

Independent Members' Forum

Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire Standards Committees

Notes of a Meeting of the Forum Held at Cherwell District Council Offices,
Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, Oxfordshire on Friday 26 September 2008.

Present:

Michael Field	Independent Member	Slough
Henna Khan	Independent Member	Slough
Paul Lipscomb	Independent Member	Slough
Steven Quayle	Monitoring Officer	Slough
John Bingham	Independent Member	West Berkshire
Mike Wall	Independent Member	West Berkshire
Tracey Allen	Monitoring Officer	Windsor and Maidenhead
Ian Hunt	Deputy Monitoring Officer	Windsor and Maidenhead
Roger Sparrow	Independent Member	Windsor and Maidenhead
David Comben	Independent Member	Wokingham
Eric Davies	Independent Member	Wokingham
Anita Grosz	Independent Member	Wokingham
John Giles	Independent Member	Wokingham
David Soane	Independent Member	Wokingham
Kevin Jacob	Democratic Services	Wokingham
Liz Howlett	Monitoring Officer	Cherwell
Douglas Frewer	Independent Member	Cherwell
Sadie Reynolds	Independent Member	Cherwell
David Best	Democratic Services	Cherwell
John Lay	Independent Member	Oxford City
Jeremy Thomas	Monitoring Officer	Oxford City
Sylvia West	Independent Member	South Oxfordshire
David Howard	Independent Member	Vale of White Horse
Margaret Thompson	Independent Member	West Oxfordshire
Alan Savill	Independent Member	Kennet
Bob Philpott	Independent Member	North Wiltshire
Rodney Job	Independent Member	Salisbury
Trevor Davies	Independent Member	Swindon
David Dawson	Independent Member	Swindon
Keith Shipman	Independent Member	Wiltshire County
Isabel McCord	Independent Member	Wiltshire County

Apologies for Absence

Gordon Anderson	Independent Member	Bracknell Forest
John Hicks	Independent Member	Reading
David Holling	Monitoring Officer	West Berkshire
James Rees	Independent Member	West Berkshire
Charles Elly	Independent Member	Windsor and Maidenhead
Helal Stephan	Independent Member	Windsor and Maidenhead
Karnail Pannu	Independent Member	Windsor and Maidenhead
James McBeth	Independent Member	Cherwell
Meryll Dean	Independent Member	Oxford City
Martin Gardner	Independent Member	Oxford City
Ann Gwinnett	Independent Member	Oxford City
William Reed	Democratic Services Manager	Oxford City

Peter Clark	Monitoring Officer	Oxfordshire County
Ann Griffiths	Independent Member	Oxfordshire County
Keith Baldwin	Independent Member	South Oxfordshire
Jeffery Lemon	Independent Member	Vale of White Horse
Mike Roberts	Independent Member	Vale of White Horse
Stuart Harrison	Independent Member	West Oxfordshire
Gordon Halliday	Independent Member	West Oxfordshire
James Carine	Independent Member	North Wiltshire and Wilts Fire
Tony Frost	Independent Member	West Wiltshire
Peter McGuigan	Independent Member	Wilts County and Berks Fire
Catherine O'Sullivan	Independent Member	Wiltshire County
Digby Baker	Independent Member	Wilts and Swindon Fire
John Adams	Independent Member	Wiltshire Police
Paul Thomas	Solicitor	Thames Valley Police

1. Welcome

Mr Douglas Frewer, Independent Member Chairman of the Cherwell District Council Standards Committee, welcomed those present to the meeting and indicated that Cherwell was delighted to host the Forum for the first time.

2. Notes of the Previous Meeting

The Forum received the notes of the previous meeting held on 29 February 2008 which were accepted subject to the name of Henna Khan (Independent Member – Slough) being added to the list of Member apologies presented to that meeting.

3. Meeting of Independent Forum Co-ordinators Held on 17 July 2008

The Forum received and noted the Minutes of the meeting of the Independent Forum Co-ordinators hosted by the Standards Board in Manchester on 17 July 2008.

The Forum discussed a number of matters included in the minutes as briefly summarised below:-

- (1) **The Balance Between Independent and Other Members of Standards Committees (Item 2)** – the arrangements relating to the make-up of standards committees across authorities were discussed and the variations between the numbers of independent and other members (elected and parish representatives) were noted. It was acknowledged that there had to be sufficient numbers of each grouping to meet the requirements of the local filtering regime;
- (2) **Standards Board Annual Assembly (Item 4)** – the merits of attending the Annual Assembly were discussed including the suggestions for improving the format, frequency and location of the Assembly. These included the holding of regional assemblies (although the pressure this would place on the Standards Board was accepted), using the second day as a training opportunity, the re-working of the plenary sessions as these tended to be dominated by the politicians and moving to a single day given that the workshop sessions were repeated over the two days. The cost of attending the Assembly was seen as prohibitive although it was always over subscribed. Members concurred with the view that new information should not be introduced at the Assembly but rather every effort should be made to publish and disseminate such information at the earliest opportunity.

The Forum was reminded that it was represented on the Co-ordinators Group by Trevor Davies (Swindon) and considered whether to designate a Deputy to attend future meetings when Mr Davies was unable to do so. In this respect it was agreed that David Comben (Wokingham) should be the designated Deputy for Mr Davies.

4. Review of the Forum

Members received a paper that provided the opportunity to review how the Forum operated and as such identified a number of issues which included the frequency, timing and venue for meetings, the business to be considered, the levels of input from members/authorities across the three counties and not least the level of participation and future involvement of the Standards Board.

The Forum debated the issues at length and whilst no firm conclusions were reached at this time it was felt that the meetings held so far had been very useful and that it was imperative that the Standards Board fully supported the regional independent member forums. It was recognised that this Forum would need to justify why it felt the input of the Standards Board was so important. Several suggestions came forward on the potential format for future meetings. These included (i) themed meetings with guest speakers; (ii) inviting monitoring officers to give presentations especially when new legislation had been introduced; (iii) using meetings for training purposes – Members were aware that the onus in relation to the provision of training fell to the relevant local and other authorities; (iv) to continue more or less as now which was essentially the sharing of information and good practice where networking was an essential feature and (v) the practicalities of inviting elected members to attend future meetings; given the nature of the Forum this latter suggestion was not generally supported.

David Comben (Wokingham) volunteered to put together some thoughts and canvass (via Keith Butler) the views of all Members on the purpose, future direction and how the Forum might operate in future as a way of ascertaining exactly what Members wanted to achieve and how to go about this. The responses could then be collated and would form the main item at the next, or subsequent, meeting. It was also suggested that the other regional forums could be contacted to ascertain their views on this matter.

5. Remuneration for Independent Members of Standards Committees

The Forum received details of (i) the letter circulated by the Chairman of the Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees (AIMSce) to Chief Executives asking that independent members should have access to all the allowances available to elected members subject to the right to decline allowance payments if the member sees this as compromising their independence; and (ii) a table setting out the levels of the allowance payments made to independent members collated from a sample of relevant authorities.

The Forum discussed whether the Standards Board should issue a basic job description for independent members as this could be used as part of the process of providing the information necessary to justify the payment of allowances; Swindon had prepared a job description for its independent members and this was available on that Authority's website. The variations in the levels of the allowances, paid by the authorities set out in the circulated table, were noted. Members took the view that there were no specific issues they wished to discuss primarily as the levels of the allowances were set at the discretion of each authority who were probably best placed to take a view on the appropriateness of the allowances paid to their independent members.

6. Indemnities for Councillors and Members of Committees

Sylvia West (South Oxfordshire) had asked that the above item be included on the agenda for discussion. Members noted that it was at the discretion of each authority to decide the indemnity cover provided for elected members. There was no standard practice and it was likely that in some authorities there was no indemnity cover. The option was available to self insure but this could be extremely expensive. Trevor Davies (Swindon) mentioned that job descriptions had been prepared for that Authority's independent members (see 5 above) which could help for insurance purposes. The conclusion was that members should ask their authorities what their indemnity policies were and whether independent members were covered.

7. Recommendations to Parish Councils

Sylvia West (South Oxfordshire) had also asked that the Forum discuss the processes that could be put in place to ascertain if a parish or council had pursued recommendations made by a standards committee after a formal complaints case.

Steven Quayle (Monitoring Officer (Slough)) advised that it was the responsibility of the monitoring officer to check that the appropriate action had been taken and if it hadn't, the case should be taken back to the standards committee. The monitoring officer should, as a matter of good practice, always ensure that a "Timed Action Plan" was in place.

8. Open Forum

The Forum took the opportunity of reviewing the work of the various standards committees over the past six months. This showed that in total some 19 complaints had been received by 9 authorities; 4 authorities had not received any complaints. Of the 19 complaints 5 had been subject to investigation. Two cases involved planning matters. The outcome of the other cases was briefly outlined.

9. Date and Venue for the Next Meeting

The next meeting to be held in March or April 2009 following the next meeting of the Regional Independent Forum Co-ordinators. David Howard was to confirm whether the Vale of White Horse would host the meeting. Date and venue to be confirmed by e-mail.

The meeting ended at 12 45 pm