

Standards Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Standards Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the **19th March 2015**.

Present:

Cllr. Mrs Dyer (Chairman);
Cllr. Davison (Vice-Chairman);
Cllrs. Burgess, Feacey, Mrs Hutchinson.

Mrs C Vant – Independent Person
Mr R Brasier, Mr D Lyward – Parish Council Representatives.

Apology:

Cllr. Chilton.

Also Present:

Cllr. Marriott

Monitoring Officer, Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer.

407 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Davison	Made a 'Voluntary Announcement' as he knew the Ward Member for Downs North and had been asked by Chilham Parish Council to be an independent observer at one of the meetings in question.	409

408 Minutes

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Committee held on the 30th September 2014 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.

409 Chilham Parish Council – Review of Governance Arrangements - Report of the Monitoring Officer

The Monitoring Officer advised that at the previous meeting of the Committee he had submitted a brief report advising of the operational problems at Chilham Parish Council (CPC). The Committee had agreed to an independent review of governance arrangements at CPC to be undertaken by Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd. The governance review report had now been published and a copy had been included

within the Agenda papers. It contained 13 recommendations and these had been put into a table with the Parish Council response, Monitoring Officer comments and a further action column alongside each recommendation. Some of the recommendations required immediate action by the Parish Council, but the majority were for the new CPC to consider after the May elections. Ashford Borough Council's role would essentially be to keep a watching brief and perhaps provide some assistance in steering CPC. The Monitoring Officer said it was important to be clear that the scope of the review was not about investigating past complaints, grievances or specific incidents or adjudicating on things that may have happened in the past, but to work with CPC to help it to operate more effectively in the future. It was also worth pointing out that whilst the review had made 13 recommendations, it did also acknowledge that CPC had undertaken much valuable work on behalf of the community and had been able to make decisions and consider issues of importance. The recommendations were about improved practices and policies rather than fundamental weaknesses in governance.

In response to a Member query the Monitoring Officer said that the issue of members of the public speaking had not been raised as part of this review however there was a recommendation to have a more structured arrangement, i.e. a dedicated agenda item, to hear from the Ward Member at meetings. In response to the wider question of public participation, as he understood it there was no consistent picture across the Borough. This was an issue for each Council to decide as there was no legal right for the public to speak at Council meetings.

The Vice-Chairman considered that this had been a worrying case. In his view CPC had largely become dysfunctional as a result of allegations of misconduct and alleged slander. He said he supported the recommendations of the review as a whole in terms of the remit given to the consultants, but given how intense the feelings and disagreements had become internally, cause and effect would both be important in resolving the issues and it was difficult for him to accept the report without a recognition of those irreconcilable differences. He said he could personally not understand why any Parish Council would not want to include its Ward Member at their meetings.

The Ward Member for Downs North said that for clarity he had attended approximately 40 meetings of CPC and had always made an effort to participate, but this had been largely rejected. Given the obvious areas of overlap he considered this was regrettable. It was also his opinion that any other member of the public attempting to speak at CPC meetings was ignored. He considered that the core reason for the problems that had arisen was that two members of the Parish Council had been effectively suspended from some areas of work for endeavouring to create more transparency. This had been done with no written notice, no hearing and had not followed any agreed disciplinary measures. Given that the review had been funded from public money, he was also concerned that CPC may neglect the recommendations in the report and that the proposed training would be another financial burden on the Borough Council.

In response the Monitoring Officer said that the recommendations in the report were largely for the new Parish Council to consider following the May elections, so it was premature to suggest they may be neglected. Additionally, there were no proposals

to spend any further money on training for Chilham specifically. As previously mentioned, the review had not examined past incidents or conduct, therefore the "suspension" of the two Parish Councillors had not been investigated. As he understood they had not, and could not have been removed from membership of the Parish Council, but they had been removed from membership of particular Committees. He was not privy to all of the facts though so did not feel he could comment any further.

There was a general feeling amongst the Committee that being so close to the elections the majority of matters outlined in the recommendations should be addressed by the new Parish Council. CPC itself had agreed to carry on as it was until the election, whilst noting that there was only one further full Parish Council meeting and it would focus on completing previously agreed work and projects and not take on any new initiatives. The work on implementing new policies and procedures etc. would be for the new Parish Council and ABC would offer support where it could.

The Parish Council Representatives considered there may have been opportunities for mediation through KALC if CPC had approached them at an earlier stage. Perhaps this was a lesson to be learnt for the future. It was agreed to add a recommendation to this effect.

Resolved:

- That**
- (i) the report of Hoey Ainscough Associates Ltd be received and noted and the company be thanked for their services.**
 - (ii) the response of Chilham Parish Council be noted and their generally positive response to the recommendations be welcomed.**
 - (iii) it be noted and agreed that Ashford Borough Council should work with Chilham Parish Council on some of the governance issues identified in the report and that the Monitoring Officer should update the Committee on progress within the first year of the Parish Council after the 2015 election.**
 - (iv) if similar circumstances arise in the future, opportunities for mediation through the Kent Association of Local Councils should be investigated.**
-

Queries concerning these minutes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:
Telephone: 01233 330349 Email: danny.sheppard@ashford.gov.uk
Agendas, Reports and Minutes are available on: www.ashford.gov.uk/committees