



**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY STANDARDS COMMITTEE HELD
ON 8TH March 2007 at 9.15 am
at NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK HEADQUARTERS, HEXHAM**

Present: Dr David Fruin, Mr Douglas Henderson,
Cllr Sue Bolam, Cllr Lawrence Thompson
In Attendance: Stuart Evans – Monitoring Officer
Garry Pointer – Legal Advisor
Linda Pinkham – Corporate Administration Officer

1. Apologies for Absence: Dr Elizabeth Stockdale

2. Election of Chairman:

As had been agreed at the Standards Committee meeting in November 2005, having served his term of office David Fruin stood down as Chairman.

Douglas Henderson was proposed as Chairman by Cllr Thompson, seconded by Dr Fruin. Douglas Henderson was duly elected as Chairman of the Standards Committee for the forthcoming year.

Douglas Henderson accepted the election and took the Chair. He thanked David Fruin for his chairmanship over the past year and a half.

No election for Vice Chairman was held at this meeting.

Members agreed that in future the term of Chairmanship and the production of an Annual Report should be tied in to the end of March, in line with the financial year.

The Chairman reminded Members that there had been a change of Monitoring Officer since the last meeting and endorsed the thanks which had been expressed by the Authority to Terry Davey on his retirement from Monitoring Officer to the Authority in June 2006. The Chairman welcomed Stuart Evans, who had taken on the role of Monitoring Officer.

Action:

Annual Report on work of Standards Committee to be produced at end of financial year.

Election of Chairman to be linked to end of financial year.

3. Minutes of the Last Meeting: 23rd November 2005

The minutes of the meeting held on 23rd November 2005 were agreed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising: It was agreed that the use of the Monitoring Officer's notebook for recording advice given to Members on Declarations of Interest should continue as it could provide a useful record if a matter was challenged in the future. The notebook would be kept by Garry Pointer.



Action:

Monitoring Officer's Notebook to continue to be used for recording enquiries from Members.

4. Report of Monitoring Officer: Consultation on the revised Model Code of Conduct

The Monitoring Officer reiterated the background to the proposed revisions to the Code of Conduct and the Legal Advisor reported that the final document was expected to be available in mid-May 2007. The Code of Conduct would then need to be formally adopted by individual authorities, who would have the opportunity to make their own additions if required.

6a: Gifts and Hospitality Register

The Legal Advisor reported that the Register of Gifts was not currently a public document although most people assumed that it was. The change proposed would bring declarations of gifts into the official Register of Interests.

- Members agreed that the process should be open and transparent and that 'perception' was an important issue.
- Members considered that registering the act of accepting hospitality was the important message and that the actual value was of lesser significance.
- It was understood that this element should relate to one-off, specific activities with regard to their 'capacity as a Member'. On-going relationships, both business and social, would be covered by the 'close association' clause.
- £25 was considered an acceptable starting point to ensure Members erred on the side of caution.

6b. Close Personal Association

The Legal Advisor expected that the Standards Board would issue further guidance on their understanding of 'close personal association'.

- Cllr Bolam considered that this was a difficult issue for Members in rural areas where there was a small population and consequently a close network of associations (both social and business)
- Members highlighted that awareness and sensible judgement by Members were important.

6c. Ability to participate in discussion

The Legal Advisor highlighted that as drafted there would be no change for National Park Authorities and it was noted that Members would therefore be operating under different rules with regard to the National Park Authority than for their appointing District and County Councils. It was felt that this element had not received sufficient consideration with regard to National Park Authorities.

The Monitoring Officer considered that introducing this element to National Park Authorities would make a judgement more balanced. However further clarification would be needed on the type of electoral division which would be applicable to National Park Authority members.

Members considered this to be a very difficult area but the Chairman felt it had been well expressed in the report.



6d. Participation in relation to prejudicial interests

The Chairman considered that this was well expressed and seemed eminently sensible. This was agreed.

8. Publicity

Members considered that this was the responsibility of the Authority as a whole and was not therefore relevant to individual members. The Monitoring Officer reminded Members that the Authority was already audited on this and that National Park Authorities also have a staggered appointment cycle. The current system operated well and it was considered that this proposal was inappropriate.

The response in the report was agreed.

10. Farming and Specialist Interests

Members noted that experience showed that the existing arrangements worked and agreed with the proposal in the report.

12. Minor Points

a. General List of Provisions:

The Monitoring Officer highlighted that the National Park Authorities in England were well organized through the English National Park Authorities Association (ENPAA) and felt that Government discussions should be channelled through this route. This would also raise the profile of the problem that it is not always clear which elements of legislation relate to National Park Authorities and which do not.

b. 'lobbying body'

Members noted that a lobbying body could be a charity but that there were checks and balances in place to ensure that charities do not use lobbying for political ends.

The Legal Advisor expected that fuller definitions or explanations of terminology would be covered in any subsequent guidance produced to the Code of Conduct.

The points in the report were agreed.

Other Points

- Douglas Henderson and David Fruin drew attention to the paragraph on bullying, which they understood as 'behaviour which does not treat others with respect'. Members noted that this could occur Member/Member, Member/Officer or Officer/Member. David Fruin considered that this type of behaviour was adequately covered by references to 'conduct unbecoming' and also through employee Codes of Conduct. However Members agreed that it would be helpful to highlight bullying in this way even though this was dealt with by other provisions, as workplaces were becoming more aware of bullying and the phrase 'bullying' was one which would be understood by the public rather than 'conduct unbecoming'.

13. Conclusion

- The Chairman suggested reinforcing the need for clarification of areas where the Code of Conduct does not apply to National Park Authorities.
- Cllr Thompson welcomed the return to local resolution of issues. However it was noted that local determination would require a change to primary legislation so was unlikely to be introduced for 12 months or so.
- The Chairman highlighted that this would affect the future training needs of the Standards Committee, to ensure that Members were fully prepared to take appropriate action.



- The Legal Advisor confirmed that all local authorities would need to consider the mechanisms for dealing with complaints and assessing whether to proceed with them.

Action:

Response be submitted to the Standards Board as set out in the report and amended as discussed.

5. Information Item: Standards Board 5th Assembly, October 2006

The Monitoring Officer, Stuart Evans, and the Chairman, David Fruin, had attended the 5th Assembly of the Standards Board in Birmingham in October 2006.

Stuart Evans reported that he had found it extremely useful and considered that it was very well organized. He felt that the format which comprised big plenary sessions (over 400 delegates) and work-out groups talking through examples had worked well and reported that representatives from other National Park Authorities and the Minister had been in attendance.

David Fruin considered it was the best meeting he had been to in terms of organization and structure and that it had been a very useful learning experience.

Members recommended that the Chairman and Monitoring Officer attend the 6th Annual Assembly, 'Down to Detail – Making local regulation work' on 15th -16th October 2007 at the ICC, Birmingham.

Action:

The Chairman and Monitoring Officer to attend the 6th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees.

6. Agenda and Date for Next Meeting

The Chairman proposed that the forthcoming annual report of activity should include:

- The Code of Conduct training session – May 2006
- The 5th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees
- Comments on the revised Code of Conduct
- Report on the two informal meetings held, including Corporate Governance
- David Fruin's attendance at the North York Moors NPA Standards Committee meeting
- The appointment of a new Monitoring Officer

The Chairman requested that web pages on the Standards Committee be revised to raise its profile and to indicate that the Standards Committee was in business, even if it did not have any business to consider. This would be done as part of the Authority's new web-site which would come into operation from mid-March 2007.

Training: The Standards Committee noted that there could be up to 10 new Members of the Authority appointed following the District and Parish elections in May 2007 who would require Code of Conduct training. It was agreed that a training session on the Code of Conduct be arranged for 11.00 am on Wednesday 27th June 2007, prior to the Annual Meeting for all new Members, with an invitation to all Members to attend for an update.

A new form for acceptance of the Code of Conduct to be produced, allowing for Members to agree to be bound by whatever Code is current/in place. Assuming there are no delays in issuing it, the new Code of Conduct would be formally adopted by the Authority at their



meeting on 27th June 2007, at which time all Members will be offered the opportunity to register their interests and sign up to the new Code of Conduct.

The next Standards Committee meeting to be arranged for the 2nd or 3rd week in November 2007, after the 6th Annual Assembly, commencing at 9.15 am. It was agreed that the Standards Board training DVD 'Going local' be shown.

Action:

Standards Committee web pages to be revised

Code of Conduct acceptance letter to be revised

Code of Conduct Training – 27th June 2007, 11.00 am (to be confirmed)

Next meeting: November 2007 – to be confirmed.

The meeting closed at 10.38 am.