

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL

COUNCIL

16 APRIL 2008

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF COUNCIL'S STANDARDS COMMITTEE
TO CANNOCK CHASE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to present this report to Cannock Chase District Council. This year has been successful for the Council in relation to ethics and standards. The Standards Committee and the Parish Standards Sub-Committee have worked well together and independently and have provided a consistent source of support and guidance to the Authority in managing its matters of ethics and good governance.

There have been no complaints received by the Standards Committee in the last municipal year and, save for 1 case which was determined regarding a Parish Council, no other cases have been heard by the Committee. The Parish Council case was a long outstanding referral. Several lessons were learnt as a result of hearing that case, in particular a review on investigatory procedures, the application of Standards Board guidance and the workings of the Hearings Panel. There are no outstanding cases subject to investigation or hearing for the Standards Committee.

Achievements during the year

During the last municipal year the Standards Committee has recommended the adoption of a protocol for the Monitoring Officer to Council in accordance with best practice. The Council has also been advised on the adoption of the new Code of Conduct in 2007, as have Parish Councils. Training was provided at the direction of the Standards Committee by the Monitoring Officer to Members of the Council and Parish Clerks. In addition, the Monitoring Officer is well underway in providing a service to Parish Councils at their meetings on changes to standards matters.

Following the advent of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Standards Committee has advised the Council on the new structural arrangements required for the determination of local referrals and changes to its Constitution. Prior to that, the Standards Committee responded to the consultation undertaken by the Standards Board for England.

The adoption of the Code in 2007 required a review of the Member Declaration of Interest forms and the Declarations of Gifts and Hospitality. The Standards Committee approved the relevant forms for distribution by the Monitoring Officer and completion by District and Parish Councillors.

The Standards Committee also directed the Monitoring Officer to give training to the Planning Committee on the protocol for the Planning Committee. This was particularly pertinent as the Planning Committee had to deal with several controversial applications during the year and the training and advice on the protocol was timely.

I have been delighted with the attendance of Councillors at the training that has been provided and which has used the DVDs supplied by the Standards Board for England. 2 training sessions using 2 separate DVD training packages have been provided to Members. I attended, together with Councillor Mrs Pat Ansell, the Standards Board for England national conference in October in Birmingham. I was encouraged to see that this District Council is well placed in relation to its standards matters and that all the necessary management arrangements are well in hand. Hearing several stories of significant case loads of complaints against Councillors at District level in particular (and Parish) elsewhere, I was encouraged that the story is much different at Cannock Chase. Accompanied by Councillor Mrs Ansell, I also attended a training session hosted by the Association of County Solicitors and Secretaries (ACSES) in Birmingham in March 2008, which was chaired by Cannock Chase's Monitoring Officer.

As a result of the changes required to the standards regime and local filtering, in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, a vacancy has arisen to increase the number of independent members on the Standards Committee. In addition, another independent member has resigned from the Committee and so there are 2 vacancies. A programme of recruitment will shortly commence to fill those vacancies.

At its last meeting the Standards Committee reviewed the member induction pack and gave comments on how it could be improved to assist members in embedding their role on election to the District Council.

Work is currently underway on publicising the new arrangements for the public to complain direct to the Council regarding breaches of the Code of Conduct by Councillors. The Corporate Complaints System at the Council is being adapted to capture such complaints and arrangements will be made to put information in leaflets and on the website.

As the standards and ethics landscape continues to change, there is a need for the Council to consider joint working with other districts and authorities. Initial talks may be pursued during the ensuing year to see whether or not there would be an opportunity for closer working with adjoining districts.

I would emphasise the need for members of the Standards Committee to respect political impartiality in all their work.

I have been encouraged all year that the behaviour of Councillors of all levels within the district and parishes has been encouraging, to the extent that there have been no complaints made. Whilst I appreciate the new regime allows for local determinations to a greater extent, I very much hope to champion local resolution through discussion and negotiation with Members and Group Leaders in the event that inappropriate behaviour or breaches of the Code are likely or have been identified.

I am appreciative of the ongoing day to day support provided by the Monitoring Officer and his team to all members on ethics and standards matters and the interpretation of the Council's Constitution, Code of Conduct and protocol. It is in the everyday work that the importance of good governance and ethics is to be understood and to be recognised and in particular through the leadership of politicians and senior officers.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all members of the Standards Committee and the Parish Standards Sub-committee and I look forward to the following twelve months of improving and developing the standard of ethics and governance within the district even further.

RAY BETTERIDGE
CHAIRMAN, STANDARDS COMMITTEE