



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE 2011/12



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

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Introduction

1. This is my third and final annual report to Council since my election as Chairman of the Standards Committee. This report updates Council on the Committee's activities and the changing context of them.

Standards Committee's Responsibilities

2. 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 Standards for England on their investigations into allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct.
3. The Standards Committee has also been responsible for the local consideration of allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct and consequently set up the following three Sub-Committees 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.
4. In addition, the Committee has set up a Dispensations Sub-Committee to consider applications from members for dispensation on speaking and voting at meetings when they have a prejudicial interest.

Changing context and activity

5. The standards context over the last year has been dominated by the Coalition Government's intention to abolish the current standards regime. In December 2011, the awaited Localism Act was published which confirmed the abolition of the national body Standards for England together with the intention that councils would no longer be obliged to maintain standards committees. The Government's vision for the new framework was to achieve a proportionate local arrangement. Although it had initially been intended to abolish the requirement for a code of conduct, this was not reflected in the Localism Act which does require a code to be adopted together with local arrangements for handling complaints about member conduct.
6. Therefore, since my last report, the Committee has remained committed to enabling the Council to make a seamless transition from one regime to another. At the Committee's formal meeting in December 2011, and in more detail at an informal workshop in January 2012, the Committee framed its

views and advice to the Council. This included a recommendation, in view of the spirit and letter of the Localism Act, that an optional standards committee not be appointed under the new regime. The Committee also expressed support for a joint approach to be taken by all of Oxfordshire's principal authorities to develop a single consistent code applicable to all these councils and potentially to the county's parish and town councils. The Committee regarded this as a very positive approach.

7. While the Localism Act was clear that authorities should appoint at least one 'independent person' to advise the Monitoring Officer in the consideration of complaints against councillors, it appeared that current independent members of standards committee were barred from being appointed to such positions. At the time of writing, it is possible that the Government may be minded to relax this potentially unintended restriction. However, the Committee deliberately did not give a view on this matter other than to endorse the value of appointing independent persons as a key feature of the new regime.
8. Mindful of the need to support the transition to new arrangements, the Committee did agree to keep a watching brief on the development of training to support councillors and co-opted members in understanding their responsibilities under any new regime. I note that a briefing on the Localism Act generally has been scheduled for May 2012.
9. One area of activity over which the Committee has maintained an overview is the arrangement for

criminal records bureau checking of members. The Committee noted during the year the provisions of the Protection of Freedoms Bill, which the Coalition Government intends will bring a lighter-touch and more proportionate regime. This is likely to mean that the Council's current practice of checking all members upon their election (unless checked in the twelve months prior to election) would no longer be appropriate. For now, the Committee has endorsed the continuation of that practice and recognises that this will be an area that will need to be addressed by the Monitoring Officer and the Council once the Protection of Freedoms Bill is passed.

Membership

10. The Committee re-elected me as Chairman and Doctor Nina Alpey as Deputy Chairman of the Committee at its June meeting and Professor Meryll Dean and Mr Mark Greenwood have continued to serve as independent members of the Committee.
11. I would like to record my thanks to Nina Alpey, to Meryll Dean and to Mark Greenwood for their valuable support to me, to the Committee and to the people of Oxfordshire as independent members of the Standards Committee.

12. I would also like to record my thanks to all the Councillors and Independent Members that have sat on the Standards Committee since its inception in 2001. Their commitment to standards has been apparent in the way they have worked together, regardless of their political allegiances. It has been a privilege working with them all.

13. It is the general view of the Standards Committee that Members do treat each other with respect and that the standards of conduct exhibited by Councillors is good in this Council. I see this as a strength of the Council and hope that the new arrangements will maintain this current level.

Complaints and the 'local filter'

14. The Standards Committee receives and makes initial assessments of new misconduct allegations relating to this authority, considers requests to review decisions to take no action and conducts hearings to determine complaints which have been investigated. This is known as the 'local filter'.

15. The Initial Assessment Panel has met three times since my last report. In one case it was decided that no further action should be taken. Of the two other cases, a finding of 'other action' was made. In one, this involved additional training on the Code for the member concerned, specific guidance to all councillors on the registration of interests involving lobby groups and a reminder to review register entries. In the other case, it was decided to ask the Monitoring Officer to remind all

members of the importance of treating each other with respect.

16. At the time of writing this report, the Initial Assessment Panel will meet to consider a further case during May 2012.

Conclusion

17. The imminent change to the standards regime draws a line under the work of the Standards Committee. I am sure however that the Council's commitment to promoting good practice and high standards of conduct will continue under the new arrangements.

18. It has been a privilege to serve as Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee and to contribute, with fellow committee members, to encouraging high standards among Oxfordshire's elected and co-opted members. I am grateful to the support of members and officers of the Council in the fulfilment of the Committee's role and my role as Chairman.

19. I am pleased to commend this report to the Council.

Ann Griffiths

Independent Chairman of the
Standards Committee
May 2012