

THE QUARTERLY MEETING AND A.G.M. OF THE ASSOCIATION  
OF COUNCIL SECRETARIES AND SOLICITORS

EASTERN BRANCH

Friday, 13 October 2006

At Forest Heath District Council Offices,  
Mildenhall, Suffolk

**Present:** Barbara Morris (Chairman) and Sue Lyons, Mid Beds District Council; Chris Hall, David Holt and Alan Gillespie, Suffolk County Council; Amerjit Kang, South Beds District Council; Lorraine Browne, Basildon District Council; Andrew Smith, Castle Point Borough Council; Victoria McNeill, Norfolk County Council; Gavin Miles, Broxbourne Borough Council and Bruce Laws, Retired Member.

**Apologies:** Roy Reeves and Colin Meadowcroft, Huntingdonshire District Council; Peter Heard, Forest Heath District Council; Francis Bogie, North Herts District Council; David Barker, East Cambs District Council; Eric Whitfield, Suffolk County Council; Liz Ashness, Broadland District Council; Wilma Wilkie Cambridgeshire County Council; Ian Rickard and Jonathan Reed, Mid Suffolk District Council; Richard Stevens Luton Borough Council; Perry Holmes, Fenland District Council. Pat Adley, St Albans City Council and Monica Blades, Thurrock Borough Council.

**1. Apologies for absence**

As set out above. The Chairman welcomed Victoria McNeill, who had replaced Keir Hounsome at Norwich County Council to her first meeting of the Branch.

**2. Invited Guest**

The Chairman welcomed Christine Greenhalgh, a Good Practice Manager from the Information Commission Office who gave a presentation on the Development and Maintenance Initiative (DMI) relating to Publication Schemes. Christine also gave a general update on FoI and the Information Commissioners Office (ICO). Copies of the slides used in the presentation are attached with these minutes. Publication Schemes had been reviewed during 2005 and had been found not to be working. As a result a further wholesale review was to be carried out with the object of achieving more worthwhile results through the DMI initiative.

A question and answer session followed during which Christine was asked whether notes taken by members of local authorities at Committee Meetings able to be requested so as to be provided in response to an FoI request. She undertook to take that point back for further consideration and to provide a response for circulation to branch members. Christine was also asked whether the Information Commission shared concerns with complainants during the investigation process. She responded that copies of correspondence were not sent to complainants whilst investigations were ongoing but there was communication between the ICO and complainant to keep them informed of the process being followed.

The Chairman thanked Christine for attending the meeting and for her presentation.

### **3. Branch Minutes and Matters Arising**

Minutes of meeting held on 21 July 2006 approved. No matters arising

### **4. Chairman's Annual Report**

The Chairman informed members that she had enjoyed her year (and a bit) as Chairman of the Eastern Branch and she thanked members for their support. She had found the full Council meetings to be of particular interest and value, especially the amount of networking and feedback from colleagues from local authorities around the country. The Eastern branch had held four meetings during the year – at Ipswich in December with Alison Donald giving a presentation on the Suffolk shared services initiative “Doing Business Better”; at the Mid Beds office in February - jointly with SLG – when Matthew Pink had led a workshop on the new Licensing Act; at Chelmsford in May when Dudley Lewis spoke about the work of the LGG/ACSeS unit in providing training and at Peterborough in July where the intended speaker had been cancelled due to a high number of apologies but at which Tony Kilner had attended and informed members of the current and proposed ACSeS policies and initiatives. All the meetings had been interesting and attendance at them had been variable with an average of 14 members, although that had increased to 24 for the meeting in February held on a joint basis with SLG. Membership had remained stable during the year. The Chairman thanked the officers for their help during her year of office and wished her successor well for the coming year.

### **5. Election of Branch Chairman for 2006/2007**

Jonathon Reed was unanimously elected as Chairman of the Branch for 2006/07. In the absence of the new Chairman it was agreed that Barbara would remain in the Chair for this meeting.

### **6. Election of Branch Vice-Chairman for 2006/2007**

Sue Lyons was unanimously elected as Vice-Chairman of the Branch for 2006/07.

### **7. Election of Branch Officers for 2006/2007**

(a) Hon Secretary – Chris Hall was unanimously elected;

(b) Hon Treasurer – Eric Whitfield was unanimously re-elected.

### **8. ACSeS Council Meeting – 14 July 2006**

The Chairman had attended the meeting held at Newark Council Offices on 11 October and she reported on the main items that had been discussed. A summary of the meeting will be forwarded to members when received. The Chairman drew members' attention to:

- A joint SOLACE/CIPFA/IDeA event to be held in November on the subject of the draft revised governance framework consultation document. Work was ongoing on arrangements for a “shared services” conference to take place on 1 December.
- Counsel's Opinion had been sought on the subject of fees for Practising Certificates and this suggested that a reduction on similar lines to Government lawyers was inappropriate and so consideration was being given to lobbying Government for a

reduced fee on the basis of the current financial constraints being placed on local government generally. A copy of the opinion was available on the ACSes web site.

- The proposal to form an Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees was gathering momentum and there was to be an inaugural meeting as a fringe event at the Standards Board Conference next week.
- The issue of approaches from Town and Parish Councils on procedural matters had been raised at a recent meeting with the Ombudsman This was not currently within the Ombudsman's remit although it may become so in the future.
- There are currently 429 members of ACSes
- The revised Members' Code of Conduct following the review was not now to be launched at the ACSes Conference as had been hoped

No dates had been set for future meetings.

## **9. Secretary's Report**

### **(a) Membership**

The Secretary reported that in addition to Victoria McNeill, Sharon Lowe of Braintree District Council, and Kathryn Pettitt of Herts CC had joined and that Perry Holmes of Fenland DC was in the process of joining. Keir Hounsome (Norwich CC and Jonathan Brown (Herts CC) had left. A recent list of Branch members showed that there were now 62 members and that only 4 members had yet to pay this year's subscriptions.

### **(b) Future Meetings**

As the dates of the ACSes Council meetings had not yet been determined it was agreed that until they had, only the date of the next meeting should be arranged at this stage. It was agreed that, subject to the new Chairman being able to make the necessary arrangements, the meeting should be held on Friday 23 February at the offices of Mid Suffolk District Council at Needham Market in Suffolk and that Matthew Cole should be invited to present his workshop on Age Discrimination Awareness. It was also agreed that the meeting should be open to members of SLG to attend and that as much notice as possible should be given to branch members.

The dates and venues of the remaining meetings would be arranged as soon as the Council dates had been determined.

## **10. Treasurer's Report**

In the absence of the Treasurer, David Holt presented the Treasurer's report, which showed a current branch fund total of £5,765.95 as at 30 September 2006. The current level of branch subscriptions was £22 for full members and £7 for past service members and no increase in these levels was proposed.

## **11. County Meeting Reports**

Although it was reported that there had been meetings in Herts and Suffolk, no reports were available.

## **12. Local Land Charges**

Nothing to report.

### **13. Corporate Governance**

The Chairman reported that in her authority the lead on corporate governance was being taken by Audit although legal services was being involved. Amerjit Kang informed the meeting that his authority was dealing with its first referral to the Standards Board and that it was proving difficult as both he and his 2<sup>nd</sup> in command had been involved in giving advice, which resulted in 2 junior lawyers having to deal with the matter. Sue Lyons commented that she had dealt with similar situations and would discuss her experiences with Amerjit.

The Chairman enquired as to whether any authorities were using the IDeA toolkit. No one present was but it was suggested that if IDeA visited an authority there were likely to be costs involved.

Victoria McNeill commented that Norfolk was having an Ethical Governance Audit and Alan Gillespie stated that Suffolk was having a similar audit. Amerjit Kang informed members that a colleague in a neighbouring authority had volunteered for such an audit and that the result had produced a detrimental effect on the authority's CPA. It was reported that Castle Point, Bedford BC and Mid Beds were currently in the process of having their CPA re-assessed.

### **14. Any Other Business**

The Chairman referred to the current situation within the SLG Regional Group which appeared to be struggling. David Holt suggested that the recent practice of opening up ACSeS meetings was good and would help SLG.

### **15. CPD**

1.5 hours