

**A MEETING OF THE STANDARDS AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
WAS HELD ON 14 DECEMBER 2006**

Membership:

Councillors Gill (P) ,Kimber (P), Langdon (P), Smith (P), Mrs Wright (P), and Wright (P)

Independent Members: Mr M J Heritage-Owen (P) and Mr R V Perry (P)

28. APOLOGIES

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were received on behalf of Linda Edwards, Borough Solicitor and Monitoring Officer.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

30. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Standards and Governance Committee held on 5 October 2006 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

31. DEPUTATIONS

There were no deputations.

32. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

33. CPA - USE OF RESOURCES TEST

The Deputy Chief Executive & Borough Treasurer presented a report advising the Committee of the revised action plan for the improvement of the Council's Use of Resources score.

The Committee had received a presentation on this matter at their previous meeting and the Deputy Chief Executive & Borough Treasurer informed Members that the current year's assessment should be completed by December 2006 and next year's by September/October 2007, significantly earlier than last reported.

The revised action plan, which was appended to the report, had been streamlined and focussed in accordance with the decisions made in September/October and areas already improved had been omitted. Officers clarified the abbreviations that appeared in the action plan and Members requested that in future 'responsible officers' for actions be identified by name and job title.

The Deputy Chief Executive & Borough Treasurer explained that many of the actions needed to improve the Council's management of assets would require additional resources. However, this issue was being addressed and progressed, with condition surveys being programmed for a way forward.

The Committee were informed that an update on the Use of Resources action plan would be provided at the next meeting and the progress being made to address asset management practices would be reported to the Committee in April 2007. However, if there were any issues of note in the meantime, these would be brought to Members' attention.

RESOLVED: That

(a) the information on the Use of Resources and the revised Action Plan be noted and an update be provided at the next meeting;

(b) progress being made on Asset Base Management be reported, as a separate agenda item, on 12 April 2007.

34. INTERNAL AUDIT – PROGRESS REPORT TO 28 OCTOBER 2006

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Internal Audit and Risk Assurance which provided information, to Members with responsibility for governance, on the performance of the Internal Audit Section in the period to week 30 (1 April to 28 October 2006) against the agreed audit plan.

The report also provided an independent internal audit opinion on the overall control environment of the areas reviewed within a brief executive summary. Members were also provided with a table of essential internal audit recommendations, together with Managers comments and target implementation dates from the reviews undertaken this year.

The Head of Internal Audit and Risk Assessment informed Members that the review of Contract Standing Orders, within the Committee's work area, had been delayed due to revised guidance from CIPFA being unavailable to date. It was proposed that the completion date for the review be amended from January 2007 to March 2007 (see Minute no. 37 below)

In answer to Members' questions, the Corporate Services Manager clarified the position regarding the recommendation and the 'essential' category within the audit of Data Protection and FOI, which was due to lack of resources and insufficient staffing capacity. The Corporate Services Manager assured the Committee that the duty to the public was being fulfilled and the matter would be kept under review.

RESOLVED: That

- (a) the performance of the Internal Audit Section from 1 April to 28 October 2006 be noted;
- (b) the independent audit opinion by the Head of Internal Audit and Risk Assurance on the level of assurance relating to the control environment be noted;
- (c) the high level audit recommendations that support the overall Statement of Internal Control be noted.
- (d) the amended completion date for the review of Contract Standing Orders be noted and approved.

35. COMPLAINTS PROCEDURES AND ANALYSIS

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Services Manager outlining the operation of the Council's formal complaints procedure, together with an analysis of complaints for the first six months of the current financial year. The report also included information that could be accessed on the Council's website about making a complaint, guidance notes on customer complaints panel hearings and the Annual Letter 2005/6 from the Local Government Ombudsman.

Copies of the Customer Complaints leaflet were distributed at the meeting.

It was suggested that Officers prepare a monitoring report for the Committee on a six-monthly basis. Members would then be in a position to make recommendations to Council on the operation of the Customer Complaints Procedures, identify trends in complaints and recommend remedial action. Each report would include progress on any recommendations made by the Committee.

It was further suggested that, at the next review, guidance notes be drafted for those involved in investigations into complaints to include what actions they might wish to consider as part of their findings.

RESOLVED: That

- (a) the Council's Customer Complaints procedure and analysis of complaints received in the first six months of the current financial year be noted;
- (b) the proposals for six monthly monitoring reports to the Committee be approved; and
- (c) guidance notes referred to in the report (paragraph 2.8) be included in the Committee's work plan.

36. MEMBER INTERESTS AND DISPENSATION DETERMINATIONS - SYSTEMS TO UPDATE AND ADVISE MEMBERS

Consideration was given to the report of the Borough Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, providing proposals for guidance to Members on:

- 'Personal' or 'personal and prejudicial' interests and how the guidance would be updated
- The Register of Member's Interests
- Declaration of gifts and hospitalities

The Standards Board for England had completed a review of the Code of Conduct and while the revised Code was still awaited, it was proposed to provide guidance on the existing Code, in particular, to clarify certain issues so that Members had the best information on which to judge whether they have any personal or personal and prejudicial interests in a matter.

Regulations made by the Secretary of State dealing with dispensations were now in force and the Borough Solicitor was currently making changes to the Constitution to reflect the new powers and would produce a guidance note for Members on applications for dispensations.

The report also outlined the provisions relating to the role of this Committee in determining applications for dispensation; suggestions for Member training; proposals for the production of a governance calendar to include reminders to Members on the need to update registers, key dates in the audit work programme and when updates would be made to the guidance. The governance calendar would be presented for the Committee's consideration at the next meeting in February 2007.

Appendix A to the report provided guidance to help Members make their decision as to what matters needed to be considered when judging whether or not they had an interest to declare. A list of frequently asked questions was included, along with a selection of case studies.

It was proposed that the Members Information Bulletin would be used to provide information and updates and all guidance would be included in the Members Information Pack.

RESOLVED: That the proposals outlined in Section 2 of the Borough Solicitor & Monitoring Officer's report be approved and the content of the Appendix to the report be noted.

37. WORK AREAS FOR THE COMMITTEE – 2006/2007

The Committee considered and reviewed their work programme

As referred to in Minute no.34 above, the date for completion of a review of Contract Standing Orders would be revised to March 2007. Monitoring complaints at six monthly intervals would also be included in the work programme.

It was noted that the Chairman had requested that the Committee had sight of the draft 'Statement of Internal Control' and also that Members should be made aware of any outside organisations involved in assessing the performance of the Council. Members also agreed that there was a need to be satisfied that Council grants awarded to outside organisations achieved value for money.

RESOLVED: That, subject to an amended completion date for the review of Contract Standing Orders and the inclusion of monitoring customer complaints on a six monthly basis, the work programme for the Committee, as set out in the report, be approved.

38. ANY OTHER ITEMS

There were no other items, which by reason of special circumstances, were for consideration as a matter of urgency at this meeting.

The meeting commenced at 6.00pm and concluded at 6.43pm

CHAIRMAN