

**D R A F T**

**WILTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**ANNUAL REPORT – 2007/08**

**Introduction by Catherine O’Sullivan – Independent Chairman**

I am delighted to present the 2007/08 Standards Committee Annual Report. The report explains what the Committee does, what it has been doing over the last year and also gives details of our future work programme.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the Standards Committee, both independent and elected members for their hard work, support and commitment over the last year. I would also like to thank officers for the support they have given me and the Committee.

As in previous years, this report is being published on the Council’s website rather than producing multiple hard copies.

**Membership**

The Standards Committee is made up of 3 elected County Councillors and 6 independent members appointed by the full Council as follows:

Catherine O’Sullivan	– Independent Member and Chairman
Paul Lefever	– Independent Member and Vice-Chairman
Keith Shipman	– Independent Member
Isabel McCord	- Independent Member
Lynne Liptrot	- Independent Member
Peter McGuigan	– Independent Member
Malcolm Hewson	– County Councillor
Pat Rugg	– County Councillor
Margaret White	- County Councillor

**Officer Support**

The Committee is supported by the following officers of the Council:

Stephen Gerrard	- Solicitor and Monitoring Officer
Ian Gibbons	- Head of Legal and Democratic Services Officer/Deputy Monitoring Officer
Nina Wilton	- Corporate Standards Manager
Yamina Rhouati	- Principal Democratic Services Officer

## Membership Changes

Our practice is that one independent member retires each year to ensure that they do not become “part of the establishment” but at the same time, maintain a degree of continuity. However, as 2008 is a transitional year before the authority becomes a Unitary Council in 2009, Council agreed with the Committee’s recommendation to extend the term of office of its independent members for another year. Council also agreed with the Committee’s recommendation to increase the Committee’s membership from 6 to 9 members.

This year, saw the appointment of Mrs Isabel McCord as an Independent Member and Mrs Margaret White, member of the Council who have also proven to be assets to the Committee. Unfortunately, Lynne Liptrot resigned from the Committee at the end of March 2008 due to other commitments and the contribution she made to the Committee is much appreciated.

## What Does the Standards Committee Do?

The Standards Committee is a statutory Committee which carries out the following functions:

- promotes and maintaining high standards of conduct by elected members, co-opted members and church and parent governor representatives and officers;
- assists those members to observe the Members’ Code of Conduct;
- gives advice on training or arranges to train those members in all aspects of the Code of Conduct and actively promotes such training and ensures and that members are aware of the standards expected from them under the Code;
- advises the Council on the operation, adoption or revision of the Members’ Code of Conduct;
- considers requests for dispensations to those members from requirements relating to interests set out in the Members’ Code of Conduct;
- overviews the whistle blowing policy;
- overviews complaints handling and Ombudsman investigations;
- two independent members from the committee serve on Review Panels to consider corporate complaints at Stage 3 of the corporate complaints procedure;
- reviews the implementation of recommendations made by the Ombudsman and corporate complaints Review Panels following complaints made against the Council;
- where appropriate, makes payments or providing other benefits in cases of maladministration;
- oversees the Constitution.

## What have We Done?

Well, it has been a busy year and considering it is quite a small Committee, we have achieved quite a lot.

We continued our work on the **Members' Involvement in the Decision Making Process**. An Action Plan which is a work in progress, has been drawn up which hopefully will assist Members.

The Committee considered the new **model Code of Conduct** and recommended its adoption to Council. The Code was adopted by the Council in July for implementation on 1 September 2007 and training was provided for all members on the changes introduced by the new Code. The Committee also ensured that all Members and co-opted Members had completed their **Register of Interest Form** under the new Code. The Committee viewed a DVD from the Standards Board for England called the '**The Code Uncovered**' which gave an insight into the operation of the new Code. At the Committee's instigation, an **interactive computer package on the Code** was obtained which has now been made available to all Wiltshire district and county council members which provides further training on the Code.

We considered the **consequential changes to the Constitution** as a result of amendments to the terms of reference of sub-committees of the Staffing Policy Committee.

We considered the ethical governance issues contained within the proposed **Statement on Internal Control** for 2006/07.

The Committee considered a revised **Governance and Reporting Structure**. This was an area of work that the Committee had itself initiated.

The Committee reviewed the **Job Description and Person Specification for the post of Independent Member** to ensure they were fit for purpose and better reflected the attributes required for the job.

The Committee considered an update of **case summaries on the Local Government Ombudsman complaints** which the Council had dealt with and resolved, during the period between January and June 2007.

The Committee also considered the **Annual Letter from the Local Government Ombudsman** for the period 2006/07. It had been noted that during this period, only 33 complaints had been made against the Council and the Ombudsman had commented that given the size of the Council's responsibilities, the number of complaints remained small. At the Committee's invitation, the Local Government Ombudsman attended a meeting of the Committee to which members of the Standards Committees of all Wiltshire councils were invited. The Ombudsman gave a very informative presentation to explain his role and kindly answered Members' questions.

The Committee responded to the **Government's consultation on Orders and Regulations Relating to the Conduct of Local Authority Members in England** (local assessment regime) which would come into force on 8 May 2008 and would

pass the responsibility to determine whether allegations about breaches of the Code of Conduct for Members should be investigated from the Standards Board for England to local authorities. The committee has been considering the implications and impact these Regulations would have on the work of the Committee.

In preparation for this new area of work and the additional work it would create, the Committee made a recommendation to Council which was adopted to **increase the size of the Committee** from 6 to 9 members. The Committee also **established 3 sub-committees** which would be required to consider any complaints received against members. The Committee has also ensured that its guidance for members of the public on how to complain includes the provisions of the new local assessment regime.

A **new unitary Council, Wiltshire Council** will come into being on 1 April 2009. The Committee has been actively involved in helping to shape the Standards Committee for the new Council. This is an ongoing process and the Committee has been very keen to also involve the Wiltshire district councils. To this end, the Committee arranged and hosted a **Wiltshire Standards Seminar** to which all district council Standards Committee members were invited. It was very well attended and provided a forum for an extremely useful exchange of ideas. We were also fortunate to have excellent speakers, namely, Sara Goodwin from the Standards Board for England who spoke on the local assessment regime (which were in draft at that stage) and Alison Kelly from the Audit Commission who spoke on ethical governance issues in general.

A follow up meeting between the chairmen and vice-chairmen of the Standards Committee of the district and county councils and the Police and Fire Authorities was held. One of the things to come out of that meeting, was an agreement for Wiltshire County Council to arrange joint training on the new local assessment regime.

Several members of the Committee attended in an observer capacity, a district council **Local Determination Hearing** (a hearing to consider a complaint against a member) as a training exercise.

The Committee regularly receives a **summary of cases dealt with by the Adjudication Panel** and guidance from the President of the Adjudication Panel where necessary to keep itself up to date with recent cases.

The Committee also regularly receives '**The Bulletin**' newsletter from the Standards Board for England and discusses matters of interest contained therein.

The Committee always ensures it is represented on the **Independent Members' Forum**, the minutes from which are presented to the Committee for consideration and comment.

The Committee is also represented by a member and officer at the **Annual Assembly of the Standards Board for England**. As Chairman of the Committee, I attended this year's Assembly and provided the Committee with a report on my attendance.

My Vice-Chairman and I also attended the **Standards Board Roadshow** on behalf of the Committee.

## What Will We Be Doing Next Year

A fundamental change to the work of the Committee from May 2008 will be an additional task of initially assessing complaints against members of the Council, an area of work previously carried out by the Standards Board for England. This will be a challenging task which the Committee will no doubt meet with its usual thorough and professional approach. I am very pleased to note that there have not been any formal complaints made against members to date, but it is important to have a robust system for members of the public to have the facility to make complaints should they need to do so.

A further area of work will be to continue work with the Wiltshire district councils to harmonise documents and procedures and formulate recommendations to shape the Committee for the new Wiltshire Council.

The Committee will also be involved in overseeing the provision of a new Constitution for the new Council.

The Committee will also need to start the process of recruiting independent members of the Committee for the new Council.

## Conclusion

I am very pleased that the Standards Committee has continued to play an effective role in the work of the County Council. As can be seen by the work undertaken this year, progress has been made in a number of areas and the Committee is keen to maintain this momentum and keep ethical governance where it should be, at the heart of what the authority does. The Committee is also grateful to have the continued support from the Council.

I was particularly pleased with the co-operation of the district councils at our Wiltshire Standards Seminar which looked to the future in helping to shape the Committee for the new Council.

## Would You Like To Be Involved?

The position of Independent Member is open to anyone who can demonstrate they

- can exercise personal integrity and are committed to integrity in local government
- have experience of critically assessing written and verbal evidence and reaching a balanced and objective decision based on the evidence
- have comprehensive experience of working with a wide range of people, both colleagues and customers or service users, and that they can communicate effectively at all levels
- are able to express their ideas and point of view confidently, effectively and tactfully
- have excellent listening skills

- have experience of problem solving and analysis
- are tenacious and independent, and can exercise persuasion and influence
- have an understanding of the principles and practice of equality and diversity and be committed to those principles

If you are interested in applying to serve on the Committee as an independent member, then look out for the adverts in the local newspapers in ? when we will be looking to recruit independent members for the new Wiltshire Council.

**Catherine O'Sullivan**  
**Chairman of the Standards Committee**

This report has been produced by Wiltshire County Council's Standards Committee. If you would like further information about the content or the work of the Standards Committee please contact:

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Minutes of the Standards Committee can be found on the following link of the Council's website:

<http://194.72.162.210/documents/dscgi/ds.py/View/Collection-12>

You can also contact us by writing to: The Standards Committee, County Hall, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, BA14 8JN