

To: Standards Committee

Date: 4th December 2009

Item No: 6

Report of: Head of Law and Governance

Title of Report: ETHICAL GOVERNANCE – MEETING WITH LEADER
AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: To advise the Committee of the matters discussed at the recent meeting between the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee, the Leader and the Chief Executive and law and governance officers.

Report Approved by:

Finance: N/A

Legal: Jeremy Thomas

Policy Framework: Not applicable

Recommendation(s): That the report be noted and that the establishment of regular liaison meetings as detailed in the report be welcomed.

1. The first of what are intended to become regular liaison meetings between the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee, the Leader and the Chief Executive and law and governance officers was held on 27th October. The meeting was useful and constructive. In future the liaison meetings will be held every six months, the next meeting taking place in June 2010 (22nd or 23rd June has been identified) and then in January 2011, June 2011 and so on. The meeting felt it would be useful if the Leaders of the Opposition Groups were also invited to the meetings, in order that the promotion of high ethical standards could be cascaded and promoted by Group Leaders to all Members.

2. The matters discussed at the October meeting are set out below:-

(a) Work, Impact, Perception and Achievements

The meeting generally felt the Committee's work programme was sound and that its achievements, as set out in the Committee's Annual Report, considerable. However:-

- (i) The work of the Committee remained relatively unknown. The Annual Report did not get the attention it perhaps deserved, being "noddled through" at Council meetings.
- (ii) The way (perhaps of necessity) that complaints of breach of the Members' Code of Conduct were dealt with caused concern to the subject Member whereas some reassurance (of robustness of process) was needed.
- (iii) The promotional work of the Committee (e.g. high standards of conduct) and advice (through training) needed greater pro-activity.
- (iv) The Committee's work programme ought to be better known about, and all members of Council ought to be able to contribute ideas on work programme elements.

In essence therefore the meeting felt that a re-think of the Committee's effectiveness and profile was needed. This is an item in the Committee's work programme and a report appears elsewhere on this agenda.

(b) Improving communication between Council, Ward members and Residents

The Chair of the Committee explained that the need for the Council to address communication had very much manifested itself in the Osney Island trees investigation. The Chair suggested that whilst front-line officers did have a "knowledge of area", middle management did not to the extent necessary. They needed to be more locally aware.

The Chief Executive said that the Council had launched a comprehensive management development programme which was directed at improving the capacity and performance of all Managers within the organisation. In addition, Officers needed to have a better appreciation of member objectives (i.e. in simple terms what had motivated them to become members). This might be addressed through the Management Practice Group, a regular meeting of middle managers.

The Monitoring Officer referred to the Member/Officer Protocol that the Committee had recently reviewed line by line. The protocol contained references to Ward member issues.

(c) Resources and Support for Standards Work

The Chair was encouraged that the Chief Executive and the Leader (and the Monitoring Officer and the Democratic Services Manager) had a real interest in championing success in standards work. This work was considerable (and unpredictable in volume) but largely hidden. He added that there was also a need for a support network for independent members. To a degree this support network was Standards for England (the Standards Board) but there had been a local regional network that appeared now to be inactive.

The Monitoring Officer reminded the meeting that the Oxfordshire Secretaries Group provided support for Monitoring Officers on standards work (and generally) and the (now emerging as regular) annual meeting of Oxfordshire Standards Members also represented a support network. The next meeting would be held at County Hall on 14th January 2010.

The Democratic Services Manager spoke about the possibility in the future of extending invitations to these annual meetings to local authorities outside Oxfordshire (perhaps urban ones to balance the rural aspect of much of Oxfordshire).

Support (in terms of bulletins, guidance, case studies and direct telephone support) was available from Standards for England.

(d) Committee Remit

Discussion focused on linkages between the Committee and the Council's Audit and Governance Committee. For ease of comprehension, the powers and duties of both Committees are appended to this note.

Members and Officers expressed views on the level of complaints, how they were handled, what lessons were learnt, how those lessons were put into practice to improve things and whether complaints monitoring sat best with the Standards Committee. The meeting concluded that there might be merit in the Audit and Governance Committee taking over responsibility for complaints and introducing to the Committee a role in approving, along with the Audit and Governance Committee, the Council's annual Governance Statement. This would require changes to the powers and duties of both Committees. The report on the Committee's effectiveness and profile elsewhere on this agenda refers to this possibility.

3. The Chief Executive thanked the Standards Committee and its independent members for their work. They represented an independent perspective on the ethical and governance arrangements within the Council and their work, in an unpaid capacity, was very much valued.

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Comment [x1]: Name, telephone number and email

Background papers: None

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