

# DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

## GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

### MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 22 JUNE 2015

**Councillors Present:** Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck (Vice-Chairman), Paul Bryant, James Cole, Lee Dillon, Sheila Ellison, Anthony Pick and Quentin Webb (Chairman)

**Also Present:** Councillor Adrian Edwards, Moira Fraser (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and Councillor Rick Jones

#### PART I

#### 3. Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings held on 27 April 2015 and 19 May 2015 were approved as true and correct records and signed by the Chairman.

#### 4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

#### 5. Forward Plan

The Committee considered the Governance and Audit Committee Forward Plan (Agenda Item 4). Councillor Lee Dillon noted that the Forward Plan did not always include the name of the Lead Member. This would be rectified by the next meeting.

**RESOLVED that** the Governance and Audit Committee Forward Plan be noted.

#### 6. Changes to Governance Arrangements (C2987)

The Committee considered a report (Agenda Item 5) which proposed to amalgamate the Governance and Audit Committee with the Standards Committee to create a new Governance and Ethics Committee.

The report had previously been considered by both the Standards Committee and Governance and Audit Committee, but the proposal was not supported by either Committee. However, Officers had been asked by Corporate Board to look into merging the two committees in order to streamline governance arrangements, particularly when considering that the workload of the Standards Committee had declined over the last few years.

Moira Fraser in introducing the item reported that the recent Peer Review had highlighted that the authority was bureaucratic in nature. This was borne out by the fact that during the previous Financial Year Strategic Support administered in excess of 330 meetings. This did not take into account the myriad of other meetings that Members were expected to attend including outside bodies, group meetings, parish/ town council meetings, meetings with Officers and those administered by other teams. Officers had therefore been seeking opportunities to streamline the number of meetings and this merger seemed a logical choice. The skills required by the Members of the two committees were broadly similar and their remit already overlapped in certain areas. A number of other authorities had already amalgamated the two functions.

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During 2014/15 the Standards Committee met four times, two of these meetings were held virtually. With the exception of the October meeting the only item of business on the agenda was the quarterly update report. During the past three years 34 complaints had been received and the Standards Committee would only have to have considered a maximum of five of these. Since the implementation of the revised standards arrangements around 80% of complaints were dealt with by the Independent Person and the Monitoring Officer at the Initial Assessment stage. There was no Member involvement required at this point in the process.

It was important to note that the current Standards Committee was constituted on a proportional basis. This would also be true of the proposed Governance and Ethics Committee. Officers had therefore proposed the retention of the Advisory Panel (which was not based on proportionality and was made up of two Members of the Administration, two Members of the Opposition, two parish council representatives and two Independent Members) to ensure that the perception of political neutrality was retained.

The Governance and Ethics agenda would be structured into two parts so that the Parish Councillors would not have to stay for the rest of the debate if they did not wish to do so. They would be appointed in a non-voting capacity as they were on the Standards Committee.

In the event that a hearing was required a special meeting would be convened to conduct this item of business.

The paper was discussed at the previous Standards Committee and Members raised a number of concerns. They were nervous that the newly elected District and Parish Councillors might, due to their inexperience generate additional complainants. This was not Officer's experience following the 2011 elections.

Members were also concerned about the possible impact of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) on the level of complaints. If a significant number of complaints were experienced the Standards Committee could be reconstituted although training might offer a better solution. Guidance might need to be provided to Parish Councils on CIL and its use.

When this item was discussed at the previous Governance and Audit Committee Members felt that they would like more time to consider the proposals hence the item being included on this agenda.

The matter has been revisited by the Standards Committee via virtual means. The Committee were largely supportive of the proposal to merge. Councillor Adrian Edwards has raised some concerns about the proposals politicising the standards processes. Members were reminded that the current Standards Committee was proportionally constituted and that the revised Committee would not change that situation. Officers had therefore recommended the retention of the Advisory Panel to address this issue. In addition the retention of the two non-voting parish councillors would be retained on the merged Committee if Members were minded to approve it.

Although this proposal would only generate a small saving both in terms of money and meetings the motivation was to improve the efficiency of the Council's democratic process and combining these two committees would be a good starting point.

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Councillor Anthony Pick sought reassurance that the skills set of Members on the two Committees would be comparable. Officers explained that broadly they would be the same in that they required members to act impartially and have attention to detail. Members of the Governance and Audit Committee would however be required to consider financial reports.

In accordance with paragraph 7.7.1 of the Constitution Members voted to suspend Standing Orders and allow those Members of the Standards Committee present to address the Committee. Councillor Adrian Edwards stated that under the previous standards arrangements the Standards Committee was not required to be constituted on a proportional basis. He was concerned that the revised arrangements might lead to a perception of political bias. This was exacerbated by the current political make up of the Council. He queried whether the proposed merger was an administrative issue. Officers noted that the proportionality rules would have to be applied to either the Standards Committee or the Governance and Ethics Committee due to the enactment of the Localism Act 2011. Councillor Webb commented that the Committee would need to be acutely aware of the possibility of accusations of political bias.

Councillor Rick Jones commented that, as he had only recently been elected, he did not have any experience of either of the Committees but based on the report and the verbal explanation offered at the meeting he supported the merger. His only other concern was about the length of agendas. Officers explained that neither sets of agendas were currently oversubscribed and that the forward plan would assist with identifying any issues in advance of the agendas being prepared.

Councillor Sheila Ellison noted the comments in respect of perception of bias based on the political composition of the Committee. Councillor Lee Dillon commented that either Committee would be constituted on a political basis. He therefore did not see that as an issue.

Members voted to re-instate standing orders. The Chairman thanked the Members of the Standards Committee present for attending.

Councillor Paul Bryant asked for clarification around the comments about CIL. Officers explained that the Standards Committee was concerned that awarding CIL to the town and parish councils might lead to additional complaints being received were parishioners were not supportive of where funding was allocated to.

Councillor Jeff Beck proposed that the Officer's recommendation be accepted. This was seconded by Councillor Paul Bryant.

**RESOLVED that** to recommend to Full Council that the recommendations in the report be accepted.

*(The meeting commenced at 3.00pm and closed at 3.33pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

**Date of Signature** .....