

RESTRUCTURING OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE.

The Standards Committee has the following functions:

Main Functions.

- To promote and maintain high standards of conduct for Borough and Parish members.
- To help members to follow the Code of Conduct.

Specific Functions

- To give the council advise on adopting a local Code.
- To monitor the effectiveness of the Code.
- To train members on the Code, or arrange for such training.
- To assess and review complaints about members.
- To conduct determinations' hearings.
- To grant dispensations to members with prejudicial interests.
- To grant exemptions for politically restricted posts.

“ABOVE EVERYTHING, THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE SHOULD BE ABOVE PARTY POLITICS AND ITS MEMBERS NEED TO HAVE THE RESPECT OF THE WHOLE AUTHORITY, REGARDLESS OF THE GOVERNING POLITICAL PARTY.” This is a quote from Standards for England and they go on to say **“ STANDARDS COMMITTEES SHOULD BE SEEN AS MAKING JUDGEMENTS IMPARTIALLY AND WITHOUT REGARD TO PARTY LOYALTY.”** Also **“ELECTED MEMBERS ON STANDARDS COMMITTEES SHOULD NOT BE SUBJECT TO A PARTY WHIP.”** In other words members must vote with their conscience, which I know everyone on this Standards Committee does.

However, the biggest problem we have in modern life is the perception of the General Public, who view all types of politics with suspicion, especially at this present time. Indeed only last year Maidstone was ranked only 9th. Out of 12 Kent Boroughs when

residents were asked if they felt they could influence decisions in their local area. I have attached some pages on the Role and Make-Up of Standards Committees from which you will see that the suggested number for a committee such as ours is 9. That is 3 Borough Members, 3 Parish Members and 3 Independents. There is a suggestion that some authorities may wish to have a majority of independent members, and although that has happened in at least one case (London), I am not suggesting that route. I am also relaxed about the use of substitutes, for if you agree to what I am suggesting then we have ready trained people.

Anyone looking at the makeup of the MBC Standards Committee at the moment, would instantly come to the conclusion that it is run on Party Political lines, purely, I hasten to add, because of its makeup. Also, if any complainant looked at the makeup of our Sub Committees they would also notice a dominance of Borough Councillors. All of this is not good for the perception of our ethical standing in the eye of the Public, and puts questions in their minds, as to whether we can deliver a fair and balanced decision.

I have been looking closely at the makeup of other Standards Committees in Kent, which make interesting reading, and attach a chart to show my findings. You will see that there are two who have gone along with the recommendations, and one which is close. I won't comment on the one highlighted in red.

I sounded out two of the Group Leaders (unfortunately only two attended the meeting), as to whether such a change would be acceptable, and did not come away from the meeting with the impression that it would be a problem, in fact the reverse.

I believe that now is the time for Maidstone to take a lead in this issue, and to agree that the Borough Council representation should be 1 representative from each of political groupings with a maximum of say 5. This gives scope for councillors for others groups at present

not represented on the Council. It is not an issue of getting rid of people, but one of creating an ethical committee which sets an example for the Council, and I look for your agreement to this proposal. I understand the comments made about experience, but unfortunately, in life, we can be here today, and gone tomorrow. We are, none of us, immortal. **IF WE DO NOT SET THE STANDARDS, WHO WILL?**

Sub Committees:

Whether you agree to the above or not, I would ask you to consider that we reduce membership of our Sub Committees to 3, i.e. 1 Borough Member, 1 Parish Member and 1 Independent Member. This is very much in line with Tribunals, Magistrates etc, and with the membership proposed, would again produce a more balanced panel to the outside world. We do at times struggle to get the 3 Borough Members, for reasons of holidays, and knowledge of the parties involved, and coming down to 3 would make it easier to ensure that we have the required number. The majority of Districts in Kent run on a membership of 3 for their Sub Committees, although, this is more difficult to prove. You may wish to consider, that for Hearings we have 5, which may consist of any makeup as long as there are Borough or Parish members on board, depending where the Councillor concerned is from.

May I ask that you support this change, which is not just change for changes sake, but one of providing a more balanced image to the General Public.

DJW.