

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

13 January 2010

STANDARDS COMMITTEE PLAN 2010-2014

Purpose of Report

1. To ask the Committee to agree a plan setting out its priorities and actions to meet them over the next four years.

Background

2. Wiltshire Council's Standards Committee was established in July 2009 and has made good progress in meeting its responsibilities under the local standards framework and the Council's Constitution. In order to ensure that it remains effective in its role and makes the best use of its resources it is necessary to agree priorities for the Committee over the next four years.
3. In agreeing its priorities the Committee will wish to bear in mind Standards for England's view that excellent standards committees are high performing in the following areas:
 - securing compliance with the standards framework;
 - demonstrating consistency and quality in the operation of its procedures and decision-making;
 - innovation e.g. use of mediation in resolving complaints;
 - exercising influence on the ethical well-being of the Council, Parish and Town Councils and partners;
 - communicating proactively and effectively in promoting high standards and public trust and confidence in local democracy.
4. Details of some performance indicators developed by Standards for England are attached at Appendix 1.
5. The Committee will also wish to have regard to the Council's draft Corporate Plan. A summary of the current version is included at Appendix 2. This is due to be considered by the Council for adoption at its meeting in February and will cover the period 2010 - 2014. It is proposed that the Committee's plan should cover the same period.
6. The Committee's priorities should reflect the Council's vision and goals. The Council's vision is to **create stronger and more resilient communities**. The vision is underpinned by 3 key goals, all of which have people and communities as their focus:
 - **Deliver high quality, low cost, customer focused services** - putting the customer first and ensuring that the Council is meeting the needs of its customers in a cost-effective way which demonstrates value for money.

- **Ensure local, open, honest decision-making** - engaging with communities so that people are contributing to the decisions that affect them and their local area.
- **Working together to support Wiltshire's communities** - across the council and its partner organisations, focusing on the needs of people and communities rather than on specific services and departments.

7. The Committee's functions of promoting high standards of conduct and ethical governance underpin the achievement of these goals. There is a strong link between good governance and high performing councils, as the following statements from "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework" (CIPFA / SOLACE) support:

Governance is about how local government bodies ensure that they are doing the right things in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable manner. It comprises the systems and processes, and cultures and values, by which local government bodies are directed and controlled and through which they account to, engage with and, where appropriate, lead their communities.

Good governance leads to good management, good performance, good stewardship of public money, good public engagement and, ultimately, good outcomes for citizens and service users. Good governance enables an authority to pursue its vision effectively as well as underpinning that vision with mechanisms for control and management of risk

8. The work of the Standards Committee is also a key part of the implementation of the Council's Code of Corporate Governance, which is based upon the following core principles of corporate governance:
- focusing on the purpose of the council and on outcomes for the community and creating and implementing a vision for the local area; engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability;
 - ensuring that members and officers work together to achieve a common purpose with clearly defined functions and roles;
 - promoting high standards of conduct and behaviour, and establishing and articulating the council's values to members, staff, the public and other stakeholders;
 - taking informed, risk based and transparent decisions which are subject to effective scrutiny;
 - developing the capacity of members and officers to be effective in their roles;
 - engaging with local people and other stakeholders to ensure robust public accountability;

Main Considerations for the Council

Goals

9. Against this background it is suggested that the Committee's overall vision is to raise public trust and confidence in local democracy by promoting consistently high standards

of conduct throughout local government in Wiltshire. To achieve this it is proposed that the Committee considers adopting the following goals:

- **Apply the local standards framework in a fair, efficient and proportionate manner;**
- **Promote the ethical well-being of Wiltshire Council by embedding standards further within the Council;**
- **Work with Parish, Town and City Councils to support them in their application of the local standards framework;**
- **Inform and engage the public on standards in local government;**
- **Promote standards in partnerships;**

Apply the local standards framework in a fair, efficient and proportionate manner

10. The Standards Committee has been operating the local standards framework for six months and has developed arrangements for dealing with complaints which, on the whole, are working well. The Committee should build on this foundation to ensure that its processes are efficient and its decisions are clear, consistent and fair.
11. As Standards for England has recognised, there is a need to demonstrate proportionality in the application of the local standards framework, in terms of cost, effort expended, timeliness and sanctions. Standards for England are reviewing this on a national basis and the Committee will wish to have regard to their findings and recommendations on this issue.
12. As reported at the last meeting the proportion of complaints referred for investigation at the assessment stage is significantly higher than the national average. The Committee needs to look into this to ensure that it is achieving the right balance between assuring the public that complaints under the Code of Conduct are taken seriously and avoiding unwarranted public expenditure on the investigation of unmeritorious complaints.
13. The Committee will need to oversee the introduction of a revised Code, which is due to be introduced in May 2010, and ensure that councillors are aware of the new provisions. This includes the provision of ongoing training.

Promote the ethical well-being of Wiltshire Council by embedding standards further within the Council

14. The Committee can support the Council in the achievement of its goals by building on the existing commitment to standards in Wiltshire Council in the following ways:
 - a. supporting the Council in moving to a single culture as outlined in Appendix 3 - One Council One Culture - What will we be like? (See also paragraph 4 on page 10 of the Executive Summary of the draft Corporate Plan at Appendix 2.)
 - b. supporting the Area Boards by attending meetings and raising awareness of the role and work of the Committee and the local standards framework.

- c. regular meetings between the Chairman of the Standards Committee, Leader and Chief Executive to maintain communications and exchange areas of development and opportunities.
- d. working collaboratively with Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny Select Committees and the Audit Committee in improving the Council's governance arrangements.
- e. reviewing the effectiveness of the Constitution. The Committee has set up arrangements to review the Constitution from January 2010 as requested by Council at its meeting in June 2009. The Constitution is an essential part of the Council's governance arrangements and provides the framework for open and transparent decision making.
- f. overseeing the Council's complaints handling to ensure that complaints are dealt with efficiently and lead to improvements in services to the public.
- g. provision of suitable training on the Code of Conduct.

Work with Parish, Town and City Councils to support them in their application of the local standards framework

15. The Committee's outreach to Parish, Town and City Councils is a key priority for the Committee and by far the most challenging in terms of time and resources, given the large number of councils involved - 256. The Committee has taken some initial steps towards this by sending a welcome pack to all town, parish and city clerks in August 2009. This included:
- A DVD by Standards for England called "The Code Uncovered";
 - A book contributed by the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils called "The Good Councillor Guide";
 - A leaflet on the Code of Conduct for each elected member;
 - Information about dispensations;
 - Contact details for officers in Wiltshire Council who support standards and governance work;
 - A leaflet introducing the Wiltshire Association of Local Councils;
 - A letter from the Chair of the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer which invited clerks to contact the council if they wished to discuss training or workshops on the Code.
16. A key element of the support to be provided to Parish, Town and City Councils is training for clerks and councillors on the Code of Conduct and the local standards framework. The Communication and Training Sub-Committees are putting together a training pack for these purposes and a training programme is due to be finalised shortly. Wiltshire Association of Local Councils' (WALC's) representative, Katie Fielding, who has an extensive knowledge of the parish and town councils in Wiltshire, has been closely involved in this work. Training will be provided on a systematic, rolling basis over the next few years, giving priority in scheduling to councils in particular need.
17. Advice and support on the Code of Conduct is available generally to Parish, Town and City Councils and will also be targeted to councils where there are problems. The Committee needs to consider how it can encourage and facilitate Parish, Town and City Councils in accessing support on wider issues of governance, particularly through

membership of WALC and NALC.

18. The Communications Sub-Committee has developed a Communications Plan which provides for other means of support to Parish, Town and City Councils.

Inform and engage the public on standards in local government

19. The Committee recognises the importance of informing and engaging the public on standards in order to increase trust and confidence in local democracy. It is already publicising the Code of Conduct, how to make a complaint, and the work of the Standards Committee through the publication of leaflets for distribution to hub offices, libraries, CABx, as well as being accessible on Wiltshire Council's web-site.
20. The Committee would wish to seize opportunities for greater engagement with the public by providing appropriate articles on the Council's web-site and external communications, as well as through public meetings and roadshows e.g Local Democracy Week.
21. Action on these should be taken forward in accordance with the Communications Plan.

Promoting standards in partnerships

22. In seeking to promote high standards of conduct across local government in Wiltshire it must be recognised that the discharge of the Council's business increasingly involves engaging with partners in the public and voluntary sector. The Council has a partnerships protocol in place, which it uses to ensure that its partnership governance arrangements are robust and sound. Further development of the protocol is, however, desirable to promote good ethical governance in partnership working.
23. Work in the areas covered by the first four proposed goals is already underway, as outlined above, but following through on all the actions linked to those goals is likely to draw on all the available resources for the foreseeable future. Work on promoting standards in partnerships will be undertaken as soon as time and resources permit.

Proposed Plan 2010 - 2014

24. A copy of the Committee's terms of reference is included at Appendix 4 for ease of reference.
25. A copy of a plan setting out the above goals and related actions with target dates, is attached at Appendix 5 for the Committee's consideration.

Environmental Impact

26. None.

Equalities Impact

27. The proposals in this report are consistent with the Council's Equality and Diversity Policy.

Financial Implications

28. There are none arising directly from this report. There will be costs associated with the implementation of the proposed plan e.g. training, printing costs. These will be met from within existing resources.

Legal Implications

29. Approval of the plan will enable the Committee to discharge its legal responsibilities more effectively.

Proposal

30. The Committee is asked to:

- a. agree its priorities and actions for 2010 -14, as set out in the plan attached at Appendix 5.
- b. review its forward work programme accordingly.

Reason for Proposal

31. To ensure that the Committee discharges its role and responsibilities effectively and makes the best use of its resources.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report: None