



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE 2008/09



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

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Introduction

The Standards Committee was set up in November 2001 as part of the ethical framework introduced by the Local Government Act 2000. Its areas of responsibility include:

- To advise the Council on the adoption of and any revisions to the Code of Conduct for Oxfordshire County Council, to monitor its operation, and to assist councillors and co-opted members to observe its provisions;
- To promote high standards of conduct by councillors and co-opted members;
- To deal with reports from the Monitoring Officer or an Ethical Standards Officer of the Standards Board on their investigations into allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct.

Since 8 May 2008 the Standards Committee is also responsible for the local consideration of allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct. The following three Sub-Committees have been set up to carry out this responsibility:

- Initial Assessment Panel – to carry out the initial assessment of misconduct allegations;
- Review Panel – To review a decision of the Initial Assessment Panel to take no action in respect of an allegation;
- Standards Hearing Panel – To determine any matters referred to it under the provisions of the Local Authorities (Code of Conduct) (Local Determination) Regulations 2003 as amended.

The purpose of this report is to update Council on the Committee's activities over the last year.

Membership

I am saddened to report that the Deputy Chairman, Mr Roger Cowdrey has resigned leaving three independent members. I would wish to place on record my thanks for his support. His experience and balanced approach to the issues discussed has been particularly welcomed and well received. We wish him well in his future activities. For my own part as Chairman, it is a personal regret that due to ill-health I will have to stand down as Chairman of the Standards Committee, an experience which has been both exhilarating and rewarding.

Consultation on a Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members and Officers

The Committee considered a consultation paper, issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in October 2008, seeking views on issues relating to amendments to the Code of Conduct for Members and the introduction of a Code of Conduct for Employees.

The consultation paper invited views on proposals for revising the model code of conduct for local authority members, principally to clarify its application to members' conduct in their non-official capacity and on changes to the general principles which govern the conduct of local authority members.

The Standards Committee agreed a response to the questions posed by the DCLG and are awaiting a formal response.

Complaints and the 'local filter'

As referred to above the Standards Board for England no longer receive complaints centrally. It is the responsibility of the Standards Committee to receive and make initial assessments of new misconduct allegations relating to this authority, to consider requests to review decisions to take no action and to conduct hearings to determine complaints which have been investigated. This is known as the 'local filter'. The Standards Board expects in future to investigate only the very serious cases, very complex cases and cases which, if investigated locally, would lead to severe disruption of business.

The Standards Board are monitoring the new local arrangements and the authority will be required to report information on cases received and cases investigated to it on a regular basis.

The Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy – Members of the County Council

The Committee considered and commented on a revision to the use of ICT Policy for Members of the County Council. The Policy was amended in light of their comments.

Training

Training has been provided for Members of the Committee on their role and this was carried out with the District Councils. Extensive training has been provided for Members of the Standards Committee, not only when meeting as a Committee but also attending training carried out in

conjunction with colleagues from District Councils, which has been of significant benefit.

Work Programme

In April 2006, the Standards Committee agreed to ask the Audit Commission to undertake a full ethical governance audit to assess how well the authority was meeting the ethical agenda.

The Commission targeted its work on the Council's compliance with statutory requirements and its behaviours, culture and values. Its aim was to:

- Provide the Council with an independent evaluation of its ethical arrangements;
- Establish a baseline position so the Council could measure future progress;
- Identify key improvement opportunities; and
- Help the Council develop an action plan to deliver improvements and set the next two to four years' work programme for the Standards Committee.

The Commission considered in its audit:

- Whether the Council was complying with Part III of the Local Government Act 2000;
- How the Council ensured the Standards Committee was working effectively;
- The extent to which members and officers understood and were aware of ethical issues and their responsibilities under the respective codes of conduct; and
- Whether training on ethical issues was satisfactory.

The Committee considered the Audit Commission's audit report 'Ethical Governance – Voluntary Improvement

Study' at its meeting in April 2007. Last year's annual report outlined the findings of the final report. The Audit Commission's main conclusion was that the Council was proactive in developing and upholding high standards of ethical governance. This and the positive leadership and contributions provided by the Monitoring Officer had led to the high standards of ethical governance found during the audit.

The comparative analysis of the Council's survey results against those from other local authorities was positive. Following workshops in the few areas where the Council appeared to be underperforming against the national comparators a number of action points were agreed at the workshops and the Commission translated these into an action plan which has been incorporated into the Committee's work programme.

The Committee has reviewed its rolling three year work programme of issues it wishes to consider to 2011 arising from the Monitoring Officer's annual report, the action plan in the Audit Commission's report on the findings from its full ethical governance audit and issues it has raised itself at meetings of the Committee.

Standards Committee

During this significant period of change, I have been impressed by the outstanding confidence and dedication of all staff supporting the Standards Committee. I have also been impressed by the way the Councillors have responded to training and requirements for information. It has to be said that there have been no complaints, which the Standards Committee have been called upon to

consider, which speaks highly of the probity of Members of this Council.

Work of the Council

I, like other Independent Members, have attended as an observer a number of meetings of the Council. I have been impressed by the moderation and cordiality which have characterised exchanges between Members. This says a great deal for the culture of respect that applies within this Authority. If there is one criticism I have, it is not to do with the conduct of Councillors or the Business Programme undertaken by them it is in the acoustics in the Council Chamber. This, in my view, makes it difficult for members of the public in the public gallery to hear precisely what is going on.

Conclusion

Standards of conduct have remained high in the Council and promoting awareness and understanding of the new Code of Conduct through training seminars has an important role to play in maintaining the high standards. Setting and prioritising a work programme enables the Committee to focus on specific issues, such as training and guidance, as well as continuing to monitor standards within the authority. Finally, whilst there have been no cases under the new responsibilities for receiving and assessing allegations of breaches of the Authority's Code of Conduct the Committee has continued to ensure that it is in a state of preparedness should any such case arise.

Robert Elmore

Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee

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