

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

13 September 2010

Group Leaders' Discussion with Standards Committee

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To consider the outcome of the discussion between the Standards Committee and Group Leaders, regarding standards issues, at the Committee's last meeting in May.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At its last meeting, on 10 May 2010, the Leader of the County Council and the Group Leaders for the Liberal Democrats and Independent Members Groups attended the Committee's meeting to discuss issues relevant to the Standards Committee and the standards regime.
- 2.2 At the outset of the discussion, Members commented that standards of behaviour within the County Council are generally very high. The discussion looked at the main areas of the standards regime and raised some interesting and key issues. The Committee agreed that those issues should be considered further and developed into the Standards Committee's Work Programme for further in- depth analysis.

3.0 DISCUSSION OUTCOMES

- 3.1 A full note of the discussion which took place between Group Leaders and the Standards Committee on standards issues and the work of the Committee is set out in the draft minutes of the Committee's meeting on 10 May 2010, which are included in Members' papers for today's meeting.
- 3.2 The key themes arising out of the discussion with Group Leaders are summarised briefly below:

1. Disproportionate nature of current regime

- (a) Members felt the current standards regime was overly bureaucratic and time consuming. This needs to be addressed and a transparent system introduced which inspires confidence from all concerned.

2. Future of standards regime unknown

- (a) Regarding the Government's intention to abolish Standards for England, Members were concerned about standards committees nationally operating to a different standard if there is no strategic regulator with general oversight.

3. Engagement of Members

- (a) One Member felt that the Standards Committee was un-engaging and that there should be more debate and deliberation at Standards Committee on standards matters.

4. Dual-hatted Members

- (a) Members were concerned regarding the regularity of dual-hatted Members experiencing conflicts of interests under the Code of Conduct and the need for them to seek dispensations from the Standards Committee.

5. Dispensations

- (a) Members are wary of dispensations, which allow Members with prejudicial interests to fully participate in the debate and vote on matters. Committee Members felt it was not always appropriate to grant dispensations and the Committee had, in the past, refused certain dispensation applications when the public interest warranted it.

6. Officer/Member Relationships

- (a) Members felt this should be covered, along with the Protocol on Member/Officer Relations, in future standards training for Members.

7. Induction Training

- (a) Members felt that more induction training on the Code would be useful, whilst avoiding a heavy training burden for Members. Members agreed that new ways of training delivery should be explored, for example some advice could be given through on-line training, with other more complicated advice being disseminated through face to face training.
- (b) It was also felt that Groups could play a larger part in the development and training of Members, especially when new to the County Council.

8. Humour

- (a) Some Members felt that Council meetings had suffered a dilution of humour and wit as a result of the standards regime, as this was sometimes considered to be insulting.

9. Complaint Handling

Members felt that:

- (a) At the outset of a complaint, there is an imbalance between the position of the complainant and the Subject Member in terms of the information known and available to each.
- (b) This can lead to feelings of isolation on the part of the Subject Member.
- (c) There is a need to ensure that the complaints process does not treat people as though they are already guilty and that there is transparency and openness in terms of complaint handling.
- (d) Communication with Subject Members to be improved and this area to form part of induction training for Members.

Members of the Committee will be interested to note that since the Committee's last meeting, the Monitoring Officer has put in place arrangements for Subject Members to have access to a nominated officer who will perform the role of Subject Member support. This is the subject of a separate report to the Committee.

- (e) Local complaints are costly and there is a need to look closely at reducing the amount of paperwork/officer time required within what is, at times, a complicated process.
- (f) Group Leaders should endeavour to address Members to take more care in certain situations to prevent them having to go through the current complaints process, as issues had arisen regarding simple matters which could have been avoided.

3.3 Members are requested to consider the issues raised in this report. The outcomes from the discussion with Group Leaders will be factored into the Standards Committee's Work Programme for 2011 and it is recommended to Members that part of the Committee's training session in November should be used as an opportunity for Members to consider how they would like the Standards Committee to be conducted in the future.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That Members consider the issues raised in this report following the Committee's discussion with Group Leaders, regarding standards issues, at its last meeting.

CAROLE DUNN
Assistant Chief Executive (Legal and Democratic Services) and Monitoring Officer

County Hall
NORTHALLERTON

Background Documents:

Standards Committee minutes for meeting on 10 May 2010

24 August 2010