

AT A MEETING of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at the County Hall, Durham on **TUESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2006** at **10.00 a.m.**

MR E MARCHANT in the Chair

Members of the Standards Committee for Durham County Council:

Councillors Porter and Stelling

Members of the Standards Committee for County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority also in attendance:

Mr Ault

Other Members:

Councillors Chapman, Gray, Knox, Magee, Meir and Wright

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bell, Canon Hodgson, Mr Thompson and Mrs Winter.

A1 Minutes

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

A2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

A3 The CIPFA Better Governance Forum - Ethical Standards - Report of Delegates

The Committee noted a report of the delegates who had attended the CIPFA Better Governance Forum on 24 November 2005 (for copy of report see file of Minutes). CIPFA regularly hosted events for the Local Government community to share experience and promote best practice in a range of corporate and financial governance areas. A copy of the documentation from the event had been placed in the Members Resource Centre.

The key points raised during the event had been as follows:-

- The latest Legal Developments and forthcoming changes
- Ethics and Human Rights
- Ethics in Governance
- Maladministration and Ethical Standards
- The Role of the Monitoring Officer

In particular, the Forum provided the opportunity to meet with colleagues from other authorities and further cement understanding and anticipation of the next steps in moving forward the ethical standards agenda.

A4 Standards of Conduct in English Local Government: The Future

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) and Monitoring Officer detailing a Discussion Paper from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister which set out the Government's vision for the future of the conduct regime for Local Authority Members and Employees (for copy of report see file of Minutes). The proposals would also impact on Fire and Police Authority Members.

The Discussions Paper reflected the Government's likely response to the recommendations of the Graham Committee (Committee on Standards in Public Life), the ODPM Select Committee and the Standards Board for England and also dealt with the question of the future conduct regime for employees.

Importantly, there was included a statement from the Government that local government had a strong track record of high standards of conduct, but in order to maintain and improve upon that position further changes were proposed.

Another key message was the Government's expectation for Local Standards Committees to fulfil an overarching role to proactively promote and embed high standards of conduct throughout the whole of the organisation, with a clear link here to the increasing importance of governance issues in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process or any future inspection regimes.

The proposals included changes to the Member Code of Conduct following the extensive consultation previously undertaken and these changes appeared broadly consistent with views previously expressed by the Committees.

As far as timing was concerned, the new Member Code was expected to appear towards the end of 2006, whereas other changes (most notably the local filter initiative) would require legislative change and Parliamentary time.

In conclusion, it seemed that the Government had now accepted the thrust of the original Nolan Committee findings - that conduct issues should largely be dealt with locally, with strategic regulation at the national level.

Resolved:

That the report be noted and the proposed changes be welcomed and the Government be encouraged to introduce them as quickly as possible.

A5 Standards Committee - Future Training Arrangements

The Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) reported on plans which were being developed for future training provision for all Members.

There were a number of key drivers to this:

- Being prepared for local investigations and local hearings as the Standards Board referred more cases to local level;
- Being prepared for all of the changes likely to arise from the Government's Discussion Paper detailed in the previous item;
- What further steps were necessary to raise the profile of the Standards Committees to embed high standards of conduct throughout the organisation, i.e. a much more proactive role; and
- What refresher training and awareness was necessary for Members generally on the conduct regime; and
- To take advantage wherever possible of collaborative events such as those at South Tyneside and Sedgfield Borough Councils.

It was intended to organise a programme to address these issues, both specifically for Standards Committee Members and all Members in general. Appropriate format and timing was yet to be determined and Members would be appraised in due course.

Resolved:

That the plans be noted.

A6 Complaints Handling for Period October - December 2006

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

The quarter had seen a modest reduction in numbers of complaints received compared with the previous year, and significantly less than in the last reported quarter of 2005/06.

Corporate performance targets for handling complaints had been met and a significant number of satisfied complainants or complaints not pursued beyond Stage 1 was anticipated.

Poor Service (52%) and staff conduct (20%) were now firmly established as the main causes of complaint and further detail had been provided by Services on both the nature and outcome of complaints received. In particular, much more detail was now available from Social Care and Health as part of their ongoing work to revise and improve their Statutory Representations Procedure.

As far as evidenced compliments were concerned, these continued to far out number complaints received. In the first nine months of 2005/06 some 700 had been received compared with 214 complaints.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

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 12A 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.