

**DRAFT EXTRACT FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE
MEETING HELD ON THE 8 SEPTEMBER 2009**

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

5.00PM 8 SEPTEMBER 2009

COMMITTEE ROOM 3, HOVE TOWN HALL

MINUTES

Present: Councillors: Carden, Drake, Steedman and Watkins

Independent Members: Dr M Wilkinson (Chairman), Mrs H Scott

Rottingdean Parish Council Representatives: Mr J C Janse van Vuuren and Mr G W Rhodes

Apologies: Councillor Jeane Lepper and Councillor Carol Theobald

12 MEMBERS' WEB PAGES

12.1 The Committee considered a report from the Director of Strategy and Governance regarding Members' Web Pages (for copy see minute book).

12.2 The Monitoring Officer summarised the report and highlighted that changes had been made to the Members' Web Pages Policy as a result of a Standards Panel recommendation following assessment of a complaint.

12.3 The main changes related to the rules regarding external links on the Members' blog pages, and the rules relating to publicity of political events. The Monitoring Officer stated that some Local Authorities had decided to ban links altogether from their website, whilst others had no adopted policy. He felt the revised policy of Brighton & Hove City Council was between these two positions, and now allowed links but subject to certain restrictions. Further changes were that personal blogs must now include a disclaimer stating that Brighton & Hove City Council could not take responsibility for the content of webpages that were external to its site. Once the policy was adopted this would be mandatory, and failure to include this disclaimer would constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct.

The second change related to publicity of political events on the Council's website. The Monitoring Officer stated that reference to an event was substantially different to promotion or publicity of an event. It was important to recognise that the City Council received political visitors in an official capacity on a regular basis, and reference to such an event, where it concerned one of the functions of the local authority, should not constitute a breach of the Code of Conduct.

If reference to such an event was made by a Member author who then went on to promote the event or share opinions on it, than this would constitute a breach of the Policy and therefore the Code.

The Monitoring Officer added that there were two interpretations of 'functions' of the Council. The first interpretation was the narrow, traditional interpretation of the services the Council provided. The second interpretation related to wider Council functions under the wellbeing powers. This would include a much broader scope of events that could be referred to without consequence, and the Monitoring Officer felt it was important to include this aspect in the Policy.

- 12.4 Councillor Steedman felt that the amended policy was a sensible approach to take to the issue. He believed that most Councillors who chose to blog would not use the Council website anyway, and as they were naturally political in nature when expressing opinions they would want to express themselves more freely than the Council's website would allow. He believed it was right that they were able to do this without undue censure, and links from the Council website to such forums should be allowed.
- 12.5 Councillor Watkins was unhappy with the amendment at 9.4 of the policy as he did not believe the Council's website should contain any references of a political nature and that a strict interpretation of this should be applied to ensure there was no political content supported by the Council. The Monitoring Officer stated that the policy at 9.4 was dependent on the fulfilment of the requirements at 9.1 and 9.2. The amendment was not intended to allow Members to affect support for a political party, but he added that references to factual events could not be a breach of the Code. He understood Councillor Watkins' concerns but felt that 9.1 and 9.2 was adequate in ensuring this would not happen.
- 12.6 Councillor Steedman noted that thought needed to be given to providing guidance to Councillors who used private blogs and the Monitoring Officer agreed. He stated that just because blogs were personal did not mean they were free from the restrictions of the Code of Conduct. The Chairman felt that this would increasingly become an issue in the future and proposed to raise this at the impending Standards Conference.
- 12.7 Councillor Van Vuuren felt that Councillors needed to be directed more firmly to Officers for advice when they were unsure about the content of a webpage, especially as once it was published onto the internet it was very difficult to withdraw. Ms Scott agreed and felt that paragraph 7 of the revised policy should be highlighted to Members accordingly.

12.8 Councillor Watkins felt the changes and implications of the policy were important and requested that a session on this was included in any blog writing training that Members received from the Council.

12.9 **RESOLVED** – That:

1. The Standards Committee notes and approves the content of the revised Members' Web Pages Policy, subject to the approval of the Governance Committee.
2. That the revised policy is referred to the Governance Committee for approval.

