

## **ANNUAL REPORT OF CHORLEY COUNCIL'S STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

1. This annual report provides a summary of the work undertaken by Chorley Council's Standards Committee during the Municipal Year 2008/09 to promote and ensure compliance with the Member's Code of Conduct and generally to ensure good standards of ethical governance within the Borough Council and the Parish Council's covered by the Committee.
2. This has been a particularly busy year in the Standard's world. In May new arrangements were implemented which transferred the responsibility for receiving and assessing complaints from the Standards Board for England to local Standards Committees. This may be seen to have been the logical next step following a general move over the last few years towards cases being investigated and heard locally. Much of the Committee's work during the last year has focused on implementing these new arrangements and to deal with some of the challenges which will undoubtedly emerge.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

3. The current membership of the Committee is as follows:

#### A. Independent Members

1. Tony Ellwood (Chair)
2. Reverend John Cree

#### B. Parish Members

1. Councillor Joan Geddes
2. Councillor William Mason
3. Councillor Alan Platt
4. Councillor Alan Cornwell (substitute Parish Member)

#### C. Borough Council Members

1. Councillor Keith Iddon (Vice-Chair)
2. Councillor Judith Boothman
3. Councillor Thomas McGowan
4. Councillor Debra Platt
5. Councillor Stella Walsh

4. In order to ensure that the Committee is able to establish the Sub Committees required for local assessment, the Committee requested the Borough Council earlier in the year to increase the numbers of Independent and Parish Members. That request was accepted and recruitment exercises have been conducted. The Committee was pleased that the exercise lead to significant interest within the Parishes. Following interviews Parish Councillors William Mason and Alan Platt were appointed to the Committee by the Borough Council on 7 April 2009
5. So far as recruitment of an additional Independent Member was concerned a press advert did result in some interest and potentially suitable candidates came forward. Unfortunately those suitable were unable to take up the position. The Local Strategic Partnership were



contacted to canvass interest and applicants were requested to apply by letter. Interviews were held in June and the Borough Council will be requested to appoint Gwynne Furlong and Hugh Evans to the Committee on 14 July 2009.

## **COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND BUSINESS**

6. The full Committee has met five times during the year and has been successful in following the work programme approach adopted during the preceding year. At each meeting the Committee considers work undertaken to promote the code and receives any updates from the Standards Board or the Adjudication Panel. Under the latter heading the Committee now receives a report at each of its meetings regarding cases which have been referred by Committees to the Standards Board for investigation and in relation to Adjudication Panel decisions. In addition to its routine business the Committee has considered and made recommendations in relation to the following matters:
  - a. A user policy on Members mini-websites;
  - b. A review of Chorley Council's Whistleblowing Policy;
  - c. A review of Chorley Council's protocol on Member/Officers Relations;
  - d. A response to the Department for Communities and Local Governments consultation paper on revisions to the Code of Conduct for Members and for the introduction of a Code of Conduct for Officers;
  - e. Draft Protocol on Parish Member-Employee Relations and
  - f. Use of Resources Assessment – What the Standards Committee needs to know.

## **TRAINING AND INFORMATION PROVISION**

8. The Standards Committee has continued to regard the provision of training and information as a key function. Members of the Committee have undertaken a variety of training themselves including:
  - a. Attending the Lancashire Standards Conference in March and then feeding back to those Members who were unable to attend at the first Committee meeting of the Municipal Year;
  - b. Undertaking a training exercise in conducting local assessment hearings following a Standards Board training package;
  - c. Independent Members have attended the meetings and training offered by the North West Independent Members Forum;
  - d. The Chair of the Committee has attended the Standards Board National Conference.
9. In addition each Member of the Committee has been supplied with updated Standards Board guidance as it has been produced.
10. In terms of training for other Members, an introduction to the Code was offered as part of the induction programme for new Councillors and a training session was offered to all Borough and Parish Councillors in July 2008.
11. In addition to formal training the Committee has continued to promote general awareness raising. All the Parish Clerks have been supplied with information relating to the new assessment processes and they have also been supplied with all the new guidance coming from the Standards Board. In addition information has been added to Chorley Council's website covering the complaints process.

## **PARISH MENTORING**

12. The Committee is now into the second year of its Parish mentoring programme which is another important aspect of its awareness raising programme. Parish mentoring involves each Member of the Standards Committee being allocated a number of Parish Councils and committing to attend at least one Parish Council meeting during the year. At those meetings the Standards Committee member is prepared to give a brief overview of the work of the Committee and pass on news about important developments. It is anticipated that by the end of the year each Parish Council will have had a visit in accordance with the plan.

## **HEARINGS**

13. The number of complaints being dealt with by the Committee continues to be at a relatively low level. However, in June the Committee considered two complaints against Parish Councillors which had been referred by the Standards Board in accordance with the old procedures. In one of those cases the Committee accepted the Investigating Officer's conclusion that there was no breach of the Code of Conduct. In the other case the Committee agreed with the Investigating Officer's conclusion that there was a breach. In that case a local hearing in July 2008 led to the Councillor receiving a three-month suspension from office. If the Parish Councillor had attended training his suspension period would have been reduced to a month. The Parish Councillor chose not to take up the training and served his full period of suspension.
14. Under the new arrangements the Local Assessment Sub-Committee met in November 2008 to consider two related complaints relating to Borough Councillors. Those complaints have been referred for investigation. One Borough Councillor was found not to have breached the Code of Conduct. In April 2009 a hearing was held in relation to the second Borough Councillor which determined there had been a technical breach, but that that no action needed to be taken.
15. The Sub-Committee (Assessment) has subsequently met in March, April and May to consider complaints against a total of five Parish Councillors. The outcome of the Assessment Sub-Committees were:
  - a. 1 referral to the Standards Board for England,
  - b. 2 no breaches of the Code of Conduct found,
  - c. 2 potential breaches of the Code of Conduct referred for investigation.

## **STANDARDS SUB COMMITTEE**

16. For some years the Committee has operated a Standards Sub-Committee which meets with the purpose of carrying out a review and audit in relation to the maintenance of records of interest and hospitality provided by both Borough Council and Parish members. This Sub-Committee provides guidance and recommendations in regard to compliance of these records. The Sub Committee was pleased this year to note that the quality of register entries showed clear signs of improvement.

## USE OF RESOURCES

17. The work of the Committee forms a small part of the work considered by the Audit Commission when undertaking the annual “use of resources assessment” of Chorley Council. Ethical governance arrangements feature as an element within the “internal control” judgement made by the Commission. This year Chorley maintained its overall maximum “4” rating. However, within that score the Council also secured an improvement in the internal control element which moved from “3” to “4”. The Committee hopes to be able to continue to support the Council to maintain this level of standing when it is next assessed under a new use of resources framework.

ANDREW DOCHERTY  
CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE

There are no background papers to this report.

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