

## Setting High Ethical Standards

### **Wiltshire County Council**

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PROJECT SPECIFICATION

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<b>Reference:</b>	Ethical Gov Spec final at 29-3-05
<b>Date:</b>	29 March 2005

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## Introduction and Background

There is an increased emphasis on the need for the highest standards of conduct in public life. The findings of Nolan and Graham Committees, the Local Government Act 2000, the introduction of The Standards Board for England, and the inclusion of an ethics component in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2005 are all factors in the current weight being given to the need for strong ethical governance in local councils.

High ethical standards are the cornerstone of good governance. They are an integral part of good corporate governance arrangements, can lead to increased confidence in local democracy and help an authority to attain a high CPA rating.

Setting high ethical standards is an important building block for councils in developing their community leadership role and improving services to the community. Councils are also becoming involved in increasingly complex partnership and a decline in high standards may adversely affect these arrangements.

Local authorities and individual members now face a number of risks which may include:

- referral to, and investigation by, The Standards Board for England for alleged breaches of the code of conduct, sometimes leading to the disqualification of members
- loss of confidence in individual members, councils and local democracy
- poor decision making.

Ethical governance is an area of great interest to the national and local press, particularly when things go wrong. On average one councillor a week is removed from office because of breaches of the code of conduct ranging from bullying behaviour, misuse of council resources, bringing the council into disrepute and using their position as a councillor for personal gain. Other sanctions have included formal censure, and suspension from using council facilities. When things go wrong and councillors are found guilty of a breach of the code of conduct, there is a risk to the reputation of individuals and the council. The consequent difficulties of having to implement widespread changes whilst under the spotlight cannot be overestimated.

One of the common aspects of governance failures is not the absence of frameworks, controls and arrangements but the absence of appropriate behaviours and values amongst members and officers. This audit therefore looks at your compliance with statutory requirements but also at behaviour, culture and values.

## Scope and objectives

The aim of this audit is to help you assess whether the council

- is complying with Part III of the Local Government Act 2000
- is ensuring that the Standards Committee has access to the right information and support to enable it to do its job properly
- members and officers have an understanding/awareness of ethical issues
- members are abiding by the code of conduct
- members and officers have training needs in this area.

The work is aimed predominantly at members.

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## Audit approach

To complete the project we will undertake:

- a document review
- interviews with key Members and Officers
- survey of members and key officers.

The survey will be undertaken in March 2005 and will provide the council with a base position regarding arrangements currently in place.

## Timescales and Resources

The following members of staff will be involved with the project:

### Audit Commission

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Tel: ext 3084

Peter will be leading the review with Sue managing the survey.

### Wiltshire County Council

**Key client contacts – John Quinton –Manager, Democratic and Member services**

The work will be carried out as follows:

Task	Target date for completion
Set up meeting	3 March 2005.
Fieldwork	March - April 2005
Client Feedback	Late April 2005
Report on findings	Early May 05

## Outputs

Depending on the findings from our work we can provide a separate summary report or report the main conclusions as part of our interim audit memorandum. The actual nature of the end product will be agreed with officers following completion of the work..

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## **Status of our reports to the Council**

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