in the draft action plan for promoting and achieving high ethical standards. They agreed that the proposed Citizens' Panel Survey should be used to ascertain residents' views on the ethical behaviour of this council's members.</p> <p><b>RESOLVED:</b></p> <p>That the next Citizens' Panel Survey include specific questions regarding the ethical behaviour of local councillors.</p>
19	<p><b>Draft Action Plan for Promoting and Achieving High Ethical Standards</b></p> <p>The Corporate Director (Policy and Neighbourhoods) presented the draft Action Plan for Promoting and Achieving High Ethical Standards. This brought together a number of successes of the previous action plan with some areas for improvement arising from the recent Ethical Governance Audit, as considered at the Standards Committee meeting on 11 June 2009.</p> <p>Members considered the plan and debated how the outcomes of the key actions might be measured and what targets might be appropriate. A number of observations were made and suggestions debated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forward would be an ideal vehicle to promote that co-opted and elected members were committed to the principles of public life and the ethical regime in place at SRBC;</li> <li>- the Citizens' Panel could be used to help shape any messages to be communicated through Forward;</li> <li>- Town and Parish councils should be invited to participate in training and awareness raising sessions;</li> <li>- use of social networking sites might allow the council to engage with sections of the community which would not normally engage with the council via other routes;</li> <li>- use of social networking sites would need to be carefully monitored to avoid distortion of any messages that the council wanted to get across;</li> <li>- evidence of key partners' awareness of and commitment to ethical standards/whistleblowing was important but SMEs should not be disadvantaged by unreasonable burdens;</li> <li>- officers were often asked by members for advice on the Code of Conduct, especially on declarations of interest;</li> <li>- length of time between decision to refer a complaint for investigation and final hearing was a concern and efforts should be made to reduce the time taken;</li> <li>- consideration should be given to using an independent, external investigation officer for all investigations.</li> </ul> <p>The Head of Corporate Governance presented a number of suggestions regarding possible targets etc. Members felt that it would be appropriate to include key targets/performance indicators for the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) % of residents feeling that the Council's has satisfactory ethical standards and behaviours;</li> <li>2) % of elected members feeling that the Council has satisfactory ethical standards and behaviours;</li> <li>3) % of officers feeling that the Council's has satisfactory ethical standards and behaviours;</li> </ol>

	<p>4) % of investigations undertaken within the agreed estimated timescale;</p> <p>5) Maintaining the existing Audit Commission's rating (Use of Resources score for standards and ethics), and</p> <p>6) the level of justified complaints that councillors had breached the Code of Conduct.</p> <p>RESOLVED:</p> <p>That the Corporate Director (Policy and Neighbourhoods) be authorised to finalise the action plan in the light of members' comments at the meeting, in consultation with the Chairman.</p>
20	<p><b>Exclusion of Press and Public</b></p> <p>RESOLVED: that the press and public be excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the following item of business as it involved the discussion of information which was defined as exempt from publication Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as it was likely to reveal the identity of an individual.</p>
21	<p><b>Review of Local Assessment of Complaints</b></p> <p>The chairman said that he felt it was timely to have a discussion about the way that the committee felt the local assessment of complaints process had gone since its introduction in May 2008.</p> <p>Members suggested a number of possible improvements and recommended that more use should be made of the conciliation process as and when appropriate.</p> <p>At the request of members, the Legal Services Manager agreed to ascertain from Standards for England whether it was necessary for a sub-committee to meet in cases where there would have to be a Standards Committee Hearing anyway because the Investigation Officer had found that there had been a breach of the Code of Conduct. Members felt that the process should be reviewed again in a number of months in the light of further experience.</p> <p>RESOLVED:</p> <p>1) That more use of conciliation be made, as and when appropriate;</p> <p>2) clarification on the need for a Consideration Sub-committee prior to all hearings should be sought from Standards for England, and, subject to this clarification, the procedure be amended accordingly, and</p> <p>3) the local assessment of complaints process and procedures should be reviewed again in the light of further experience.</p>

..... (Chairman)

The meeting finished at 6.21pm.