

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL

COUNCIL

30 June 2010

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to report to Cannock Chase District Council in relation to ethics and standards for the last Municipal Year.

The Standards Committee have worked well together and independently and have provided a consistent source of support and guidance to the Authority and Members in managing matters of ethics and good governance.

As everyone will be aware, there have been considerable changes to the ethical framework since the new national Members' Code of Conduct was introduced and the new regime in relation to the Standards Committee's handling of complaints about Councillors' conduct coming into force on 8 May, 2008. Although further work has since been undertaken on reviewing the Code of Conduct, unfortunately, publication has been delayed several times and we still await the revised Code of Conduct and associated guidance.

A major change in the Local Government Ethical Framework that I reported on last year was the introduction of the Initial Assessments Panel. This removed the need for every complaint to go to Standards for England (formerly the Standards Board for England) initially, to one where a panel from the Council's Standards Committee could hold a hearing and determine the outcome of a complaint, thus removing bureaucracy and speeding up the process of investigation and assessment.

The move to local assessment means that the vast majority of complaints come in the first instance to the Monitoring Officer who reports to an Initial Assessment Panel of the Standards Committee. This change has presented everyone involved in promoting high ethical standards with a real challenge to ensure that local assessment is fair, robust and effective. This is particularly true in the instances of complaints from an elected Member about the actions of a fellow Councillor, where Panel members have to set aside political differences and act with impartiality to ensure a decision that would stand up to external scrutiny in the event that the matter was referred for appeal.

During the last year I am pleased to report that has been only one complaint considered by an Initial Assessment Panel of the Standards Committee. This compares with five in the previous year (one of which was not referred for investigation, and only one of which was eventually upheld in part by the Standards Committee). However, it should be borne in mind that last year's peak followed an extensive

period of training on the Code of Conduct which raised awareness of Member Conduct and the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct.

I'm sure Members will appreciate the need to continue to uphold these high standards. It is clear for all to see from the issues that continue to affect MP's (especially those surrounding expenses), just how easy it is for the public to get a negative impression – rightly or wrongly - of those in public office. I would, therefore, take this opportunity to reiterate the importance of promoting and encouraging compliance with the Code of Conduct as fundamental in ensuring the integrity of Members, the Council, Committees and of course the position and role of the Standards Committee itself.

Achievements and Looking Ahead

Following a steep learning curve in the preceding year, the Standards Committee has had a relatively quiet time over the last twelve months, while continuing to wait on the next phase of changes and the potential challenges these might bring.

I will continue to champion local resolution through discussion and negotiation with Members and Group Leaders, where appropriate, in the event that inappropriate behaviour or breaches of the Code are likely or have been identified.

I intend that the Standards Committee will continue to review issues of Member conduct, consider any new changes that are being introduced, monitor the effectiveness of the Standards Committee arrangements and look at how the revised Code of Conduct can be promoted and embedded further in the culture of the organisation, particularly through pro-active Member training for both District and Parish / Town Councillors.

As the standards and ethics landscape continues to change, so do the pressures placed upon local authorities. This situation is only likely to worsen over the next few years and there is a need for the Council to consider joint working with other authorities. This council has already gone somewhat down that route and Members will be aware that our current Monitoring Officer is the Head of Law and Administration from Stafford Borough Council. I am grateful for the insights that he has brought to the role and for the shared opportunities that have and will, hopefully, continue to arise out of this shared working arrangement. At a County level, Standards for England are also encouraging the setting up of County-wide Independent Members Forums, and this is already being explored for Staffordshire. I continue to support Lichfield District Council by attending their Standards Committee and some Initial Assessment Panel's. Consideration may be given during the ensuing year to see whether or not there would be an opportunity for more working with adjoining districts.

I would again emphasise the need for members of the Standards Committee to respect political impartiality in all their work. Likewise, all other members of the District and Parish Councils need to recognise this impartiality as the Committee deals with standards matters.

I must also emphasise the utmost importance for strict confidence to be given to the deliberation of standards matters, especially within Initial Assessment and Review Panel meetings. To this end, a Protocol document on Confidentiality has now been approved by the Standards Committee.

I have been encouraged by the behaviour of Councillors of all levels within the District and Parishes. I fully appreciate the pressures and demands placed on Councillors but hope Members are reassured to know that a fair, robust and effective ethical and standards framework exists for the benefit of all.

I have already mentioned my gratitude for the support provided by the Monitoring Officer, and his team, and this support extends to all other Members of the Council in matters of ethics and standards and the interpretation of the Council's Constitution, Code of Conduct and protocol. I reiterate my message that 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 must express my sincere thanks to my fellow members of the Standards Committee for all their support and commitment and I look forward to continued working with them to develop the standard of ethics and governance within the district even further.

RAY BETTERIDGE
CHAIRMAN, STANDARDS COMMITTEE