

## Standards Committee

A meeting of Standards Committee was held on Thursday, 28th February, 2008.

**Present:** Mr F W Hayes (Chairman), Cllr Paul Baker, Cllr John Fletcher, Cllr Andrew Sherris; Mr C.V Algie (Parish Representative); Mrs E Chapman (Independent), Mrs F Robinson (Independent)

**Officers:** I Jones (RES); D E Bond, S Johnson (LD)

**Also in attendance:** No other persons in attendance

**Apologies:** Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr Mohammed Javed; Mr T Bowman (Parish Representative)

### **S**      **Declarations of Interest**

**97/07**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **S**      **Internal Audit Quarterly Report**

**98/07**

Consideration was given to a report that advised of the work carried out by the Internal Audit Section in three audits within the remit of the Committee during the quarter October to December 2007.

Members were reminded that Internal Audit was an independent appraisal function established by the Council to objectively examine, evaluate and report on the adequacy of internal controls. The role ensured that there was proper economic, efficient and effective use of resources. It also ensured that the Council had adequate accounting records and control systems.

All audit work undertaken in a quarterly period was circulated to all Councillors prior to the quarterly Audit Committee meetings. The intention was to give Councillors the opportunity to raise questions on issues that affected their ward or other areas of responsibility and for answers to be provided at that meeting.

The Chief Internal Auditor gave a verbal summary of the the findings and responses of audits relating to Elections, the Scheme of Delegation and Partnerships Management and the Committee considered the details provided.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

### **S**      **Scrutiny Work Programme 2008/09**

**99/07**

The Committee considered a report that sought suggestions for topics to be considered for inclusion in Stockton Council's scrutiny work programme for 2008/09.

It was explained that an annual work programme for the Council's seven Select Committees was agreed each year following extensive consultation with elected Members and officers. All topic suggestions were discussed by the Council's Scrutiny Liaison Forum comprising Scrutiny Chairs, Members of Cabinet and Corporate Management Team. Following this, the Executive Scrutiny Committee, the co-ordinating body for scrutiny agreed a work programme. To date, each Select Committee had conducted an average of two in depth scrutiny

reviews each year.

It was advised that in order to assist with prioritising suggested topics, the PICK system had been introduced, details of which were presented to the Committee. In proposing topics for scrutiny, the Committee were asked to consider the justification under the PICK categories.

The Committee were invited to propose suggested topics for scrutiny review. Members did not consider that there were any topics which could usefully be suggested, noting that key issues for the Committee would be reviewed by the Committee itself, rather than by referral to a Select Committee.

RESOLVED that the Committee did not, at this time, have any topics it wished to be considered for inclusion in the Scrutiny Work Programme 2008/2009.

**S**      **Guide for Members of the Public attending Council Meetings**  
**100/07**

The Committee considered a report that provided details of a new guide for the public when attending Council meetings.

It was advised that the guide for members of the public had been developed by Democratic Services, following consultation with and advice from other Officers.

It provided useful information for members of the public attending meetings of full Council; Cabinet; Executive Scrutiny; Select Committees; Planning; Licensing; Licensing Sub-Committee, the Appeals and Complaints Committee together with the Audit Committee and the Standards Committee itself. The Committee was provided with a copy of the guide.

It was explained that the guide had been drafted to support, other than in relation to full Council meetings, the application of paragraph 12(2) of the revised Code of Conduct in appropriate circumstances.

It was indicated that comments received from consideration of the guide by the Members Advisory Panel at its meeting on 17 December 2007 had been incorporated into the text as appropriate.

The Monitoring Officer indicated that he had received comments in relation to the guide from Councillor Fletcher and advised that they had been passed onto Democratic Services for consideration.

The Committee discussed the guide and raised issues in relation to the use of blackberrys and the request for members of the public to arrive 15 minutes prior to the start of the meeting, in particular whether this was necessary for members of the public who did not intend asking any questions. The Committee agreed that the guide would be useful and would hopefully encourage members of the public to attend Council meetings.

Councillor Fletcher requested that, once finalised, a supply of the guides be placed in the Town Hall.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The guide be received.

2. The Committee's comments, as detailed above, be forwarded to Democratic Services for consideration.

**S**            **Members' and Officers' Gifts and Hospitality**

**101/07**

Consideration was given to a report that provided details of the procedures relating to Members' and Officers' gifts and hospitality and the returns submitted during the third quarter (1 October 2007 - 31 December 2007).

The Committee was advised that the Members' Register had again been reviewed and Members were presented with details of gifts/hospitality received by Members in the third quarter. There were 8 entries.

It was explained that to assist members in submitting appropriate details of gifts or hospitality received, a flow chart had been prepared, a copy of which was presented to the Committee. It also highlighted that refusal of a gift or hospitality should, in certain circumstances, be reported. The Committee's comments on the flowchart were invited before it was circulated to Members.

It was noted that copies of the gifts and hospitality form and related guidance note had recently been emailed to all Councillors and hard copied to co-optees.

A further review of the Officers' register had been carried out. The Committee was provided with examples of details submitted during the third quarter.

A flowchart had also been drafted to assist Officers in submitting appropriate details of gifts or hospitality which they had received. A copy was presented to the Committee. The Monitoring Officer advised that he intended to produce more guidance for Officers. The Committee's comments were invited before the flowchart was circulated to Officers.

RESOLVED that the report be noted and that the two flow charts be approved for circulation.

**S**            **Members' and Officers' Interests**

**102/07**

The Committee considered a report that provided an update regarding Members' and Officers' interests.

It was advised that the elected Members' register was now complete. All 56 Members had submitted returns.

A reminder about updating interests had recently been circulated and amendments to register details had been received as a result.

The Monitoring Officer advised that regarding co-optees, three had still to complete and return a register of interests form. As regards Town/Parish Councils it was suggested that a reminder could be issued at the Parish Council Liaison Forum meeting on 25th March 2008 for those Town/Parish Councils which had still to submit copies of their Members' register of interests forms.

The Members' flowchart reported to 29 November meeting had been updated and circulated to all Members and Co-optees. Members of the Committee were provided with a copy of the flowchart.

A (Monitoring Officer) register inspection had taken place on 1 February. One of the main issues which arose was that a few entries had been submitted out of time. Reminders about the specified timescale had been sent to the relevant Officers.

The Officers' flowchart reported to the 29 November meeting had also been updated and finalised. It had now been circulated to all relevant Officers. A copy was presented to Members of the Committee.

RESOLVED that the report be received.

## **S Local Assessment Framework**

**103/07**

The Committee received and considered the following information in relation to the Local Assessment Framework:-

1. Response to consultation on Orders and Regulations relating to the local assessment framework.
2. Comments on DCLG local assessment proposals – Weightman's Newsletter.
3. Feedback from the CIPFA Ethical Standards Workshop – 27 February 2008.

The Monitoring Officer provided the Committee with verbal feedback in relation to the CIPFA Ethical Standards Workshop on 27 February 2008. A summary of the main issues were as follows:

- No guidance or regulations were available yet. The representative from the Standards Board advised that there was some draft guidance but it was not possible to go any further with it until they had seen the regulations.
- The consultation period had ended and it was thought that the 1st April 2008 implementation date was not practicable, a revised date of early May 2008 was being considered.
- In terms of publicity it was thought that Local Authorities might be requested to put a notice in the local press. It was discussed that not many people look at such notices and that they were expensive. ACSeS was, therefore, lobbying against such a requirement.
- It had been discussed that there was still uncertainty around how much supplementary information the Committee would be able to request in the first instance as they may only receive a letter or an email. Some preliminary research would thereby be necessary and appropriate.
- The Standards Board considered that the guidance/regulations around joint arrangements would be flexible and that there would be provision to 'borrow' independent members from neighbouring authorities.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

## **S Information/Discussion Items**

**104/07**

The Committee received and considered the following information:-

1. Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ("2007 Act") – Explanatory Notes.
2. The 2007 Act Commencement (No. 2) Order.
3. House of Commons – Standards and Privileges Debate – Derek Conway MP.
4. Committee on Standards in Public Life – Press Release – Standards and Privileges Debate – Derek Conway MP.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

**S**  
**105/07**      **Standards Committee Forward Plan 2007/09**

The Committee was provided with the Forward Plan for 2007/2009.

RESOLVED that the plan be noted.