

At a Joint Meeting of the Standards Committees of Durham County Council, Durham Police Authority and County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority held at the County Hall, Durham on Friday 20 February 2009 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Mr E Marchant in the Chair

Durham County Council

Councillors J Armstrong, A Bainbridge, E Bell, C Carr, G Holland, M Plews, J Shiell, D Southwell, and M Williams

Mr Balls, Mrs Blythe and Mrs Winter

Other Members

Councillors P M Charlton, C Magee, R Todd and C Walker

Durham Police Authority

Mr P Thompson

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Gray, Mr Ault, Mrs B Howarth and Mrs E Davies

A1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

A2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received from members in relation to the business on the agenda.

A3 Local Government Reorganisation Update

The Acting Director of Corporate Services provided an update on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) preparations with an impact on the Committees. Interviews were being arranged for new Independent Members for all three bodies. Expressions of interest were also being sought for six Parish Council representatives for the County Council's Standards Committee, to be nominated by the County Association of Local Councils. It was confirmed that the interview panel for Independent Members would have cross party representation.

The most recent LGR Transitional Regulations from Communities and Local Government (CLG) seemed to suggest that:-

- there would be provision for allegations of misconduct which were the responsibility of a predecessor council, to be concluded if necessary by the Unitary Council; and
- if there were any new allegations received after Vesting Day in relation to the conduct of a Member of a predecessor council these would also be determined by the Unitary Council.

In both cases, further guidance and clarification was being sought from CLG and the Standards Board for England.

In the new staffing structures being developed for the Unitary Council, additional support was being included for both the Monitoring Officer and the business of the Committee in general in anticipation of increased workloads. In the meantime, existing relevant staff from the eight authorities would provide support as necessary.

In relation to the Council's new Corporate Complaints Procedure, work to harmonise best practice from the eight authorities had been undertaken, some fine-tuning was yet to be done but it was hoped that the new procedure would be available to share with the Committee in the near future.

A4 Complaints Handling for the period October to December 2008

The County Council's Standards Committee noted a report from the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer providing details of complaints handling during the period October to December 2008 (for copy see file of Minutes).

In the third quarter of 2008/09, 83 complaints had been received, averaging 28 per month, although 15 of these complaints had related to one specific incident. All complaints had been acknowledged within target as well as 94% resolution of Stage 1 complaints. Poor service and staff conduct continued to account for the majority of complaints. However, the number of complaints relating to staff conduct had shown a marked decrease. 377 compliments had been received during the same quarter.

Progress reports on a number of issues raised by Members in relation to specific complaints would be provided at a future meeting.

Members acknowledged that the number of compliments received and the fact that the majority of complaints were successfully resolved at Stage 1, reflected very well on the efforts of staff. This point would be picked up again when the Committee's Annual Report was produced, with suitable recognition through both the Press Office and other channels.

A5 Any Other Business

The Chairman of the County Council's Standards Committee advised that he was to step down from his position at the end of March. He commented that he was pleased to see that great changes had been made over the years with the Committee extending its remit to cover not only Member conduct but also responsibility for the monitoring of service complaints and remarked that these had decreased over the last four years.

He expressed his sincere thanks to colleagues and officers for their support, adding that he hoped the experience of the Committee would be retained and further developed.

Members of the Committee thanked Mr Marchant for his effective and approachable leadership style, commitment, guidance, sound judgement and common sense. Members agreed that the Committee had moved forward considerably under his exemplary leadership.

A6 Exclusion of the Public

Resolved:

That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the said Act.

B7 Review of Completed Complaints

Members of the Committee inspected a sample of completed complaint files for the review period in question.