

STANDARDS & ETHICS COMMITTEE

17 JULY 2007

Present: Independent Members: Akmal Hanuk (Chairperson),  
Maureen Hedley-Clarke, Deirdre Jones, Anne  
Morgan

Community Councillor David Suthers

County Councillors James and Owens

Apologies: Paul Stockton and Councillor Griffiths

S96 : MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Standards and Ethics Committee held on 22 May 2007 which was re-convened on 5 June 2007 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

S97 : MONITORING OFFICER'S VERBAL UPDATE

The Monitoring Officer updated the Committee on a number of points arising from previous meetings and discussions took place as part of the update.

Annual Report – The Committee was advised that the Annual Report had been favourably received at Council and the Members had made positive comments. The Chairperson advised that the feedback from Council was that Members were pleased with the work of the new Committee so far, particularly in respect of its involvement with training and development of Members and encouraged the Committee to continue to be proactive in its approach to the various issues relating to improving Governance within the Council.

The Committee thanked the Officers and the Chairperson for the work carried out to finalize the Annual Report and for the presentation of the report by the Chairperson at Council.

Progress on Amended Code of Conduct – The Committee was advised that a meeting had taken place between Assembly Members and Monitoring Officers in Wales regarding publication of the new Code. It was now unlikely that the Code would be published before the May 2008 elections. The delay was as a result of delays in importing legislative changes into the English Code.

Schools Organisation Committee – The Monitoring Officer advised of an issue that had arisen in the Council's Schools Committee, which had met on a regular basis over the past nine months as open meetings. The Schools Committee agreed that in order to make better progress, it would be beneficial if the meetings were held in confidence to allow the Committee to have the opportunity to receive briefings from Officers on a confidential basis. This was agreed by the Committee including its Co-opted Members, the Committee met on that basis on 2 July 2007 and were close to agreeing a set of proposals that would be placed in the public domain.

The issue of concern reported to the Schools Committee was that information from the meeting was subsequently reported to the press.

It was noted that Co-opted members and representatives from the trade unions present were not bound by the Code, however, all parties present at the meeting had given an undertaking that they would not disclose information or report back on any matters discussed.

The Monitoring Officer advised that it was within her role to express her concern and regret that the confidential code had been breached and urged everyone present at the meeting to recognise that this was a serious matter that would be taken seriously by the full Council.

The Schools Committee were notified that the matter would be formally reported to the Standards and Ethics Committee as there had been a breach.

**RESOLVED** – That

- (1) Information from the Monitoring Officer regarding a breach of confidential information, and the serious concern voiced by the Committee as a result of the breach be noted; and

- (2) A formal report providing further information on the incident be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration and decision as to whether further action should be taken as a result of the breach.

S : 98 APPLICATION FOR DISPENSATIONS

The Committee had a statutory authority to grant dispensations to Members of the relevant Authority with a personal interest in a matter, allowing them either to speak and vote or to vote (depending on the nature of the interest).

The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that she had received an application for dispensation from County Councillor Ann Rowland-James in respect of her interest in matters relating to the new Glamorgan Records Office, as a representative of the Council on the Glamorgan Archives Joint Committee (GAJC)

RESOLVED – That

In accordance with Section 81 (4) of the Local Government Act 2000 and Regulation 2(d) of the Standards Committees (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) Regulations 2001, Councillor Rowland-James be granted dispensation to speak and vote at the Glamorgan Archives Joint Committee on matters relating to the new Glamorgan Records Office, provided that the dispensation shall not apply where the Councillor has an interest other than the one referred to in the report.

S : 99 PLANNING CODE OF GOOD PRACTICE

At its meeting on 10 January 2007, the Committee received a report concerning the Wales Audit Office baseline assessment of the Planning service. The report dealt with a number of issues and made specific recommendations which included a recommendation that the Council prepare a Code of Practice for Councillors and Officers involved in the planning process, having regard to best practice across Wales.

The Committee received a draft protocol and noted that this was also the subject of consultation with the Planning service and the Chairperson of the Planning Committee.

The Monitoring Officer advised that discussions had taken place with

Councillor Derbyshire Chairperson of the Planning Committee who has requested that briefings be provided for the Members of the Planning Committee in October 2007.

In response to concerns of the Committee about the lack of suitable accommodation for the Planning Committee, the Monitoring Officer advised that three options for rooms had been provided but that a suitable room had not yet been identified. The matter was being progressed and the Committee would be given a further update in due course.

Concern was expressed that the Community Council had not yet been given an opportunity to comment on the document and it was requested that this be circulated to Community Councils at an appropriate time, following which they be given a deadline of 30 days in which to comment.

The Monitoring Officer suggested that the document be circulated to the political groups in September 2007 and that comments, if any, be reported to the Constitution Committee followed by the Standards and Ethics Committee and that once a clear view had been made by Council, the document could then be circulated to the Community Councils for comment.

**RESOLVED – That**

- (1) the draft document be circulated for comment to the political groups, the Constitution Committee and the Standards and Ethics Committee for views; and
- (2) the final document be circulated to all Community Councils for comments, to be returned within 30 days of circulation of the document.

#### **S : 100 REGISTRATION OF GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY**

The Committee at its meeting on 5 June 2007 considered a report on the registration of gifts and hospitality. The Committee deferred its decision pending receipt of further information in connection with a review of the threshold for the registration of gifts and hospitality by Members and Officers.

The Chairperson welcomed Councillor Rodney Berman, Leader of the

Council to the meeting.

Councillor Berman thanked the Committee for giving him the opportunity to address the Committee on the issues relating to registration of gifts and hospitality in respect of the Leader and the Lord Mayor.

Councillor Berman advised the Committee that he was concerned that the Committee were considering the issue and making recommendations to the Council on the thresholds for registration of gifts and hospitality without knowledge of the impact a reduced threshold would have on a number of Members and Officers of the Council, particularly the Leader and the Lord Mayor.

Councillor Berman advised that the importance of keeping a register was to ensure transparency and that the Council were acting with propriety and that when making decisions they were not being influenced by the offer of gifts and hospitality. Councillor Berman advised that this was not the perspective of the public.

The Committee was advised that when invitations are received by the Leader or the Lord Mayor, consideration is given to the nature and relevance of the event and whether it was appropriate for the Council to be represented, before accepting the invitation.

Councillor Berman outlined examples of the number and nature of the invitations received and stated he was concerned about the impact of having to register everything over £25.

Councillor Berman advised that both he and the Lord Mayor attend many functions as part of their civic role and that many events gave them the opportunity of networking with a number of high profile organisations. Councillor Berman was concerned that the requirement to register everything over £25 might mean that they would have to reconsider the events they attended in order to avoid being judged. It would also put pressure on his staff as a result of increased workload.

The Committee made a number of observations:-

- The benefit of networking on behalf of the Council was not in dispute and should not be underplayed.

- Reference was made to the events listed by the Leader, it was felt that it was important to attend such events, however, it was also the view that the level of threshold at the moment in Cardiff is too high and that other major cities including Greater London had lower threshold values of £25.
- The issue mentioned by Councillor Berman of increased workload that would be caused to his staff as a result of a reduction in the threshold would need to be reviewed and if necessary the forms be simplified to minimise any increase to workload.
- It is important for the Leader and the Lord Mayor to attend functions as they are representing the Council and as such should be seen to be high profile in performing their civic role.
- A reduction in the threshold would be a good opportunity for the Leader and the Lord Mayor to highlight the good work they do as representatives of the Council.
- The value of the visits were not in dispute, the issues were as follows
  - (a) Perception of the people outside the Council
  - (b) There is no reason to reduce networking which is crucial to the Council
  - (c) Reduce the onerous nature of the forms to avoid increased workloads.
- It would be beneficial to consider differing between gifts and hospitality, it was pointed out that gifts were rarely accepted by Members.

**RESOLVED - That**

- (1) the matter be discussed further at the next meeting.
- (2) That a copy of the registration form be included with the Agenda of the next meeting of the Committee for information.
- (3) Following consideration of the above, a recommendation on the threshold levels for receipt of gifts and hospitality be made to Council.

S : 101 MEDIA

The Chairperson welcomed Kathryn Richards, Head of Function, Communications and Anna Meredith, Operational Manager, Media who had been invited to the meeting to give a brief presentation on the operation and role of the media in Cardiff and how it supports the Council.

The Committee was advised that as part of its role, the Communications Section plays an important part in communicating the policies and services of the Council to Cardiff citizens and stakeholders. An element of the role is also around reputation management.

Anna Meredith outlined the expectations and pressures for the media today:-

- A fast moving 24 hour news agenda.
- Can be minutes away from a deadline
- Highly competitive field – journalists all want an exclusive.
- Media demands immediate answers

The Council's Media Team is comprised of a small team of journalists who have all worked in local and broadcast media, they are on call 24 hours a day seven days a week. Press Officers are each given responsibility for certain service areas to build up expertise.

The small team undertakes numerous duties and tasks as follows:-

- The teams send out more than 550 press releases each year, press releases are an effective way of informing the public and keeping them updated on the Council's activities.
- They deal with over 3,000 enquiries each year.
- Monitor almost 4,000 items each year.
- Evaluate media coverage, and in an average year, 2,800 items will

be neutral, 925 will be positive and just 275 will be negative .

- The team safeguards the channels of communication between the Council and the media and works with key media as partners
- The team are proactive, responsive and available 24 hours a day.

In conclusion, an outline was given of the Team's challenges including:-

- Headlines are often misrepresentative of stories, however, if the story behind the headline is correct, it is difficult to challenge.
- Once mis-information is printed, it is difficult to counter.
- It has to be accepted that the Council operates in a political world where there might be conflicting agendas, that may conflict and harm the reputation of the Council.
- The reputation of the Council is precious, once lost it is difficult to regain.

Following the presentation, the Committee asked a number of questions, made observations and sought clarifications on the points made.

- In response to a query relating to the route for responses to enquiries, it was confirmed that enquiries must be directed through the Communications Section who would then contact the appropriate service area for the information and then respond to the query.
- There was concern about the issue of negative headlines that can give the completely wrong impression of a news story and the Committee felt there was a need to address this issue. The Committee questioned whether there was a mechanism in place to challenge such reporting.

In response, the Committee was advised that meetings are held with key journalists and issues of concern can be discussed.

- The Committee asked about the methodology in respect of Members dealing with the press and whether assistance was available from Communications. The Committee was advised that



all reporting in the press should be in accordance with Council Policy and with the guidance of the Communications section.

- There needs to be a rule based policy in place to safeguard Members and Officers when dealing with the press, in order to avoid negative press.
- The Head of Function, Communications advised the Committee that a Media Protocol is in place and the Media team are proactive in its reporting and in providing briefings for the benefit of its stakeholders through press releases and the website

The Chairperson suggested that the Communications Section provide the Committee with an idea of what the Standards and Ethics Committee may be able to look at in terms of how they could help the media to report issues relating to the media positively.

RESOLVED – That

- (1) The Communications Section be requested to provide Committee with further information on the Council's media protocol and the codes of conduct that exists for the media.
- (2) An invitation from the Committee to the Press to attend a meeting of the Standards and Ethics Committee be deferred, pending further consideration on the issues faced by the Council as a result of negative press coverage.
- (3) Consideration be given to the setting up of a Task and Finish Group to progress the matter further.

#### S102 : WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee discussed the items on the Work Programme and set the Agenda for the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED – That the following items be placed on the Agenda for the next meeting of the Committee on 18 September 2007:-

- (i) Code of Planning Guidance
- (ii) Media – to receive further information on issues relating to the

- Council's relationship with the Press.
- (iii) Registration of Gifts and Hospitality.
- (iv) Commission of Governance – to receive an update on the status of the recommendations made in the Commission of Governance report.

Signed .....

Date .....