

RAISING THE PROFILE OF STANDARDS COMMITTEE

LEAD OFFICER: Martin Jepson, Head of Legal and Democratic Services
REPORT AUTHOR: Martin Jepson

Why has the agenda item come before the Committee?

- A strong ethical governance framework will help the effective running of Councils and will increase public confidence in Councils. Effective communication and increased public awareness of the Standards Committee's activities should help increase this level of confidence. Therefore, the Committee is asked to review best practice for raising the profile of Standards Committee.

Recommendation

- That the Committee reviews current best practice and indicates its preferred initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The current Local Standards Framework has been in place for eighteen months. Although an item has recently been placed in Copeland Matters, the full role of the Standards Committee may not be widely understood.
- 1.2 A number of best practice initiatives have been developed over the last eighteen months by other Councils.

2. EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

2.1 Rossendale Borough Council

Following the suspension of a Member and the statutory requirement to publicise this in a particular format, the Chair of the Standards Committee issued a press release with the following key messages:-

- A reminder that all members should maintain the highest possible standards at all times and that this is what the Council and public expect;
- Reiterating that Rossendale has a robust system for identifying and investigating the conduct of councillors and that the Standards Committee was willing to use the powers available to them, including suspension;

- Reassurance that a thorough investigation had taken place and that the Standards hearing had been fair and had taken into account all the written and oral evidence submitted;
- Highlighting that this was the first time the Standards Committee had taken action to suspend a Councillor;
- Putting the suspension into context and saying that standards generally in Rossendale are very high;
- Demonstrating that by suspending the councillor the Standards Committee took breaches of the Code of Conduct very seriously;
- Justification that the sanctions taken were consistent with the seriousness of the breach of the Code.

2.2 As a result of the case, Rossendale also realised that a media protocol was required for future cases – including regular meetings between the communications team, the Monitoring Officer and the Chair of Standards Committee.

2.3 North Tyneside Borough Council

A recent corporate assessment had previously identified that the behaviour of a minority of councillors of all political parties distracted energy from the Council's Improvement programme and had a detrimental impact on the external reputation of the Council.

2.4 As part of its response to the Audit Commission's findings, North Tyneside not only looked for ways to implement a strengthened local Standards Committee but also looked to increase the understanding among the wider public of the process and their ability to raise concerns about member behaviour.

2.5 North Tyneside's communications strategy was to use a wide range of methods including:-

- a press release involving the Independent Chair, including explaining the process implemented by the Standard's Committee and the consequences if members were found to be at fault;
 - articles for the residents magazine;
 - internal publications of staff;
 - improved website coverage.

2.6 Other notable practice

- Publicising the Process
 - Bolton Council has a dedicated website for standards issues;
 - Bristol Council places an advert detailing the complaints process on employee payslips;
 - Harborough Council placed an article in a publication circulated to all households with their Council tax bills;
 - Taunton Deane Council distributed leaflets in post offices.
- Communicating information to the public
 - At Taunton Deane hearings are held in public and are webcast;
 - At South Cambridgeshire Council panel chairman have received media training and advice on how to handle media enquiries.
- Unique ways of promoting Standards
 - Buckinghamshire Council holds annual officer quizzes that include questions on standards.
 - Leeds Council have adopted an internal newsletter called "Governance Matters" which promotes ethical and corporate governance issues;
 - Rossendale Council has its own slogan "Serious about Standards".

3. **PUBLICITY ON ASSESSMENT SUB-COMMITTEE DECISIONS**

- 3.1 Despite the worth of publicising the Standards Committee's work it is not appropriate to provide information to the press at the Assessment Sub-Committee stage. As members will know this is a sifting-out stage and many complaints are not proceeded with beyond this point. I would only recommend that general statistics be used in publicity in respect of numbers of cases dealt with and numbers which proceed to investigation.

3.2 I do have concerns over publicity which arises in respect of ongoing cases, or cases where there is a possibility of an appeal to a Review Sub-Committee where the Assessment Sub-Committee has decided not to ask for an investigation. In such cases I intend to write to all Members involved in future to say that I consider that until a case is determined any public comment on it is a breach of confidence and may result in me formally making a complaint against that Councillor to the Assessment Sub-Committee.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 In light of the ideas highlighted Members are asked to consider initiatives they would wish to see developed. It may be that Members have additional initiatives they wish to be provided. Following this an Action Plan will be developed and progress reports made to future meetings.

List of Appendices:

None

List of Background Documents:

None.

List of Consultees:

Acting Chief Executive, Head of Finance and Management Information Systems, Head of Policy and Performance, Senior Communications Officer.