

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the Standards Committee held at the County Hall, Durham on Thursday 15 February 2007 at 10.00 a.m.**

### **PRESENT:-**

**Mr E Marchant** in the Chair

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors Maddison, Southwell, Stelling and Mrs D Winter

### **Other Members:**

Councillors C Carr, R Carr, N C Foster, Hunter, Magee, Meir and O'Donnell.

### **Member of the Standards Committee for Durham Police Authority:**

Mrs E Davies

### **A1 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2006 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to Minute A3 the Committee was advised that the review of Members' register entries was virtually complete.

With reference to Minute A4 ('Raising the Profile' of the Standards Committee) Members were informed that an article was to appear in the next edition of Countywide, promoting the work of the Standards Committee together with a promotional article on the County Council website. As far as measuring an Effective Ethical Environment, was concerned, Sunderland City Council had already carried out an Ethical Governance Audit and feedback from this exercise had been given to the County Council. It was anticipated that the County Council would undertake a similar exercise following the conclusion of the Corporate Performance Assessment in May 2007.

In relation to Minute A5 and the question raised as to whether the indemnity cover would extend to appointments to outside bodies, the Committee was advised that new guidance was currently in the process of being prepared in relation to this issue.

## **A2 Declarations of Interest**

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

## **A3 Corporate Complaints Procedure - Internal Control Report**

The Committee considered the report of the Internal Audit and Risk Management Division detailing the outcome of the review that had been carried out on the Corporate Complaints System (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

The overall objective of the review was to provide a risk based assessment of the systems in place in order to form an opinion as to whether they were robust and provided an adequate basis for effective control.

The Committee also discussed the merits of the Local Member being kept informed about service complaints arising in their area where appropriate, recognising the potential sensitivity of this issue.

### **Resolved**

1. That the recommendations and management responses contained in the report be approved.
2. That the Committee record its appreciation for this piece of work, both as an independent assessment and an improvement action plan.
3. That further consideration be given as to what information could be provided to Local Members.

## **A4 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill**

The Committee noted a report of the Acting Director Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer advising Members about the publication of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill with specific reference to Part 9 of the Bill which related to Ethical Standards (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

An extract of the Explanatory Notes accompanying the Bill detailing all the Clauses contained in Part 9 was attached to the report.

As far as the new Member Code of Conduct was concerned, the Government had published its latest consultation paper in late January with a deadline of 9 March for responses. As a result, a Special Joint Standards Committee had been arranged for 8 March to consider a response.

**A5 Standards Board for England Finding - Allegation Reference: SBE16245.06**

The Committee noted a report from the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer in relation to an allegation made to the Standards Board that Councillor Gray had failed to register his membership of two other local authorities in his Durham County Council register of interests.

The Standards Board had concluded that Councillor Gray had indirectly breached the Code of Conduct by failing to register his membership of the two authorities. However, it found that no action needed to be taken as Councillor Gray had updated his register of interests as soon as he was made aware of the discrepancy, having explained that this had been an inadvertent omission.

This incident had also served as a timely reminder to all Members of the importance of keeping their register entry up to date and complete.

**A6 Complaints Handling for the Period October to December 2006**

The Committee noted a report from the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer which provided details of complaints handling in the Council during the period October to December 2006 (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

Once again, Members were advised that as a result of recent Service restructurings, direct comparisons were not always possible and this would take time to regularise.

In the third quarter of 2006/07, 69 complaints were received averaging 23 per month compared with 21 per month in the period October to December 2005.

All complaints in this latest quarter had been acknowledged and received full responses or progress reports within the Council's performance targets with 43 complainants either satisfied as to how their complaint was handled or not pursuing their complaint further beyond Stage 1.

In this quarter, poor service had been the largest single category of complaint at 43% compared with 52% in the same period in 2005. Staff conduct represented 23% of complaints received in the third quarter compared to 20% in the comparison period.

As far as evidenced compliments were concerned, the total number recorded for this quarter was 182.

**A7 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 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the said Act.

**B8 Review of Completed Complaint Files**

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