

AT A MEETING of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at the County Hall, Durham on **TUESDAY 8 NOVEMBER, 2005 at 10.00 a.m**

Mr E Marchant in the Chair.

Members of the Committee

Councillors Maddison, Southwell and Stelling.

Other Members:

Councillors Chapman and Fenwick.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bell and Nugent.

A1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 August 2005 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to Minute No A4 the Committee was advised that the issue of complaints handling arrangements within Social Care and Health would be dealt with later on the agenda. It was also reported that Durham City Council had approached the County Council about arranging a joint training event for Standards Committee Members. It is expected that this would be arranged in December.

A2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

A3 Fourth Assembly of Standards Committees

The Committee noted a report of delegates who had attended the Fourth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees held at Birmingham on 5 and 6 September 2005 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The key points referred to in the report included:

- the increase in the number of cases being referred for local investigation;
- the need for more local involvement with only serious complaints being referred nationally for investigation;
- the review of the Code of Conduct;

A number of other topics had arisen in the Assembly Workshops, particularly in relation to the organisation of investigations and hearings and the key points raised would be progressed in future training provision. The delegates had found the Assembly to be a very worthwhile event. The Chairman also advised the Committee that he had been invited to join a working party to help organise next year's Assembly.

A4 Reform of Public Sector Ombudsmen Services in England

The Joint Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) and Monitoring Officer about a Government consultation exercise on proposals for the reform of the public sector Ombudsmen services in England (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A5 Annual Report of Social Care and Health Representations Procedure 2004/05

The Committee noted a report from the Acting Director about the performance of Social Care and Health in respect of the handling and consideration of representations as detailed in the attached Annual Report (for copy see file of Minutes).

It was intended in future to present the Annual Report to the Committee as a means of further developing Members awareness and understanding of complaints handling and their outcomes within that particular service.

Social Care and Health viewed representations and complaints received as a positive measure towards understanding the needs and concerns of those who accessed their services and the number of representations demonstrated the volume of work undertaken. The top two areas of complaint related to a lack of service and staff conduct and attitude. Most complaints were resolved informally with only 15% proceeding to the formal complaints procedure.

The key issues for action arising from the report included changes to the IT system for recording complaints and ensuring staff accurately recorded any representations received to enable performance and trends to be identified and in so doing provide better information to Members. In addition, it was essential to continue to learn from representations and complaints.

A current restructuring within the service was also designed to improve complaints handling, recording and reporting.

A6 Complaints Handling for the Period July – September 2005

The Committee noted a report from the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) which provided details of complaints handling in the Council during the period July to September 2005 (for report see file of Minutes).

In the second quarter of 2005/06, 92 complaints had been received averaging 30 per month, compared with 26 per month during the same period in the previous year. 43 complainants were either satisfied as to how their complaint was handled or did not pursue their complaint further beyond Stage 1 and this number was likely to increase when complaints still under investigation were complete.

In this quarter poor service was again by far the largest single category of complaint at 50% compared to 40% in the same period of 2004. Staff conduct represented 21% of complaints received in the second quarter compared with 15% in the comparison period.

During the second quarter of 2005/06 a total of 284 compliments had been received, compared to a total of 216 in the comparative quarter in 2004. Additional information about the nature and outcome of complaints received by individual services was also provided in the report.

The report also provided details of Local Government Ombudsman investigation of a complaint against the Council which had been settled locally.

Members reiterated the usefulness of providing as much information as possible about the outcome of complaints, particularly in relation to those involving staff attitude and conduct.

A7 Exclusion of 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 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12 to the said Act.

B8 Review of Completed Complaints

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