

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the Standards Committee held at the County Hall, Durham on **Thursday 10 July 2008 at 11.00 a.m.**

PRESENT:

Mr E Marchant in the Chair

Members of the Standards Committee:

Councillors Armstrong, A Bainbridge, E Bell, Jopling, Murphy, Plews, Shiell, Southwell, Stelling, Williams and Mr Ault and Mrs Smith.

Other Members:

Councillors Blakey, Gray, E Huntington, Tomlinson and Mrs Davies and Mrs Khan-Willis.

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Balls, Mrs Blythe, Mr Thompson and Mrs Winter.

A1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2008 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to Minute No. A3 (Consultation on Local Assessment) the Committee was advised that the Fire and Police Authorities had subsequently decided to appoint only the two Independent Members from each other's Standards Committee to address the new local assessment requirements.

A2 Declarations of Interest

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

A3 Role and Composition of the Standards Committee

The Committee noted a report from the Acting Director of Corporate Services which included an extract from the Council's Constitution detailing the role and composition of the Standards Committee (for copy see file of Minutes).

The County Council had now agreed to appoint the Independent Members of the Fire Authority and Police Authority Standards Committees to it's Standards Committee.

The Acting Director of Corporate Services advised Members that from April 2009 all Standards matters, including those of parish and town councils, would be the responsibility of the Unitary Authority's Standards Committee and a new recruitment and appointment process would take place for Independent Members ahead of that date.

A4 Procedure for Local Assessment of Complaints against Members

The Committee considered a report from the Acting Director of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer about the procedure for local assessment of complaints against Members and initial assessment criteria (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

From 8 May 2008 Standards Committees had three distinct roles:-

- Receiving and assessment complaints
- Reviewing local assessment decisions
- Conducting hearings following an investigation into the complaint

There was provision for more serious matters to be reported back to the Standards Board for England. The report identified the next steps for Members, including, arrangements to establish necessary sub-committees. The Access to Information provisions would not apply to the sub-committees, however, a written summary, open to public inspection, had to be provided.

Appropriate training would be organised for Committee Members in due course.

Resolved:

- (i) That the procedure and assessment criteria be approved;
- (ii) That the delegations to the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the Chairman, as set out in the Procedure in Appendix A, to establish appropriate sub-committees for the purposes of administering the local assessment arrangements be approved;
- (iii) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make any changes to the Local Determination Procedure to incorporate the new legislative requirements and guidance from the Standards Board for England relating to hearings in respect of the local assessment of complaints.

A5 Complaints Handling for the Period January to March 2008

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 periods January to March 2008 and 2007/08 as a whole (for copy of report see file of Minutes).

The 2007/08 performance was summarised as follows:-

- total number of complaints (251) had declined for the third year in succession.
- there were high levels of satisfaction with complaints handling or complaints not being pursued beyond Stage 1.
- poor service and staff conduct were well established as the two main causes of complaint
- evidenced compliments were running at three times the level of complaints.

Included in the report was a copy of the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for 2007/08. Complaints to the Ombudsman were down on previous years, there were no issues of concern to raise in formal reports and the Council's response times to Ombudsman enquiries had improved considerably. These were all important factors in the Council's overall corporate governance performance.

It was agreed that for the next meeting Members would be appraised on how the Council defined formal complaints and arrangements to keep Local Members informed about complaints received and their outcomes.

A6 Local Government Reorganisation

At the next meeting Members would be appraised on LGR preparations as far as Standards issues were concerned, including convergence on complaints handling and dealing with petitions.

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.

Signed

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The Chairman of the meeting held on Thursday 21 August 2008