

MINUTES of the **WEST SUFFOLK JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at the District Offices, College Heath Road, Mildenhall on Monday 16 December 2013 at 6.04pm.

PRESENT:

Councillors:

Forest Heath District Council

St Edmundsbury Borough Council

E Stewart (Vice-Chairman in the Chair)

J Thorndyke

R Dicker

Also in attendance:

J Bowes, Head of Legal and Democratic Services

H Hardinge, Committee Administrator & FHDC Scrutiny Support

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor D Redhead.

Councillors B Cockle and Mrs C F J Lynch were also unable to attend the meeting.

SUBSTITUTES

There were no substitutes at the meeting.

838. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no questions/statements from members of the public.

839. **CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2013 were accepted by the Committee as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

840. **UPDATE OF OPERATION OF THE STANDARDS REGIME (REPORT NO JST13/003)**

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services presented this report which provided the Joint Committee with an update on the operation of the revised Standards Regime.

Members were advised that a meeting had taken place earlier in the year between the Suffolk Monitoring Officers, Standards Committee Chairmen and Independent Persons. At the request of the Chairman it was agreed that the presentation that was delivered to that meeting would be circulated to all Members of the Joint Committee for information.

Discussion had taken place at that meeting, which was similarly echoed by those present, at the dissatisfaction with elements of the new regime due to the limited sanctions available and subsequent inability to enforce. Comments were also made on the lack of central guidance and the fact that there was no mechanism available to enable a nationwide collation of data.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised the Joint Committee that experience in operating the revised procedure for dealing with Standards complaints had led to a suggested revision in order to allow a Councillor to comment on the complaint against them before the matter was considered by the Independent Person. Accordingly, a proposed amendment to the procedure was attached as Appendix A to Report No JST13/003 and this sought Members' approval.

Lastly, attached as exempt Appendix B was a document setting out a summary of the Standards complaints received in relation to the West Suffolk authorities. In view of the Members wishing to ask questions on specific complaints set out in the exempt appendix, it was agreed that this would take place later in the meeting following exclusion of the press and public.

With the vote being unanimous, it was

RESOLVED:

That:-

1. The update on the operation of the Standards Regime over the last year be noted; and
2. The amended procedure for handling complaints, which would allow the Councillor to respond to a complaint before it was considered by an Independent Person, as set out in Appendix A of Report No JST13/003, be approved.

841. APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSONS (REPORT NO JST13/004)

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services reminded Members that at the Joint Committee's last meeting on 17 June 2013 concern was expressed that the pool of eight Independent Persons for Suffolk neither resided within West Suffolk nor were representative of the make up of the area in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Accordingly, it was agreed that a recruitment process would be undertaken aimed at obtaining Independent Persons from West Suffolk and this report sought approval of an indicative timetable to achieve this.

Subject to Members' approval of the timetable an additional report would then need to be produced for consideration by the Joint Committee which set out the recruitment process and financial implications. In view of the terms appointed by the West Suffolk authorities for the Independent Persons expiring at the end of June 2014, it would be necessary for an additional meeting of the Joint Committee to be scheduled for late February/early March 2014 to consider this further report.

With the vote being unanimous, it was

RESOLVED:

That:-

1. The indicative timetable for appointing Independent Persons for West Suffolk, as set out in Paragraph 4.3 of Report No JST13/004, be approved; and
2. An additional meeting of the Joint Committee be scheduled for late February/early March 2014 in order to consider a further report on the recruitment process and financial implications.

842. **EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

With the vote being unanimous, it was

RESOLVED:

That, under Section 100(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as prescribed in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, and indicated against each item.

843. **UPDATE OF OPERATION OF THE STANDARDS REGIME (REPORT NO JST13/003) – EXEMPT APPENDIX B (PARAS 1 & 2)**

Members of the Joint Committee posed questions on specific complaints set out in the exempt Appendix B attached to Report No JST13/004.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services advised Members that the information had been listed in such a way so that it should not be possible to identify individuals as a number of the complaints were still ongoing and, therefore, may be subject to future consideration by the Joint Committee, meaning it was necessary to ensure that Members were not compromised in any way.

The meeting closed at 6.35pm.