

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Standards Committee** held in Committee Room 2 - County Hall, Durham on **15 February 2013** at **10.00 am**

Present: **Councillor J Shiel (Chairman)**

Members of the Standards Committee:

Councillors A Bainbridge, E Bell, D Farry, G Holland, D Southwell and M Williams.

Town Councillor T Batson; Town Councillor A Cooke.

Apologies:

Mr J Dixon-Dawson and Councillors P Charlton, J Armstrong, C Carr and W Stelling.

Also in Attendance:

Mr P Jackson

1 Minutes of the Meeting held on 7 November 2012

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2012. Councillor Bell advised that he had submitted his apologies for that meeting, however they were not recorded in the minutes, and requested that the amendment be recorded.

With the amendment to the apologies noted, the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

3 Corporate Complaints, Compliments, Comments and Suggestions – Quarter 3, 2012/13

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services, which provided the performance information and learning outcomes in relation to the two types of complaints (Statutory and Non-Statutory) which the Council dealt with (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Service Improvement Team Leader was in attendance to deliver the report and an overview presentation of the statutory, non statutory and Local Government

Ombudsman complaints received throughout the period (for copy of slides see file of Minutes)

In referring to the outstanding decisions which were awaited from the Local Government Ombudsman, a Member queried how long those decisions had been outstanding. The Service Improvement Team Leader advised that she would get a response to the Member following the meeting.

The Chairman referred to the previous meeting of the Committee, when concerns had been raised in relation to planning related complaints. Members of the Committee would benefit from more detailed information in relation to planning complaints, as it was acknowledged that some complaints would be about the outcome of planning applications rather than planning procedure, and it would be useful to have a breakdown of that information. The Service Improvement Team Leader agreed to arrange for the Head of Planning or relevant delegate officer to attend the next meeting of the Committee to provide further information.

In response to a query from a Member, the Service Improvement Team Leader advised that the environment within the Council was taken into account when complaints were being considered. Complaints which were made against Council Policy would be recorded as unjustified complaints, however they would be used at a later date to inform future policy making decisions.

A concern was raised in relation to the pressure which could be placed on resources once the changes to the welfare system came into force later in the year. The Service Improvement Team Leader advised that work was currently being undertaken to assess the potential increase of demand and as such plan resources accordingly. Members were further advised that Customer Service Staff and front line officers within Revenues and Benefits were undertaking a series of briefing sessions to ensure they would be well equipped to deal with public enquiries once the welfare reform changes came into force. Members were further advised that work was being done in relation to communicating the changes to the public and signposting them to where to get assistance in relation to benefit claims.

It was noted that in relation to the Resources service area, there were a high number of complaints compared to a low number of compliments and Members queried whether some investigative work could be undertaken to assess why this was the case. The Service Improvement Team Leader advised that while no such work was currently being undertaken, she would forward on the Committee's comments.

In relation to Neighbourhood Services, Members of the Committee requested that their gratitude and appreciation to staff be placed on record, regarding the refuse service delivery especially during adverse weather conditions. Members received a lot of praise for Council services verbally, though this was not reflected in the physical compliments which were received by the authority.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

4 Granting of Dispensations in connection with the approval of the Council's Budget and Council Tax

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, which informed the Committee of dispensations granted to members in connection with the forthcoming Council meeting which would approve a budget and set Council Tax for 2013/14 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Chairman noted that to date, 110 dispensation requests had been received from members of the County Council, leaving 16 outstanding. He therefore requested that a final reminder be issued to those members whose request was currently outstanding, in an attempt to ensure that all Councillors could participate in fully in agreeing the budget and Council Tax for 2013/14.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

5 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 items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the said Act.

6 Update on the Handling of Current Complaints

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which provided an update report in respect of complaints of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct (for copy see file of Minutes).

In addition, an updated Local Determination Procedure was circulated for Members approval, reflecting the changes to Procedure following the introduction of the new Code of Conduct.

Resolved:

That the report be noted and the updated Local Determination Procedure be approved.