

# **TEESDALE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**ANNUAL REPORT  
2007/08**

## **FORWARD FROM THE CHAIR**

This is the first time that an annual report on the work of the Standards Committee has been produced. It is important that the work of the Standards Committee should be visible to the authority and wider public.

This is particularly the case at a time of significant change, given that Standards Committees have now taken on greater responsibility to deal with complaints against members locally. Standards Committees will need to report quarterly to the Standards Board for England on complaints received, investigations undertaken and performance information such as time taken to consider complaints and to complete investigations.

During the year, the Standards Committee continued to work to develop the expertise of its members to prepare them for local management of complaints, to monitor developments which have taken place in relation to the new Members' Code of Conduct, adopted by the Council in May 2007, and to promote high ethical standards among local authority members throughout Teesdale.

I expect 2008/09 to be another busy and interesting year for the committee.

John Hughes  
Chair  
2007/08

## **1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

All local authorities must demonstrate high standards of ethical conduct in the actions and behaviours of their members and officers.

The Local Government Act 2000 required Councils to establish Standards Committees within each County and District area. The principal role of the Standards Committee for Teesdale is to promote and maintain high ethical standards, and observance and compliance with the Members' Code of Conduct, among members of the District, Town and Parish Councils within Teesdale District.

Prior to May 2008, the Standards Board for England was the body to which complaints against members needed to be made and it was also responsible for deciding whether complaints should be investigated, either by one of its Ethical Standards Officers or referred to the local Standards Committee.

The role of the Standards Committee has now become more significant with the implementation of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 which has transferred the responsibility for both receiving and dealing with complaints against members to local Standards Committees.

## **2. MEMBERSHIP OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

The Standards Committee comprises seven members of the District Council, three independent members and, from May 2008, three (instead of two) Parish Council representatives.

### **District Council Members:**

The District Council members in 2007/08 were Councillors Richard Bell, Kenneth Coates, Pauline Charlton, Martin Clark, Margaret Hamilton, David Reed and John Salter. Councillor Dreda Forster replaced John Salter in January 2008.

### **Independent Members:**

Dianne Austin, a former member and chair of the District Council, has been a member of the committee since its formation in 2002. She was appointed vice chair in March 2008.

John Hughes, a former local authority chief officer, was appointed as a member in September 2006, and has served as chair of the committee since his appointment.

Trevor Lewis, a consultant forensic photographer and former police officer, was appointed in December 2007. He replaced Tony Callender who resigned his position in August 2007, following his relocation out of the area.

### **Parish Members:**

The two original Parish representatives, Councillors David Reed (Staindrop) and Alan Wilkinson (Barnard Castle), both stepped down in May 2007, David, due to his being elected as a District Councillor and Alan, due to retirement. David has been re-appointed to the committee as a District Council representative.

Councillor John Blissett (Barnard Castle) was appointed in December 2007 and Rosemary Thompson (Cotherstone) in February 2008.

The Council has now agreed (April 2008) to increase the Parish representatives to three, in preparation for undertaking the local management of complaints.

### **3. WORK OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE IN 2007/08**

#### **Meetings:**

The Standards Committee met four times during the year, on 13 June 2007, 26 September 2007, 19 December 2007 and 18 March 2008. John Hughes was re-appointed as chair at the June meeting, with Tony Callender as vice chair. Dianne Austin took over as vice chair in March 2008.

#### **Revised Code of Conduct:**

During 2006 and 2007, the committee considered the proposed new Members' Code of Conduct and submitted a response to the Government consultation on the proposed changes. The revised code was laid before Parliament on 4 April 2007 and adopted by the Council on 16 May 2007.

Familiarisation with the new code has been one of the two principal issues focused on by the committee during 2007/08. The other has been familiarisation with the requirements and procedures of the local management of complaints against members, implemented by the Government on 8 May 2008.

#### **Training:**

The Monitoring Officer made presentations to the Standards Committee, to the new Council Induction Session and to the Parish Forum on the revised Code of Conduct, which also introduced new requirements relating to the Registration of Interests. Training sessions were also offered to all Parish Councils. The Council Induction also covered the role of the Standards Committee and the Member Officer Protocol.

The Monitoring Officer, John Hughes and Margaret Hamilton attended a Standards Board training event on the new code in Newcastle in June 2007. Also in June, the Monitoring Officer and David Reed attended a training event organised by Sedgefield Borough Council, at Ferryhill, which concentrated on the new code and the introduction of local management of complaints. The Monitoring Officer increased his knowledge of the requirements throughout the year through membership of the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, and meetings of the County Durham Monitoring Officer Group.

The committee's understanding has been assisted by reviewing the Standards Board's guidance relating to the new code (issued in May 2007) and local assessment of complaints (issued in May 2008) and training DVDs produced by the Standards Board.

A series of workshops was also held for all elected and co-opted members of the District Council dealing with the requirements on local authorities relating to equalities and diversity, and the link to the code of conduct.

The committee has also considered good practice guidance issued by the Standards Board and made recommendations to Council relating to the adoption of good practice by members on the following matters:

- Predetermination, predisposition and bias

- Prejudicial interests
- Guidance on gifts and hospitality
- Protocol relating to the disclosure of confidential information.

### **Complaints Against Members:**

Since the introduction of the Members' Code of Conduct in 2002, there had been only four complaints made against Teesdale members (two against members of the District Council, in 2004 and 2005; two – although one incident – against Parish Council members, in 2005), none of which were referred by the Standards Board for investigation, until late 2007.

In December 2007 and January 2008, complaints were made against two District Council members, both alleging that the members concerned had acted disrespectfully to other members, thereby bringing the Council into disrepute. Neither complaint was referred for investigation.

A further complaint, alleging that eight members of the District Council had breached the code by their actions toward the complainant and other members, thereby bringing the Council into disrepute, was also not referred for investigation, this time after a request, by the complainant, for a review of the original assessment. This counts as eight complaints, bringing the total number of complaints made in 2007/08 to ten.

No formal complaints were made against members of Parish Councils in 2007/08.

### **Local Assessment of Complaints:**

Potentially, the most significant issue for this (and all other) Standards Committees during 2008/09 will be the devolution, from May 2008, from the Standards Board to local Standards Committees, of the receipt, assessment and, where necessary, the investigation and determination of complaints of misconduct against members of the District Council and Parish Councils.

The Committee will determine, at its first meeting in 2008/09, following consideration of the Regulations and the Standards Board Guidance, how it wishes to organise itself in order to effectively discharge this responsibility, including the requirement to give reasonable publicity to the public to the changed procedure for making complaints.

### **The Monitoring Officer:**

The Monitoring Officer is the principal advisor to the Standards Committee. It is one of three statutory positions which each District Council must have (the other two being the Head of Paid Service and the Chief Finance Officer).

The Monitoring Officer has a statutory role in ensuring that the Council, its members and officers, carry out their functions in a proper and lawful manner and has a role in contributing to the promotion and maintenance of high standards of conduct throughout the organisation.

