

Minutes of the Meeting of the West Mercia Independent Members' Forum held at the Council Chamber, Castle View, Oswestry on Wednesday, 7th June at 5.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Mrs. Joan Casewell	Bridgnorth District Council
Mr. J. N. Brogden	Oswestry Borough Council
Mr. David Stevens	Herefordshire Council and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority
Mrs. Sheila Garner	Worcester City Council
Mr. M. L. Tebbutt	Shropshire and Wrekin Fire and Rescue Authority
Mr. P. Rowland	South Shropshire District Council
Mr. Malcolm J. K. Smith	South Shropshire District Council
Miss J. C. Hoskins, RRC TD	South Shropshire District Council
Mr. Kevin Hull, Monitoring Officer	Oswestry Borough Council
Mr. Tim Griffiths	Shropshire County Council
Mr. Michael Oliver	Shropshire County Council
Mr. Colin Emeny	Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority
Mr. John Cox	Wyre Forest District Council
Mr. Alan McLaughlin, Head of Legal and Democratic Services	Herefordshire Council
Councillor Martin Bennett	Mayor of Oswestry Borough Council (Introduction only)
Ms. Beverley Jameson	Director of Corporate Services & Deputy Chief Executive, Oswestry Borough Council, (Introduction only)
Mr. Kevin Hull	Borough Solicitor & Monitoring Officer, Oswestry Borough Council
Mrs. Shelley Davies	Democratic Services Officer, Oswestry Borough Council

1. APOLOGIES

Mr. Terry Bayliss, Shropshire County Council
Mr. Mark Salt, Bridgnorth District Council
Mr. Lionel Lovell, Oswestry Borough Council
Mr. W. Sinker, North Shropshire District Council
Mr. Francis Beasland, Borough of Telford and Wrekin
Mr. Robert Rogers, Herefordshire Council and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority
Ms. Angela Brinton,
Mr. Patrick Talbot, Bridgnorth District Council
Mr. David Blakey, Worcestershire County Council
Dr. Murray Mylechreest, Worcester County Council and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority
Mr. Tony Lyons, Malvern Hills District Council
Mr. Paul Leopold, Malvern Hills District Council
Mrs. Christine Davenport, MBE, Worcester City Council
Mr. Chris Williams, Worcester City Council
Mr. C. Brighton, Wyre Forest District Council
Mr. Fred Noble, Wychavon District Council
Mr. I. O. Webb, Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority
Mr. Phillip Moore, South Shropshire District Council
Dr. G. N. St. John Penney, South Shropshire District Council
Mr. Simon Mallinson, Monitoring Officer, Worcester County Council
Mr. Kevin Douglas, Monitoring Officer, Malvern Hills District Council
Ms. Debbie Warren, Acting Monitoring Officer, Redditch Borough Council
Ms. Doreen Porter, Monitoring Officer, Worcester City Council

Mr. Ian Marshall, Monitoring Officer, Wychavon District Council
Mr. Tom Clark, Monitoring Officer, Bridgnorth District Council
Mr. Rod Owens, Monitoring Officer, North Shropshire District Council
Mr. Gareth Owen, Monitoring Officer, Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
Mr. R. W. Kimber, Oswestry Borough Council
Mr. Richard Gething, Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority
Ms. Ann McDowell, Wyre Forest District Council
Mr. Stuart McLaren, South Shropshire District Council
Mr. Alan Jones, South Shropshire District Council
Mr. David Turner, Shropshire County Council

2. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Peter Rowland welcomed those present to the meeting, and thanked Oswestry Borough Council for hosting and clerking the meeting.

Ms. Beverley Jameson, Director of Corporate Services and Deputy Chief Executive welcomed those present to Oswestry and referred to the rural location of the town noting the problems this has in relation to Central Government Policy which generally relates to urban Councils.

The Mayor of the Borough of Oswestry, Councillor Martin Bennett, also discussed the location of the town and mentioned that Oswestry was once part of Wales. The Mayor talked about the Code of Conduct and the difficulties Members are faced with when lobbied and declaring interests. He added that he hoped Independent Members would bring vision, practicality and common sense to Standards Committees and in particular recognise the balance that Councillors require to remain rooted in the community.

Mr. Rowland invited all present to introduce themselves.

Discussion took place regarding the issue raised by Ms. Jameson regarding the need for rural proofing. Mr. Rowland noted that the Standards Board Training DVD on local investigations and hearings is aimed at an urban area Council and that there should also be a version for rural areas.

Discussion also took place on the movement towards unitary councils and the effect this may have on the workload of Standards Committees.

3. HEREFORD MEETING – 3RD FEBRUARY 2006

Minutes from the meeting held at Hereford on 3rd February 2006 were circulated. No comments were received regarding these minutes.

4. UPDATES ON LOCAL DETERMINATIONS/HEARINGS

Mr. Kevin Hull announced that Oswestry Borough Council are running a training session on how to run a hearing on Wednesday, 21st June and asked if any Members present were interested in joining the session they should contact Democratic Services at Oswestry Borough Council.

Mr. David Stevens gave information in relation to a recent hearing that took place at Herefordshire Council where the Monitoring Officer investigated the complaint and therefore was unable to advise the Committee at the Hearing. The difficulties of the Monitoring Officer not being present at the hearing were discussed and Mr. Kevin Hull explained that at Oswestry Borough Council complaints are passed to another officer to investigate so he can advise the Committee at the hearing.

Mr. Peter Rowland stated that South Shropshire District Council complaints are investigated by a trainee Solicitor for the Monitoring Officer to be able to advise the Committee at the hearing.

Mr. David Stevens gave further details regarding the recent hearing at Herefordshire in relation to the difficulties with witnesses at hearings and noted the problems

experienced when the decision of the Hearing was appealed and an Independent Panel in London had to decide whether the decision should be upheld.

Mr. Peter Rowland asked other Members if they had experienced a number of complaints regarding a single issue. Mr. Brogden noted that a similar issue had occurred at Oswestry Borough Council and the Committee had written to the complainant to suggest that the Monitoring Officer is contacted first for advice before taking action to report to the Standards Board.

5. APPOINTMENT OF COUNCILLORS TO STANDARDS COMMITTEES

Mrs. Sheila Garner sought information on how other authorities appoint Councillors to their Standards Committee and detailed recent appointments to Worcester City Council.

Mr. Peter Rowland noted that at some authorities all Councillors wishing to sit on the Standards Committee are interviewed in same way independent and Parish Councils Members are. It was agreed that usually Councillors are appointed to the Standards Committee by Group Leaders at Full Council meetings.

Further discussion took place on whether the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee should be an Independent Member.

6. AIMSce (ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES IN ENGLAND)

Mr. Peter Rowland gave some background to AIMSce and explained that the inaugural meeting was due to take place on 16th October 2006.

Mr. Kevin Hull stated that he agrees to the Association in principal but questioned how it was to be funded.

7. FORUM OPERATION

i) Member Database

Mr. Peter Rowland informed the Association that Shropshire County Council had offered to maintain the Member database to ensure it is updated centrally.

ii) Forum Management

Mr. Peter Rowland asked if any other Member wished to assist him in running the forum and mentioned the possibility of a vice-convenor to help organise forums.

Mr. Alan McLaughlin suggested that an Independent Member of the host authority could act as the vice-convenor to help organise the forum at their authority.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND SUGGESTIONS OF BUSINESS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

i) Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

Mr. David Stevens and Mr. Peter Rowland both recommended Members attending the Annual Assembly stating that it was good opportunity to talk to Members from other areas.

ii) Dates of Hearings

Mr. Kevin Hull suggested that Members of the forum could circulate dates of public hearings so that members of other authorities could attend to observe the hearing.

Mr. Peter Rowland thought this was a good idea and informed the forum that the next scheduled hearing of South Shropshire District Council is on Monday, 3rd July at 2.00 p.m. at Stone House, Ludlow. He added that once the database is available electronically we could regularly send out dates of hearings to other Forum Members.

iii) Councillors Perception of Independent Members

Mrs. Sheila Garner stated that she had been informed by a Councillor of her authority that Independent Members should attend Council meetings and talk to Councillors so the Councillors know who they are and asked other Members for their views on this.

Mr. Peter Rowland suggested that it is a good idea to attend some meetings but a balance is needed and that it is not a good idea to be too friendly with Councillors. It was suggested that it is all part of induction process and an item would be put on the agenda for next meeting to discuss training and induction of Independent Members.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Friday, 26th January 2007 at Shropshire and Wrekin Fire Authority at 2.00 p.m.

Mr. Peter Rowland asked for a suggested venue in Worcestershire for the Summer 2007 meeting.

Meeting ended at 6.35 p.m.