

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

AT A MEETING of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at the County Hall, Durham on **TUESDAY 23 MAY 2006** at **10.00 a.m.**

MR E MARCHANT in the Chair

Members of the Standards Committee for Durham County Council:

Councillors Barker, Southwell, Stelling, Williams and Mrs D Winter JP.

Other Members:

Councillors Gray, Meir and O'Donnell.

A1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14th February 2006 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

In relation to Minute A4, (The Future of Standards of Conduct in Local Government) the Committee was advised indications were that there would be a further and final consultation exercise on the New Code of Conduct for Members with an expectation that the new Code would come into force in May 2007.

In addition, Members were advised that the ability for Monitoring Officers and Standards Committees to filter complaints against Members was anticipated now in 2008.

With reference to Minute A6, (Future Training Arrangements) Members were advised that this matter had been given further consideration and after consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman and the revised likely timetable for further changes in the conduct regime, it was proposed that a familiarisation exercise be undertaken with the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the three Standards Committees on our procedures for investigation and determination of complaints.

In addition, a training event was suggested for September with a recognised external facilitator. The morning session would be open to all Members and would take the form of a refresher of the whole conduct regime. The afternoon session would be for the Members of the three Standards Committees and would involve a practical scenario of a local investigation and hearing.

It was also suggested that the Council should investigate the use of a self assessment diagnostic tool available through the Standards Board/Audit Commission/IDeA to audit the Council's performance as an ethical organisation which would result in the production of an action plan identifying possible further development.

Resolved:

That the information provided be noted and the proposals/suggestions for training and investigation of the diagnostic tool be agreed.

A2 Declarations of Interest

Mrs D Winter declared an interest in relation to paragraph 28 of the Complaints Handling Report (Agenda Item 4).

A3 Annual Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2005

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) and Monitoring Officer advising Members about the publication of the Annual Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life 2005 (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

The Annual Report presented an overview of the Committee's main activities in 2005 and a full copy was available in the Members Resource Centre and electronically.

Importantly for the Council, the Report focused attention on the Local Government Ethical Framework and was a key contributor to the Government's recent discussion paper "Standards of Conduct in English Local Government - the Future", which had been considered at the Committee's meeting held on 14th February 2006.

It was explained that the report's reference to a strengthening of the independent composition of Local Standards Committees might be a reference to either an increase in the proportion of independent (non-elected) members or the position of the Chairman.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A4 Complaints Handling for the period January - March 2006

The Committee considered a report from the Deputy Chief Executive (Corporate Services) which provided details of complaints handling in the Council during the period January to March 2006 (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

The quarter had seen a modest reduction in the number of complaints received compared with the same quarter in the previous year. The figures for 2005/06 as a whole showed a 12% reduction in comparison to the previous year.

Corporate performance targets for handling complaints had been met with a significant number of satisfied complaints or complaints not pursued beyond Stage 1 and these numbers might well increase considerably when the significant number of complaints still under investigation were completed.

Poor Service (44%) and Staff Conduct (38%) were firmly established as the main causes of complaint and further detail was provided on a service basis on both the nature and outcome of complaints received.

Additional information relating to two complaints made regarding Education School Transport were circulated at the meeting (for copy see file of Minutes).

As far as evidenced compliments were concerned, these continued to far out number complaints. In the final quarter of 2005/06 a total of 188 compliments were received, giving a figure of 890 for 2005/06 compared with a total of 299 complaints.

The Chairman advised the Committee that its Annual Report would be submitted to the County Council in August, giving clear comparisons with the complaint figures over the previous two years, as well as the position with compliments and Ombudsman investigations.

As far as comparisons with other authorities were concerned, the information available was fairly limited, although from what had been possible to collect previously the County Council seemed to compare favourably.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A5 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 item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the said Act.

B6 Review of Completed Complaints

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