

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

**At a Meeting of the Standards Committee** held at the County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 14 August 2007 at 10.00 a.m.**

### **PRESENT:**

**Mr E Marchant** in the Chair

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

Councillors Barker, and Southwell

### **Other Members:**

Councillors Armstrong, Chapman, Douthwaite, E Foster, Myers, Pendlebury, and Stradling, Mrs E Davies and Councillor O Brown

### **A1 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2007 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to Minute A3 (Ethical Governance Audit) the Committee was advised that the analysis and comparator report had now been received from the External Auditor (Audit Commission) which would be a draft for discussion. The discussion on this will take place in September. Although there were positive messages coming from this there would also be an action plan for further improvement. A report would be presented to the Committee in due course.

Also in relation to Minute A3 (the Local Member being kept informed about service complaints) there had been some clarification on the point from the Information Commissioner alongside the question of dip sampling all files. Further work on this was to be undertaken by the Council's legal staff and it was hoped to be able to report on a positive outcome at the next meeting.

The Committee was advised that in relation to Minute A4 (Revised Members' Code of Conduct) the County Council had adopted its new code on 28 June, the Fire Authority had now also adopted its new code, and the Police Authority would do so in September. New guidance had been issued to Members, two training events about the Code were held in July, and in October there will be drop in sessions as part of the Member Development Programme. Members were again asked to seek clarification if they had any uncertainties about the Code.

## **A2 Declarations of Interest**

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

## **A3 Local Government Ombudsmen- Annual Review 2006/07**

The Committee noted the Report of the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer about the publication of the Annual Review of the Local Government Ombudsmen for England 2006/07 entitled 'Delivering Public Value' (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

The report provided a broad overview of the national picture on performance for 2006/07 and key areas of development activity. It had been published to coincide with the issue of Annual Letters to all principal authorities.

Members were advised that the Commission would publish its Annual Report in September, which would include summary annual accounts.

The Commission had also recognised that partnership working had grown in importance in local authorities and the Local Government Ombudsmen must adapt their working methods in order to ensure an effective service to complainants and councils.

## **A4 Standards Board for England Annual Review 2006/07**

The Committee noted a report of the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer advising about the publication of the Annual Review of the Standards Board for England 2006/07 entitled 'To Higher Standards' (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Review outlined the progress that had been made in developing a locally based ethical system, and explained the part the Standards Board had played in moving this process forward.

During 2006/07 the review of the Code of Conduct was completed. The Majority of the Standards Board's recommendations were implemented, leading in their view, to the introduction of an improved, less restrictive Code of Conduct.

The Local Government and Public Improvement in Health Bill which was on course to become law in the autumn, would make standards a truly local issue. The Standards Board view point was that local standards committees would have the responsibility for receiving complaints and deciding whether they should be investigated. This in turn would clarify the Standards Board's new role as a strategic regulator, to monitor standards overall and provide support and oversee local authorities in the application of the Code. In

2006/07 that process had already begun with over half of all cases being investigated locally.

The review also supplied details of the key findings of four major research projects commissioned by the Board and completed in 2006/07.

## **A5 Complaints Handling for the Period April to June 2007**

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 April to June 2007 (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

It was usual practice to incorporate details of the statistics for the comparative period in the previous year, however, Members were advised that as a consequence of the revised reporting arrangements following the Internal Audit review direct service comparisons were not possible.

In the first quarter of 2007/2008, 76 complaints had been received, which averaged 26 per month (compared with 26 per month in the period April to June 2006).

72% of complaints in this quarter had been acknowledged and received full responses or progress reports within the Council's performance targets. 56 complainants were either satisfied as to how their complaint had been handled or did not pursue their complaint further beyond Stage 1. However, these numbers were expected to increase when the numbers of complaints still under investigation were complete.

In this quarter, poor service was the largest single category of complaint at 33% compared to 61% in the same period in 2006. Staff conduct represented at least 13% of complaints received in the first quarter of this year compared with 12% in the comparison period.

As far as evidenced compliments were concerned, 224 were received during the quarter. The Committee acknowledged the significance of this figure and suggested that in order to give out a positive message on the work of the Authority and in particular its staff an article should be placed in the next issue of Countywide.

The report also included additional information which individual Services had provided on the nature and outcome of complaints during the period in question.

As far as Local Government Ombudsman complaints were concerned, the report also included the Council's Annual Letter for 2006/07 (its annual health check from the Ombudsman) which contained a number of very positive messages, including the Council's improved response times.

The Ombudsman had also made particular mention of a locally settled case involving delay and non disclosure by the Council. This would be looked into further and a report would be presented to the Committee in due course.

The Ombudsman's Annual Letter now formed part of the evidence gathered for the Comprehensive performance Assessment process and it was pleasing to note that for the third year running there have been no findings of maladministration against the Council by the Ombudsman.

## **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 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.

## **B7 Review of Completed Complaint Files**

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