

Standards Committee

A meeting of Standards Committee was held on Thursday, 8th May, 2008.

Present: Mr F W Hayes(Chairman), Cllr Mrs Lynne Apedaile, Cllr Paul Baker, Cllr Ken Lupton; Mr T Bowman (Parish Representative), Mr C V Algie (Parish Representative); Mrs F Robinson (Independent)

Officers: D E Bond, S Johnson (LD)

Also in attendance: Cllr John Fletcher

Apologies: Cllr Ken Dixon; Mrs E Chapman (Independent)

S **Declarations of Interest**

21/08

There were no declarations of interest.

S **Minutes of the meetings held on 28 February 2008 and 10 April 2008 - for** **22/08** **signature**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2008 and 10 April 2008 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

S **Local Government Ombudsman - Various**

23/08

Consideration was given to a report that provided details regarding the changes to the Ombudsman's arrangements for handling complaints; the Ombudsman's new powers under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and a recent case relating to the need for Council services to work together in response to cross-cutting issues.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that as from 1 April 2008 a new service provided by the LGO Advice Team (based in Coventry) began, providing the first point of contact for all enquirers and new complainants from any part of England. The Committee was provided with the details regarding the new service.

The Committee was also presented with a copy of the new complaints leaflet and were informed that all previous old leaflets were out of date and should not be used or displayed.

It was explained that changes to the Ombudsman's jurisdiction and operations had been brought into force by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The changes applied to all complaints and matters coming to the Ombudsman's attention on or after 1 April 2008.

The Committee was provided with the details concerning the changes.

The Committee was also provided with details of a recent case involving another authority which demonstrated the need for Council services to work together closely when dealing with cross cutting issues. It was explained that in this instance the case related to the approach to assessing and meeting an individuals need from a housing and social care perspective.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The report be noted; and that
2. The details be brought to the attention of all Members and relevant Officers.

S
24/08 **Members' and Officers' Interests**

Consideration was given to a report that updated the Committee regarding Members' and Officers' interests.

As reported to the 28 February Committee meeting, the elected Members' register was complete.

The Committee was informed that a further reminder about updating interests had been circulated. This was done on a regular basis, but was of particular importance following the Annual Meeting and first meeting of Cabinet when new appointments to outside bodies had been made.

As regards co-optees, the position was that there was one remaining co-optee who had yet to complete an interests form.

As reported to the 28 February Committee meeting, a (Monitoring Officer) register inspection took place on 1 February. It was noted that the next inspection was planned for 4 June 2008.

An Internal Audit review of Officers' interests and gifts and hospitality arrangements took place on 7 January 2008. A report dated 29 February had been issued. Details of the agreed areas of improvement concerning interests was provided to the Committee.

The Monitoring Officer explained that annually, all Members and key Officers were asked to complete and return a form regarding any material transactions in the preceding financial year between the Council and related parties. This included Councillors, Officers, members of their close families and partnerships, companies, trusts etc in which any of these individuals had a controlling interest.

Copies of the relevant documentation sent to Councillors and an example of a completed Officer return were provided for the Committee's information.

It was explained that whilst there was an area of overlap with the Members' Register of Interests under the Code of Conduct and the Officers' Register, the process was a specific requirement of the CIPFA Code of Practice and important to the preparation of the Council's accounts. The Audit Commission monitored compliance and the number of returns and included comments in its Annual Governance Report for the Council where necessary due to any failure to submit returns (nil or otherwise).

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the closing date for this year's exercise was 9 May 2008. It was noted that, to date, 32 Councillors had returned their forms and 22 Officers.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

S **Ethical Standards - Case Studies**

25/08

The Committee was presented with two case studies from the CIPFA Better Governance Forum Ethical Standards Workshops for its consideration and views.

The two case studies related to prejudicial interests- the Public Interest and Personal Interests - Awareness. The Committee was provided with relevant extracts from the Code of Conduct. Both cases were discussed by the Committee.

RESOLVED that the information be received.

S **Local Assessment Framework**

26/08

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

1. Written Ministerial Statement
2. Consultation Paper on Orders and Regulations relating to conduct of Local Authority Members - Summary of Responses received
3. Conduct of Local Authority Members - New Arrangements
4. Standards Board Bulletin Issue 38
5. Standards Board Toolkit
6. Standards Board Guidance on Local Assessment

The Monitoring Officer circulated a correction note for Item 4 - Standards Board Bulletin Issue 38, that had been issued by the Standards Board. The correction note related to the 'Validity of proceedings' information on page 3 of the Bulletin.

The Committee considered and discussed various points relating to Item 6 - Standards Board Guidance on Local Assessment. Copies of the guidance were circulated at the meeting. The Committee discussed the following parts of the guidance:-

- Pre-Assessment - Publicising the complaints system - The Monitoring Officer circulated a copy of the 'Local Code of Conduct Complaints Process' notice that he had produced. The notice had been placed onto the front page of the Standards and Probity section of Stockton Council's website. The Monitoring Officer also informed Members that the notice would be sent to all Libraries and Town/Parish Council Clerks to be displayed on their notice boards and a similar version would be placed in the next edition of Stockton News. The Committee suggested sending a copy to the Citizens Advice Bureau for display. The Committee considered that it would be beneficial to publicise the rules and procedures of the sub Committees to Members and Officers. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that in terms of setting up a procedure for the submission of a complaint that he would be developing a separate process for

Code of Conduct complaints.

Suggested arrangements regarding the following were also discussed:-

- Pre-Assessment - Reports and Enquiries
- Assessment - Developing Assessment Criteria
- Decision
- Other issues to consider

The Monitoring Officer informed Members that where appropriate, he would begin drafting procedures and guidelines for Stockton based on the Standards Board guidance.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

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27/08 **Information/Discussions Items**

The Committee received and considered the following information:-

1. Standards Board - Satisfaction Survey Report

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

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28/08 **Standards Committee Forward Plan 2008/09**

The Committee was provided with the Forward Plan for 2008/09.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.