



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE 2010/11



**OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL**

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ST8

Introduction

This is my second 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

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.

The Standards Committee is also responsible for the local consideration of allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct and has 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.

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

Following the general election in May 2010, the Coalition Government indicated its intention to make a fundamental change to the standards regime. This included a commitment to abolish Standards for England together with the requirement for councils to have a code of conduct or a standards committee. Rather, the Government proposed that there would be a criminal offence of failing to register or disclose an interest.

Standards for England cancelled its planned annual meeting of standards committee and made other retrenchments to its activities. It is set to cease investigation of complaints late in 2011 and be abolished in 2012.

The Standards Committee for the Council has therefore had to react to this changing environment and to accept the Government's direction of travel. This has meant that the Committee's meeting scheduled for December 2010 was postponed to allow the specifics of the Localism Bill to become more apparent.

Consequently, given this changing context, it was appropriate that the Committee's work programme should not be renewed during the year but that attention should be paid instead to the arrangements already put in place

by the Committee previously and to the Monitoring Officer's ongoing activities in the areas of members interests, conduct and member development.

Nevertheless, the Committee is clear that the current standards regime remains in place until the new legislation takes effect. It therefore views its responsibilities as ongoing within that context.

Membership

The Committee re-elected me as Chairman and Nina Alphey as Deputy Chairman of the Committee at its June meeting. In view of the economic climate, Nina and I agreed it was right for us to waive the special responsibility allowances attaching to our roles. This is also consistent with the Council's commitment to reducing costs while maintaining focus. This took effect from December 2010.

Professor Meryll Dean and Mr Mark Greenwood have continued to serve as independent members of the Committee.

Given the changes outlined above, it was decided to postpone the December meeting of the Committee until the potential changes to the standards regime were more clearly known as a result of the publication of the Localism Bill.

Complaints and the 'local filter'

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'. Standards for England

continues to investigate only the very serious cases, very complex cases and cases which, if investigated locally, would lead to severe disruption of business.

The Initial Assessment Panel has met once since my last report and decided that no other action be taken as regards the complaint against the member concerned. Given the issues involved, the Monitoring Officer did however issue advice to all councillors about good standards practice when blogging or tweeting.

Work Programme

The Committee's work programme was confirmed in June 2010 as the Government's intentions for the standards regime were being revealed. Insofar as this focused on the role and profile of the Committee itself, it has not been appropriate to make much of this given the Government's intention to discontinue the role of standards committee's in their current form.

However, it is important that the Committee ensures that appropriate transitional arrangements are put in place to maintain compliance and up to and beyond the changes taking place. This will be a priority in the coming months.

Other areas of importance for the Committee have been acted upon. An annual reminder to members to review their registers of interest took place in July 2010.

The Monitoring Officer also reported to the Committee on a survey of officer views on their perceptions of being able to challenge members without fear of reprisal. Encouragingly, respondents to the survey spoke very

positively about the Council's culture, with clear recognition of the scope of member and officer roles and the procedures for raising any concerns. The lack of any such concerns was itself positive.

An intended action regarding compliance with new requirements for criminal records checking was superseded when, early into its term of office, the Government announced the suspension of the intended changes. As a Committee, we are continuing to monitor this situation so as to promote the appropriate action.

My Deputy Chairman and I have welcomed the opportunity to meet with the Monitoring Officer periodically during the year to discuss the emerging issues and future of the Committee and, more importantly, ongoing activities in achieving high standards of conduct.

Conclusion

The changing context of the standards regime nationally has obviously, and necessarily, had consequences for local standards committees. Nevertheless, standards of conduct have remained high and the Committee is committed to overseeing, for the remainder of its term of office, the promotion of awareness and understanding of high standards.

The emphasis in the past year has been on continuing the ongoing activities of the council and in understanding, and anticipating, the changes and challenges ahead under the new regime.

This work is set to continue and the Committee will play an appropriate and

proportionate role on behalf of the Council in encouraging high standards and monitoring the shift to new arrangements.

Ann Griffiths

Independent Chairman of the
Standards Committee
May 2011