

Durham County Council Standards Committee 2010/2011 Development Strategy

The Standards Committee have a common interest in that we believe in principled local politics and part of our role being to champion and promote high standards of conduct amongst our local politicians.

Research has proved that councils, which display good conduct, enjoy higher levels of public confidence than those, which do not.

It is widely recognised that a number of factors may affect public trust in local government, a key driver is often the amount to which the public are kept informed.

Building and maintaining an ethical framework is of paramount importance, and we believe that the ethical framework and Standards Committee have become an established and accepted part of the corporate life within County Durham.

Public expectations of Parish, Town and Unitary Authority Councillors remain high. It is for this purpose that a Development Strategy for the Standards Committee has been established.

Code of Conduct – Approach

The task is to encourage greater awareness and the acceptance of the 'values of the code of conduct' not just the regulator element, but also the ethics of the code as a whole. The code can provide the public with confidence that Councillors are acting on their behalf working to the guidelines of probity and good behaviour and within an ethical framework.

Development Strategy

This Development Strategy sets out how we will continue to build and maintain our ethical framework. The Standards Committee will:

- Work cohesively with the Chairman and Leader of the Council, CEO Officers, Councillors (County, Town and Parish), Monitoring Officer, 151 Officer and Council staff (see appendix A),
- Be open and transparent about the work of the Chair and Vice Chair and committee members and proposed agendas
- Create an opportunity for Councillors to comment on the code and how they would like to improve it
- Creating an awareness and understanding of the ethical framework
- Develop communication links with Councillors, officer's and the general public
- Consider the financial implications of the DCC Standards Committee (SC) and the work that is carried out on their behalf e.g. investigations.
- Demonstrate development through specific objectives, key performance indicators, personal and annual committee appraisal
- Extending the opportunity for training and awareness of the code

Development Plan

Leadership

To provide positive leadership through:

- The appointment of the Standards Committee Chair who will provide leadership and guidance
- The appointment of a Vice Chairman with a view to contribute to development is essential.
- The Standards Committee being consulted and agreeing the agenda for development.
- Regular meetings with Monitoring Officers to appraise progress and consider future development. *An essential part of the programme is to work with the Officers advice and guidance –generally the Standards Committee should know their Council members and procedure*

Understanding the Role of Standards Committee

The Standards Committee will develop its role by:

- Being aware of Council structures, how the Council operates and its protocols and procedures
- The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Standards Committee will meet with officers to plan meeting agendas and to gain further understanding of items being presented
- Building alliances with other committees
- Becoming aware of how to use and work with Standards for England (SfE), information and direction. *This is an on-going process; there is something new to learn about protocol and procedure all the time. Independent members have to grapple with a whole new set of procedures many very different from the commercial setting. Furthermore this is currently under review further to the Governments announcement of its intention to abolish the Standards Board regime*

Raising awareness of the 'Value of the Code'

The Standards Committee will raise awareness of the 'value of the Code' by:

- By recognising that raising awareness of the Code is an on-going task; we must focus on four key areas that have a vested interest in the success of the programme; SC, All Councillors, Officers/staff and General Public in Durham.
- We have established a series of Key Performance Indicators which are being used to evaluate our performance.

Councillor / Standards Committee Training and Development

The Standards Committee will:

- Ensure that the training and development needs of Councillors and Standards Committee members are identified and action is taken to meet these needs.
- Town and Parish Council training/briefing programmes will be set up by the Monitoring Officers and the SC Chair. Independent members to introduce aspects of the development programme at these sessions.
- SC to be invited to specific 'Chairman' training events and updates on the code.
- Ethics and Governance sessions will be organised for Councillors and SC to explain how relevant this area is and the role for SC in its execution
- New Independent members induction training will be provided followed by an open discussion with all Independent members and Monitoring Officers on the importance of independence and scrutiny

Demonstrating the Value of the Standards Committee

To demonstrate the value of the Standards Committee we will:

- Identify a number of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and these will be linked to the national indicators. Performance against targets will be reported to the Standards Committee on a regular basis and to the Council annually.
- The Chairman and Independent members will visit Parish and Town Councils to raise awareness of the value of the code.
- The Standards Committee Members will raise awareness of the value of the Code with other Members of the Council.
- Training will be provided to Standards Committee and Council personnel and to raise awareness of the ethical framework.
- After every conference attended, full feedback will be given to the Standards Committee. *Again this is under review further to the Governments recent announcement of its intention to abolish the Standards Board regime.*

Development Programme 2010

To establish a transparent and open development programme is 'an opportunity not to be missed' in the opinion of the Chair.

It will be a learning curve into the world of working in collaboration with an organisation plus the added dimension of the 'political' approach, which is to be taken into account.

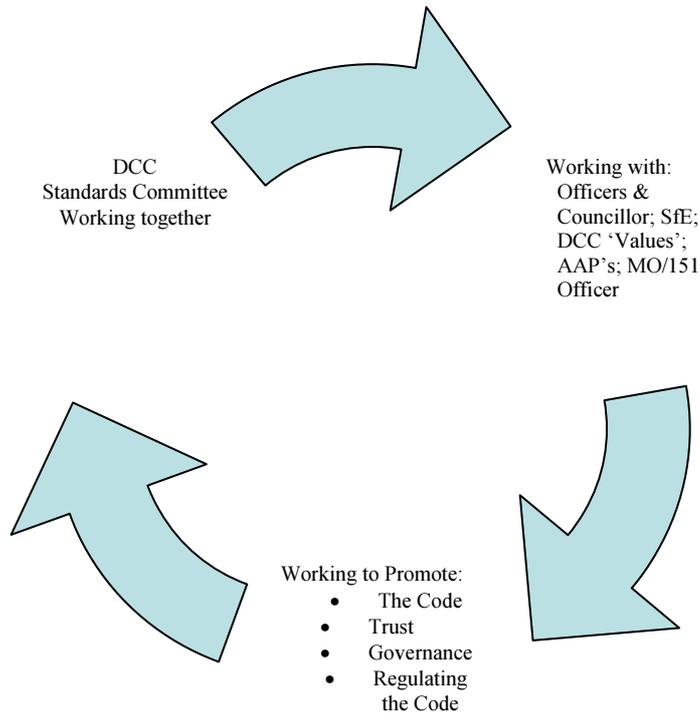
Challenges for the Development of the Code of Conduct

Looking to the future of the code there are many areas that could be strengthened given the climate surrounding behaviour of public figures. One of these areas is that of balancing sanctions for member's who have breached the code. The experience of a SC suggests that there could be further discussion on the possibility to create further differentiation on sanctions and a larger number of options at the Hearing Committee's disposal.

Gaining Councillors support for the code will be an on-going issue for all involved, great progress has been made however continuous focus to bring about a cohesive approach to the ethical framework should not be overlooked.

The DCC Standards Committee Development plan is a working document and may be able to identify additional development opportunities.

Development Programme Evolving Mission 2010



Awareness of the Code of Conduct

- The Standards Committee will implement the statutory code. Areas for improvement will be reflected back to the Chief Executive of Standards for England.
- The Standards Committee will recommend actions for improvements, to all who are subject to the Code of Conduct.
- The Standards Committee will communicate to the general public on how the Code is being implemented.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

- Section 151 Officer - A nominated Senior Officer being responsible for the proper administration of the Council's financial affairs;
- Monitoring Officer - A nominated Senior Officer being responsible for actions taken in accordance with Statute and Regulation