Setting new standards

This is the tenth Annual Report of the Borough Council’s Standards Committee. It will also be the final report from the Committee in its current form.

The new arrangements in the Government’s Localism Bill described in the last Annual Report underwent significant change in Parliament but the Localism Act 2011 became law in November 2011. It is expected that the changes to the standards regime will come into effect in July 2012.

The new arrangements include:

- all councils having to promote high standards of conduct by councillors and to adopt a code of conduct
- criminal offences for councillors not registering or declaring certain types of interests
- the Borough Council still being responsible for considering complaints that borough councillors and parish/town councillors have not complied with their codes of conduct.

After a number of years when the number of complaints has been low (1 last year and 4 the year before), there were 12 complaints referred to the Committee this year. Of these 2 related to borough councillors and 10 to parish and town councillors.

There were 8 complaints about one council and the Committee recommended that training be provided to its councillors which has been done.

The Committee is aware that investigations into complaints are often lengthy but is pleased to report that the average time taken to reach initial decisions on whether to investigate complaints or not was 13 working days, less than the recommended 20 working days.

Further details regarding the current position of the hearing by the Standards Panel, other aspects of the work of the Committee and its views for the year ahead are described on page 2.

More information about the Code of Conduct, the complaints process and a complaint form are available on the Council’s website

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Determination hearing
Two complaints were referred to a hearing by a Panel of Committee members. Both related to the same parish councillor. The Panel will determine whether the councillor failed to comply with the Code of Conduct and, if so, whether a sanction should be imposed.

The Panel met but adjourned so that further legal advice could be obtained.

Other work
The main focus of the Committee’s work this year has been on considering the development of the proposals for the new standards arrangements. The Committee would like to thank the Leader of the Council, Cllr David Slater, for attending one of its meetings to discuss their implementation.

The Committee also received regular reports on the guidance issued to councillors on standards issues and significant cases elsewhere in the country relating to the conduct of councillors.

Following the council elections in May 2011, there were a number of changes to the membership of the Committee. The Committee would like to record its thanks to the former members of the Committee and its sadness at the death of Stephen Campbell who served on the Committee for many years.

In addition to the Code of Conduct, the Council has a number of other codes and protocols which the Committee oversees.

No complaints relating to these codes and protocols were made during the year.

Contact Details
Address:
Charnwood Borough Council,
Southfield Road,
Loughborough
Leicestershire, LE11 2TR
Telephone:
01509 263151
E-mail:
information@charnwood.gov.uk
Website:
www.charnwood.gov.uk

Members of the Committee (from left to right): Cllr Iain Bentley, Cllr Max Hunt, Mr Philip Tomlinson (Independent Member and Chair), Cllr Stephen Smith (Vice-chair), Mr Michael Pearson (Independent Member), Mr Toby Griffiths (Parish Member), Mr Michael Parker (Parish Member). Other members of the Committee are Cllr Liz Bebbington, Cllr Peter Osborne, Mr David Lindley (independent Member) and Mrs Betty Crick (Parish Member).

Looking ahead to next year

The new standards arrangements do not require the Council to have a standards committee.

The Committee has endorsed the work being undertaken by the Monitoring Officer to develop joint arrangements with other local authorities which would involve a committee resembling the current Standards Committee continuing in some form.

Until the Committee’s current functions and the statutory Code of Conduct come to a formal end, the Committee will continue to consider any complaints that are received under the current arrangements.

The Committee will also assist the Council in adopting its new code and procedures for dealing with complaints.

The Committee also hopes that the regular meetings with Parish and Town Council Clerks, which include standards matters as well as other issues, will continue.