

**ANNUAL REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**Report of the City Solicitor**

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 As Members are aware the Standards Board for England has required Monitoring Officers to complete quarterly returns on activity since the local assessment of complaints regime came into force on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2008.
- 1.2 It is also the intention of the Board to require an annual return in the near future (the format has not been settled). Accordingly, it is considered appropriate to prepare an annual report summarising the work of the Committee over the last Civic year.

**2. Membership**

At the last Annual Meeting of Council in May 2008 the Standards Committee was revised to incorporate a third independent member (Mr Colin Stewart). The Committee is now comprised as follows:

- 5 City Council Members
- 3 Independent Members
- 2 Members of Hetton Town Council

**3. Meetings**

The Committee will have held 5 meetings (on 23 May 2008, 30 June 2008, 30 September 2008, 28 November 2008 and 27 March 2009).

**4. Matters Considered**

The Committee has considered a number of matters including:

- 4.1 The assumption of the new responsibilities for the local assessment of complaints. A report was considered at the May meeting and procedures were approved at the meeting on 30 June 2008.

Elsewhere on the agenda for this meeting Members are asked to consider approving a handbook which consolidates all relevant procedures.

- 4.2 The Committee granted dispensations to Cabinet Members to enable them to consider a report on the Ford and Hylton Club.

The Committee also granted dispensations to Washington Councillors to enable them to consider all matters relating to Washington Pride at the Washington Area Committee.

- 4.3 A detailed response to a further Consultation paper on proposed revisions to the Code of Conduct was sent to the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- 4.4 A protocol for Councillors having business dealings with the Council was considered by the Committee and subsequently approved by full Council.

The first such notification has recently been received from Councillor Tye in respect of discussions with the council on a number of matters in his capacity as a volunteer with a local community group, Youth Almighty Project. He has indicated that the project has secured funding for a multi use games area and will be procuring work, the council will be given the opportunity to quote for the work in addition to planning matters which he will be dealing with, he will be declaring a personal and prejudicial interest in any meetings where this could be considered. This matter is being considered.

## 5. **Local Assessments**

In respect of Case No. 1/08 the Assessment Sub-Committee determined that the complaint should not be investigated. This decision was upheld by the Review Sub-Committee.

With regard to Case No. 2/08 the Assessment Sub-Committee determined that the one alleged breach of the Code of Conduct should be investigated. Subsequently the complaint was withdrawn after an apology was issued.

## 6. **Training**

Members of the Committee participated in a training workshop and considered two scenarios to assist them in preparing for their new role of operating the local filter. I also provided induction training which included presentations to new members in May 2008 on both the Code of Conduct and the Constitution and refresher training was also provided to existing members. Training on the Code of Conduct has also been provided to officers to improve their understanding of the ethical regime.

## 7. **Relationships**

### (i) Other Standards Committee

I have continued to organise occasional meetings of Chairs of Standards Committees and their respective Monitoring Officers in the region to share experiences and develop good practice.

### (ii) Leaders of Political Groups

An informal meeting is being arranged for the Chair to meet the Leader of the Council and the new Chief Executive, and is also being offered to the Leaders of other political groups. The aim is to broaden understanding of respective roles.

### (iii) Members

Proactive guidance is given to Members and advice is regularly given on queries and on declarations of interest by me and my colleagues. Copies of the Standards Board's publication "the Bulletin" are placed in the Members' room with case summaries.

### (iv) The Public

An article was published in the Sunrise to raise public awareness of Council's procedures for dealing with service complaints, whistleblowing, fraud and corruption and complaints about Councillors.

Since the inception of the new arrangements, forms of complaints and guidance notes about Councillors can be downloaded from the Council's website. Forms may also be obtained from Civic Centre reception points.

## 8. **Register of Interests**

In the interests of transparency the register of interests can be accessed electronically on the Council's website.

This accords with the Audit Commission's views.

## 9. **Use of Resources**

The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment for 2007/08 assessed the Council's overall score at level 4 (performing strongly).

In respect of the Council's arrangements to promote and ensure probity and propriety in the conduct of its business it states,

“The Council has strong arrangements in place that are designed to promote and ensure probity and propriety in the conduct of its business. All of the level 4 criteria are in place and are well embedded. Fraud and governance are key components of risk management arrangements and Internal Audit coverage is comprehensive.

Member training, staff induction and other corporate processes stress the importance of high ethical standards and the need to comply with codes of conduct etc. This message is reinforced through the Council intranet, staff newsletter and payslip information, which has been identified as notable practice.

No significant frauds have been discovered in recent years and ombudsman and standards board referrals are low”.

#### 10. **Conclusion**

The Committee is invited to note and consider this report.