

West Wiltshire District Council
Annual Report of the Standards Committee

November 2006

Introduction

I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce this second report by the West Wiltshire Standards Committee.

The Committee was formed in 2001 as a consequence of the Local Government Act 2000. Its membership comprises four District Councillors (representing the main party groups) a Parish Councillor, a Town Councillor and three independent (ie non elected) members. The Chairman and Vice Chairman are selected from the independent members.

The body of this report provides details of the roles and function of the committee. I think the essence of what we are trying to achieve can be summarised as "being proactive in helping to create and maintain the highest ethical standards throughout the District, Town and Parish Councils in West Wiltshire.

The Standards Committee

The Standards Committee is composed of 4 District Councillors and 5 independent members including Town Council and Parish Council representatives. It is concerned with promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by all parish, town and district councillors in West Wiltshire.

Profiles of Standards Committee Members:

Chairman – Tony Frost (External Representative)
Jasmin House, 115A Hilperton Road, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 7JJ
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"I began my working life in my father's small building business and I am now a chartered surveyor working in Bath as a project manager with a local branch of a national surveying practice.

My projects have included museums, schools, universities, a wildlife centre and several swimming pools.

A part of my job includes negotiating the settlement of disputes and contractual claims and, in some cases, acting as an expert witness in legal proceedings.

Acting on behalf of lottery funders, I also monitor and report on the progress of various projects for which they are providing financial support.

I was born in Melksham and attended the boys' high school in Trowbridge (now John of Gaunt). I have always lived in Wiltshire and seven years ago my wife Vicki and I moved to Trowbridge.

Outside of work, my interests include swimming and triathlon, looking after two large dogs and a very small pony and reading as many books (usually history), as I can manage."

Vice Chairman – Keith West (External Representative)

5A Bradley Road, WARMINSTER, BA12 8BL

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"I was born in an RAF hospital in Singapore and left there at a very early age to live in South West London. I attended a grammar school in Kingston upon Thames, leaving with a couple of Science A Levels in 1980.

For four years I studied metallurgy and materials science at Coventry University before graduating in 1984 and heading off into the wide world of employment.

My career has seen me move from work on adhesive coatings on plastic films, through failure analysis of aircraft components using electron microscopy, into production of complex electronic circuits and then to a more in-depth appreciation of miniature electronic components.

In 2000, my wife Louise, son Ryan (age 11) and I moved to Warminster when I took up an appointment working as a quality and improvements professional on an RAF base in South Wiltshire. My current role involves me on a day-to-day basis providing advice on Quality, Health, Safety & Environment and security standards and practices to a group of 800 project managers, highly qualified engineers and the odd (sic) test pilot. I'm also responsible for a building occupied by 140 people from various parts of my company and my role covers everything from arranging evacuation procedures, in the event of a bomb threat or fire, to ordering toilet brushes for the cleaners.

When away from work I like to relax with my family walking, travelling, fishing or at the cinema. I enjoy reading books that challenge or stimulate my mind, but probably don't do enough of this."

Dr Kurt Paulus (External Representative)
50 Wooley Street, BRADFORD ON AVON, BA15 1AQ
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"I trained as a physicist and spent my working life in scientific publishing. I retired as Operations Director of Institute of Physics Publishing, with responsibility for production, information technology and human resources. I am a fellow of the Institute of Physics and sit on the panel for the assessment of company training schemes, as well as taking a continued interest in learned publishing. I have lived in Bradford on Avon since 1993, where I chair the Woolley Festival and Friends of Woolley."

Ernie Clark (District Council Representative)
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"Born in South London I moved to Kent when I married (London property being too expensive). I came to Wiltshire in 1992.

My working life was spent with Barclays Bank, mostly with the International arm in the City of London, but latterly with Barclays Global Securities when that operation was opened at the White Horse Business Park. I have the dubious honour (if that's the right word) of having been in the first ever batch of compulsory redundancies made by the bank!"

Marion Clegg (District Council Representative)
4 Wellhead Lane, WESTBURY, BA13 3PW
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"Having lived in Westbury for nearly thirty years I have seen many changes. It is still a friendly town - as are most of the people in it. Coming from a large town this is much appreciated.

My own family of four (two daughters and two sons) is now grown up and I have eight grandchildren. Two of my grandchildren have produced six great grandsons between them; others are still at school. Between them there is not much that has not happened to one or other of them. I like to think this gives me some insight into the problems encountered by the constituents in my ward. I trust I treat them all equally and well!"

Sophie Farkas (District Council Representative)
174 Winsley Road, BRADFORD ON AVON, BA15 1NY

Tel: 01225 862874

"I have been a local councillor for 18 years and a district councillor for the past 13 years, during which time I have been involved with a wide range of local issues and the Chairman of three different committees.

I have also been Vice Chairman of Council for three years, a board member with the Housing Society, PPG member of our local doctor's surgery and involved with the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Now, totally relaxing, I have few commitments on the Council. Since closing my health food shop my husband and I run a successful Bed and Breakfast, which is quite hard work."

Eli Manasseh (District Council Representative)
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"I was born in Calcutta, India and moved to the United Kingdom as a teenager and continued my education at Hackney Downs school in East London.

I moved to Westbury in 1970 and married Chris, we have two children both born and educated in Westbury.

I have had a variety of jobs from journalism to working on the factory floor at Bowyers. For most of my working career I was a teacher in a large Comprehensive School in Bristol. I had to retire in 1992 because of deafness and before being elected as a district councillor spent almost all my time at Westbury United Football Club on a voluntary basis. I read a great deal and enjoy watching all types of sport.

Peter Leach (Town Council Representative)
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"A resident of Bradford on Avon, I have been on the Town Council for the past four years and Chair of the Town Council for just over one year.

One of my main focuses is on young people and I have led a recent successful campaign to establish a Youth Council in Bradford on Avon.

As a boat owner, I am passionately keen on the waterways of the Wiltshire area and am Chairman of the Town Council's Riverside Committee. I am also keenly interested in maintaining the unique environment of West Wiltshire and am a prominent member of the Town Planning Committee.

I am a printer by profession and work full time in the Graphic's Industry.

I am very much a people person who interacts with all members of society equally. I believe I have integrity, commitment and a tremendous energy and enthusiasm.”

Horace Prickett (Parish Council Representative)
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"Although not born in West Wiltshire, I have lived here continuously since the age of 2, mainly in the Westbury area.

I was educated at the now Matravers School in Westbury and spent almost all my working life within the town, first with British Rail and later teaching for nearly thirty years at my old school. I still teach part time at a college for students with Asperger's Syndrome, a job I very much enjoy and which gives me a great deal of satisfaction.

I am currently a Westbury Town Councillor and North Bradley Parish Councillor. I have been interested in local government and active in local politics all my adult life and sat for four years on the District Council. This is my second term as a Westbury councillor and my fourth as a parish councillor.

I have a keen interest in improving the standard of living and services within West Wiltshire and I intend to retire here as I have two daughters with spouses and four grandchildren all living in the area.

In my little spare time between council business and work, I enjoy travel and photography and run a small photographic studio specialising in wedding photography.

What is the Standards Committee's Role and Function?

- (a) promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Councillors and co-opted members;
- (b) assisting the Councillors and co-opted members to observe the Members' Code of Conduct and any local Protocols;
- (c) advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct and of any local Protocols;
- (d) monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct and any local Protocols;
- (e) advising, training or arranging to train Councillors and co-opted members on matters relating to the Members' Code of Conduct and any local Protocols;
- (f) granting dispensations to Councillors and co-opted members from requirements relating to interests set out in the Members' Code of

Conduct and any local Protocols;

- (g) dealing with any reports from a case tribunal or interim case tribunal, and any report from the Monitoring Officer on any matter which is referred by an ethical standards officer to the Monitoring Officer;
- (h) dealing with any complaints of failure by a Councillor to comply with any local Protocol;
- (i) monitoring the operation of this Constitution and recommending to the Council on any changes to this Constitution;
- (j) receiving reports from the independent remuneration panel and making recommendations to the Council on members' allowances. Such recommendations will be referred to the Cabinet for comment before being submitted to the Council;
- (k) making recommendations to the Council on the adoption and amendment of any Code of Conduct for officers. Such recommendations will be referred to the Local Joint Consultative Committee before being submitted to the Council;
- (l) preparing and advising upon the preparation of Working Guidelines as guidance to Councillors and officers in the discharge of their functions;
- (m) considering and making recommendations to the Council and the Cabinet in respect of any matter which has been referred to the Committee for consideration; and
- (n) the exercise of (a) to (g) above in relation to the Parish and Town Councils wholly or mainly in its area and the members of those Parish and Town Councils.

What have we been doing since January 2006?

Role of the Standards Committee in adopting the new Constitution

The Standards Committee has monitored the implementation of the new Constitution, and has recommended changes to the Council. We have agreed to involve the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet and have agreed a process to be initiated involving members and officers to ask for any further issues to be identified for consideration.

Code of Conduct

We have considered the ODPM's conclusions arising from the consultation exercise on the review of the Code of Conduct in English Local Government. The outcome of this is that the Standards Board for England will focus on a

central strategic role to promote consistently high standards of conduct. This will result in a continuation of the trend of referring an increasing number of cases for local investigation and determination. The Standards Committee examined the implications, and considered the evidence that showed an increased cost burden on the Council. These costs were queried direct with the Standards Board and received a less than satisfactory response. We shall continue to monitor and where possible protect the Council's position where we are able.

Local Determination Hearing

In May 2006 a hearing panel comprising five members of the Standards Committee successfully conducted its first local determination hearing into the conduct of two town councillors. The hearing was a learning experience for everyone concerned as we endeavoured to apply and administer the procedural rules prescribed by the Standards Board for England. Perhaps as a consequence of our collective inexperience and certainly in the interests of fair play the Chairman decided to adjourn the first hearing to allow more time for information to be gathered and further witnesses to be present.

When the hearing was resumed the Standards Committee resolved that one of the councillors had not been disrespectful and had not brought his office or authority into disrepute. The second councillor was found by the Standards Committee to have failed to treat others with respect and had brought his office and authority into disrepute.

Many lessons were learned which will be invaluable for the future although we all hope that the need for future hearings will be minimal.

Complaints Procedure

The Standards Committee has received a report on the Council's complaints procedure and the monitoring that has taken place. Copies of any reports concerning complaints which are presented to both Cabinet and Scrutiny, will also be monitored by the Standards Committee.

Methodology for Granting Dispensations

The Standards Committee has received a report on the methodology of granting dispensations.

Planning Applications submitted by Councillors

The Standards Committee approved an advice note to members on planning applications submitted by Councillors.

Learning and Development

In carrying out its role of advising, training or arranging to train councillors and co-opted members on matters relating to the Members' Code of Conduct and any local protocols, the Standards Committee has arranged the following over the past year:

- The screening of a DVD produced by the Standards Board for England explaining the process of investigations and hearings
- Training on Code of Conduct issues
- Training on Ethical Governance

Conclusion

Following the adoption of the new constitution earlier this year the role of the Standards Committee has been more clearly defined. We expect over the coming months to set out our own guidelines and targets for carrying out these duties and measuring and improving our performance.

We are also expecting, following changes in the working practices of the Standards Board for England, to be dealing with an increased proportion of the complaints made against councillors.

Whilst we are pleased with the progress made we realise that there is much more to be done. Changes in the National Code of Conduct and the way the Standards Board deals with alleged breaches of the Code will bring new challenges which will have to be dealt with by the Committee and may impact upon the numbers and membership of the Committee.

Above all we intend to be proactive in promoting ethical behaviour in local government in West Wiltshire.

To conclude I must thank all members of the Committee, past and present, who have contributed to its work, the District Councillors who have been so supportive especially to we "independent members" and the staff of the District Council for the help and information they provide and without whom we couldn't function.