

## Standards Committee

A meeting of Standards Committee was held on Thursday, 5th June, 2008.

**Present:** Mr F W Hayes(Chairman), Mrs E Chapman(Vice-Chairman), Cllr Mrs Lynne Apedaile, Cllr Paul Baker, Cllr Ken Dixon, Cllr Ken Lupton, Mr C.V Algie, Mr T Bowman, Mrs F Robinson

**Officers:** Ian Jones (Audit), Brian Simpson (Finance), D E Bond, Sarah Whaley (LD)

**Also in attendance:**

**Apologies:** Cllr Ian Dalgarno

### **S 29/08**      **Declarations of Interest**

Mr T Bowman declared a personal/non-prejudicial interest in respect of Agenda item 10 - Members' and Officers' Gifts and Hospitality, as a notice of hospitality he had submitted was included as an appendix to the report.

### **S 30/08**      **Internal Audit Quarterly Report**

Consideration was given to a report that advised the Standards Committee of the work carried out by the Internal Audit Section in two audits within the remit of the Committee during the quarter January to March 2008.

Members of the Committee 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. This role ensured that there was proper economic, efficient and effective use of resources.

All audit work undertaken in the relevant 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 annual audit opinion statement was an assessment of the quality of the Council's control environment based on the audit work undertaken during the financial year 2007/08.

The audit opinion statement for 2007/08, as reported to the Audit Committee, was;

"In our opinion, from the audit work undertaken, the Council has an adequate and, overall, an effective internal control environment, upon which it can place reasonable reliance to deliver the systems' objectives or detect fraud or other malpractice within a reasonable period of time".

There were 2 audits with 9 recommendations in the final quarter of the financial year for the attention of the committee. A summary of the findings and responses was attached to the report.

RESOLVED that the report and performance be noted.

**S**  
**31/08**      **Annual Governance Statement 2007/08**

Consideration was given to the Council's Annual Governance Statement for 2007/2008.

It was explained that the Accounts and Audit (Amended) Regulations 2006 required all authorities in England to conduct a review at least once a year of the effectiveness of its governance framework and include an Annual Governance Statement within its Statement of Accounts. The deadline for completion of the Statement of Accounts for 2007/08 was 30th June 2008. The Statement of Accounts and the Annual Governance Statement would be presented for approval to the Audit Committee on the 26th June, 2008.

The Annual Governance Statement included an acknowledgement of responsibility for ensuring that proper arrangements were in place around the governance of the Council's affairs and an indication of the level of assurance that the system provides. The statement also included a description of the key elements forming the governance framework, a description of the process applied in reviewing the effectiveness of this framework, including the system of internal control, and an outline of the actions taken or, proposed to be taken, to deal with significant governance issues.

At this time the Council had not identified any significant audit findings that were not being addressed within the Statement. The Audit Commission, the Council's external auditors, had been consulted on the process and the identification of key internal control issues.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

**S**  
**32/08**      **The Standards Committee's Annual Report 2007/08**

Consideration was given to a draft version of the Standards Committee's third Annual Report (for 2007/2008).

The Annual Report would, in due course, be brought to the attention of all Members of the Council by means of reports to the Audit Committee; Cabinet and full Council (to be presented by the Chair of the Standards Committee and by the Monitoring Officer). It would also be placed on the Council's intranet and internet systems.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The Director of Law and Democracy be authorized to finalise the Report, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, following the conclusion of the consultation specified in the Committee Report; and

2. that the final version of the Annual Report be brought to the attention of all Members of the Council and be brought back to a future meeting of the Standards Committee for information.

**S**  
**33/08**      **The Monitoring Officer's Annual Report and Work Programme 2007/08**

Consideration was given to a draft version of the Monitoring Officer's Annual Report and Work Programme for 2007/2008.

The report provided the Committee with an opportunity to consider and comment upon the draft Monitoring Officer's Annual Report for 2007/08, together with the related work programme outcomes.

The report was intended not only to provide an overview of the work of the Monitoring Officer in the past year, but also to identify and promote examples of best practice and to provide an opportunity to review and learn from experience. The Report therefore, outlined the Monitoring Officer's statutory responsibilities, summarised how those duties had been discharged during 2007/08 in accordance with the Council's Constitution, legislative requirements and relevant Government guidance, and drew attention to those issues that would require attention in the year ahead.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The Director of Law and Democracy be authorized to finalise the Report, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, following the conclusion of the consultation specified in the Committee Report; and

2. that the final version of the Annual Report be brought to the attention of all Members of the Council and be brought back to a future meeting of the Standards Committee for information.

**S**  
**34/08**      **Code of Corporate Governance**

Consideration was given to a report setting out the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

The Code, a copy of which was attached as an appendix to the report, encapsulated the Council's approach to corporate governance, and had been prepared by the Corporate Governance Working Group.

Members were notified that this year the Code reflected the fact that there were no significant issues identified as evidence by the annual audit opinion statement and annual governance statement, and it was agreed that the Code be monitored year on year with any issues arising being resolved through appropriate action plans.

RESOLVED that:-

1.The Code be placed on the intranet to front the corporate governance page and on the internet.

**S  
35/08**      **Stockton-on-Tees Corporate Assessment**

The Committee were asked to receive and consider details regarding the Stockton on Tees Corporate assessment.

The Council's Corporate Assessment took place over the period from 3 December to 14 December 2007.

The outcome of the assessment was that the Council had maintained its 4 star, performing strongly status, with block scores of Ambition 4, Prioritisation 4, Capacity 3, Performance Management 4, and Achievement 3. This was the second highest score nationally.

The Director of Law and Democracy highlighted in particular the positive approach to ethical governance across the whole organisation. It was also indicated that the full report could be viewed on the internet and the intranet.

RESOLVED that:-

The Stockton on Tees Corporate Assessment details be received.

**S  
36/08**      **Local Government Ombudsman - Provisional Statistics and Decisions**

Consideration was given to the Local Government Ombudsman - Provisional Statistics and Decisions (affecting Stockton).

The Director of Law and Democracy highlighted the fact that overall complaints had reduced in 2007/2008 and a significant improvement had been made in the number of planning complaints made, due to improved procedures.

RESOLVED that:-

The Local Government Ombudsman - Provisional Statistics and Decisions report be received.

**S  
37/08**      **Members' and Officers' Gifts and Hospitality**

Members considered and received the Members' and Officers' Gifts and Hospitality Report.

The Director of Law and Democracy confirmed that quarterly audits would continue to take place and that any irregularities found in a particular Service Area would result in the procedure being revisited to make sure there was a

consistent approach across each service and the authority as a whole.

RESOLVED that:-

Members' and Officers' Gifts and Hospitality report be noted.

**S**  
**38/08**      **Ethical Standards - Case Studies**

Members discussed two case studies from the CIPFA Better Governance Forum Ethical Standards Workshop.

**S**  
**39/08**      **Local Assessment Framework**

Members were presented with a further report regarding the Local Assessment Framework. This covered the updated Standards Board guidance; local assessment criteria; a complaint form; guidelines on conflicts of interest and criteria for considering confidentiality requests. The Director of Law and Democracy explained that the documents provided were in their infancy and over time and use would evolve as appropriate.

The Committee discussed the availability of the documentation and how public access would be made easier. It was also confirmed that contact details would be made available for help with the process and the completion of the forms.

It was agreed that all Members would be provided with access to the finalised documents.

RESOLVED that:-

The information be received.

**S**  
**40/08**      **Information/Discussion Items**

The Committee received and considered the following information:-

1. Weightmans Newsletter - Ethical Standards Clinic
2. Attendance at Town/Parish Council Meetings - Meetings Schedule and related documentation.

Members were asked to pass on availability details for attendance at Town/Parish Council Meetings.

RESOLVED that:-

Information/Discussion items be noted

**S**  
**41/08**

**Standards Committee Forward Plan 2008/2009**

Members were presented with the new version of the Standards Committee Forward Plan 2008/2009.

RESOLVED that:-

The new version of the Standards Committee Forward Plan 2008/2009 be noted.