

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL

COUNCIL

24 June 2009

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF COUNCIL'S STANDARDS COMMITTEE  
TO CANNOCK CHASE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to report to Cannock Chase District Council in relation to ethics and standards for the last Municipal Year.

The Standards Committee have worked well together and independently and have provided a consistent source of support and guidance to the Authority and Members in managing matters of ethics and good governance.

As everyone will be aware, there have been considerable changes to the ethical framework since the new national Members' Code of Conduct was introduced and the new regime in relation to the Standards Committee's handling of complaints about Councillors' conduct coming into force on 8 May last year.

A major change in the Local Government Ethical Framework is the introduction of the Initial Assessments Panel. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 provided for a change from a centralised system, where every complaint went to the Standards Board for England (SBE) initially, to one where the Council's Standards Committee could hold a hearing and determine the outcome of a complaint.

The centralised process was seen by many people as remote and bureaucratic and resulted in a lack of local ownership. This was perceived to be a real disadvantage of the old system. Over time, the SBE recognised these problems and took steps to involve local Standards Committees and to speed up the process of assessment and investigation.

The move to local assessment means that the vast majority of complaints will come in the first instance to the Monitoring Officer who will report to the Standards Committee (Initial Assessment Panel). This change has presented everyone involved in promoting high ethical standards with a real challenge to ensure that local assessment is fair, robust and effective.

During the last Year there have been a total of 5 complaints received by the Standards Committee. This is against the background of no complaints being made against Members of this Council in the previous Year. Whilst at first this may appear concerning, it should be recognised that the level of complaints follow an extensive period of training on the Code of Conduct which has raised the profile of Member Conduct and the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct.

Of the 5 complaints received:

One was not referred for investigation;

Four were referred for investigation; and

Out of the four referred, only one complaint was partially upheld by the Standards Committee.

This demonstrates that , whilst the new regime has raised the importance of ensuring high standards, it has also reinforced the position that Members of this Council continue to uphold and now have also been proven to uphold good standards of conduct.

As with many things, there is always room for improvement and I'm sure Members will of course appreciate the need to continue to uphold these high standards. It is clear for all to see from the issues that have affected MPs nationally, the perception that can be generated rightly or wrongly from certain behaviour. The importance of promoting and encouraging compliance with the Code of Conduct is fundamental in ensuring the integrity of Members, the Council, Committees and of course the position and role of the Standards Committee itself.

### Achievements and Looking Ahead

During the last year , despite the Standards Committee being on a steep learning curve in meeting the challenges of the new standards regime, the Members of the Standards Committee have risen to the challenges faced and have ensured that local determinations are founded on sound and robust grounds. This is evidenced by the fact that no reviews of any decisions made have been necessary.

The last Municipal Year has enabled the Standards Committee to review how the new regime has worked in practice and consider how issues that have arisen can be addressed and improvement made to how complaints are handled.

I very much hope to champion local resolution through discussion and negotiation with Members and Group Leaders in the event that inappropriate behaviour or breaches of the Code are likely or have been identified.

I propose that during the following year the Standards Committee will undertake a complete review of Member conduct, consider any new changes that are being introduced, monitor the effectiveness of the Standards Committee arrangements and look at how the Code of Conduct can be promoted and embedded further, particularly through pro-active Member training.

As indicated last year, as the standards and ethics landscape continues to change, there is a need for the Council to consider joint working with other districts and authorities. Over the last year, I have supported Lichfield District Council by attending several of their Initial Assessment Panel meetings. Consideration will be given during the ensuing year to see whether or not there would be an opportunity for more working with adjoining districts.

I would emphasise the need for members of the Standards Committee to respect political impartiality in all their work.

I must also emphasise the utmost importance for strict confidence to be given to the deliberation of standards matters, especially within Initial Assessment and Review Panel meetings. To this end, I have asked the Monitoring Officer to prepare for the Standards Committee's consideration a Protocol document on Confidentiality.

I have on balance been encouraged by the behaviour of Councillors of all levels within the district and parishes. I fully appreciate the pressures and demands placed on Councillors but hope Members are reassured to know that a fair, robust and effective ethical and standards framework exists for the benefit of all.

I appreciate the ongoing day to day support provided by the Monitoring Officer (both current and previous) and his team to all Members on ethics and standards matters and the interpretation of the Council's Constitution, Code of Conduct and protocol. I reiterate my message that it is in the everyday work that the importance of good governance and ethics is to be understood and to be recognised and in particular through the leadership of politicians and senior officers.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my fellow members of the Standards Committee and I look forward to improving and developing the standard of ethics and governance within the district even further during this ensuing Municipal Year.

*RAY BETTERIDGE*  
*CHAIRMAN, STANDARDS COMMITTEE*