

STANDARDS COMMITTEE31 March 2004
(6.00pm – 6.40pm)**PRESENT:** Councillors Stebbings (Chair), Dryden, Howell, Hughes, Pinnington and Taylor.
External Members Dr Clark, Ms Hobbs**FOR INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL**04/s/01 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting on 22 October 2003 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

04/s/02 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

04/s/03 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were none.

04/s/04 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no questions from the public.

04/s/05 **GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT - IMPLEMENTING STANDARDS OF CONDUCT IN PUBLIC LIFE**

The Director of Central Services introduced the item saying that this 'Issues & Questions' paper had arrived at an opportune time and asked for members' comments on it. A summary of members' comments on the relevant questions is given below:

Q9: What lessons can be learned from comparing the content and operations of Codes of Conduct across NHS bodies, local government and other public bodies?

The Committee felt there was great benefit in the transfer of experience and underpinning principles between the various parts of the public sector. The Committee also remarked upon the contrast, in terms of openness and transparency, between local government and some of the professional interests at play in the NHS sector. Members also wished to highlight the more stringent requirements placed on local councillors, in terms of their Code of Conduct, than those placed on MPs. This was an anomaly which should be rectified.

Q10: Should the Local Government Model Code of Conduct apply to all tiers of local government?

The Committee thought that the Code of Conduct should apply to all tiers of local government.

Q11: Should there be a general requirement in Codes of Conduct to register membership of any society which though not a charity or directed towards charitable purposes might be perceived to constitute a conflict of interest?

The Committee thought it would be easier for local councillors if they had to register and declare all outside memberships, rather than some and not others. The current Code was difficult to interpret in practice and members were often left in doubt as to whether something was registrable or declarable or not.

Q12: Are the requirements of the various Codes of Conduct proportionate or a disincentive to public service?

The Committee did not think so.

Some members thought that the time commitment and the Data Protection Act provided more disincentives. Dr Clark and Ms Hobbs thought that Codes of Conduct were more of a disincentive in other organisations than local government. Ms Hobbs also commented that developing a culture of open-ness was more effective than having rules.

Q14: What good practice exists to embed the Seven Principles of Public Life into culture of public bodies? For example, good practice in: (a) Training and Development; (b) Encouraging the challenge of inappropriate behaviour at all levels in the organization and (c) Attempts to measure changes in the culture of public bodies.

The Committee cited as examples of good practice that the Standards Committee issued a quarterly Bulletin to all councillors, to ensure they were kept up-to-date with ethics and standards matters and that the Council also ensured that new staff and new members were trained in conduct issues.

Councillor Pinnington also suggested that the Seven Principles of Public Life (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership) cited in the paper might be put into other Council publications.

Councillor Hughes also said that in the areas of disability awareness and cultural diversity it was vital that good practice prevailed and not just lip service. This was particularly important in relation to planning applications for both developers and council officers.

Q17: What are the key elements of good practice likely to deliver effective whistle-blowing policy and practice in public bodies?

The Committee thought that speed in resolving complaints made under whistle-blowing procedures and assurances of confidentiality (unless there was good reason for not keeping an allegation confidential) were key elements.

Q18: Is there any evidence that the cultures of the National Health Service, local government and other public bodies have become more open and accountable as a result of the Public Interest Disclosure Act?

The Committee thought this was true in part. The Act had had an impact, but there were other factors in play, especially the change in culture within local government, towards more openness.

The Director of Central Services undertook to communicate the Committee's views to the Standards Board.

04/s/06 **REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CODE OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

The Director of Central Services said that this was a Code the Council was required to have but it was important to also make it a useful document. One new change had been introduced – the third column headed 'By when and who to lead'.

Members asked questions of clarification and the following were agreed:

- On page 31, as well as the Statement of Accounts, the Best Value Report would be included.
- On page 41, in relation to item (f), the Director of Central Services would check with the Head of Human Resources that members of the Chief Officer Performance Review Panel were trained before undertaking the role.

04/s/07 **WITHOLDING OF MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES**

The Committee noted the decision of Council on 4 December 2003 to delegate to the Standards Committee the decision on whether or not to withhold an allowance in any particular case.

04/s/08 **PUBLICISING THE WORK OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE - ORAL REPORT**

The Director of Central Services reported that she had talked to the new Corporate Marketing Officer about publicising the work of the Standards Committee. The Cambridge Evening News had expressed interest in interviewing the Chair and the Vice-Chair.

Agreed to follow up this initiative after the elections in June.

04/s/09 **DATES OF MEETINGS IN 2004/05**

The Committee Manager proposed a series of dates through to April 2005.

Agreed to meet on 30 June and 3 November 2004 at 6pm and to agree dates for 2005 at the 30 June of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 6.40pm.

Chair