
PROMOTING HIGHER STANDARDS

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report summarises what Standards for England and the Audit Commission see as the characteristics of a well-performing Standards Committee and the range of proactive work that such a Committee might undertake. It provides examples of initiatives from other authorities for comparison with our own performance and what is seen as being necessary to be judged as effective, and asks Members to consider what more the Committee might need to do.
- 1.2 Whilst taking into account constraints on resources, possible initiatives have been compiled into a draft action plan to assist Members and are appended for consideration.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Standards for England (previously known as the Standards Board for England) and the Audit Commission place increasing emphasis on the need for Standards Committees to be proactive in promoting higher standards. This is seen as a way of promoting a sense of ethical well-being and improving confidence in local democracy and the public image of local government.
- 2.2 The Audit Commission's assessment of the Council's Use of Resources, an important part of the appraisal of the authority against national criteria, includes a number of "Key Lines of Enquiry" (KLOES) concerning standards and the ethical framework. It is clear that simply complying with statutory requirements is not seen as sufficient to be judged as performing well.
- 2.3 Paragraph 3 sets out the Audit Commission's current definition of an authority that is performing well and the standard against which the Council's external auditors compare our performance. On a number of occasions since its inauguration in 2002, this Committee has given consideration to promoting high standards of conduct in the Rochford District and has demonstrated its willingness to take a proactive role. This is an opportune time to consider what more the Committee can do.
- 2.4 At the last Assembly of Standards Committees in October 2008 a number of speakers addressed the question of what makes a Standards Committee effective. Their papers are available through links on the Standards for England website and principal suggestions are set out in Paragraph 4 below. In addition, information published by those Standards Committees short-listed for the Local Government Chronicle Standards and Ethics award for 2009, set out in Paragraph 5, provides an insight into the initiatives some of those authorities have undertaken.

3 THE AUDIT COMMISSION DEFINITION

- 3.1 The Audit Commission provide the following summary description of a well-performing Standards Committee:-

“The authority is proactively raising standards of ethical conduct, for example through providing ethics training, guidance and information. Training is well attended by members, including long-standing members. Poor attendance can indicate a lack of understanding of the importance of the ethical agenda. The authority communicates progress made in developing the ethical environment to stakeholders and to local people and communities.

The authority can demonstrate it embeds a strong ethical culture and members and staff understand the importance and impact of the ethical agenda and their responsibilities to protect the authority, its resources and reputation. The authority proactively disseminates information to staff, local people and communities that highlights the importance of the ethical agenda and in particular the importance of maintaining high standards of conduct within the authority to ensure probity. Members and staff have high levels of awareness of, and confidence in, the whistle-blowing arrangements. The standards committee is outwards-facing and works to ensure that both its partners and the public have awareness of the local standards framework for example, a webpage explaining the role of the standards committee and how to make a complaint. The authority has assessed the risks associated with the local determination of cases brought against members and has effective arrangements in place to manage any consequences, including any potential negative impact on the reputation of the authority.”

4 STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND

- 4.1 At the 2008 Assembly of Standards Committees a major contribution to the debate on higher standards was set in the context of declining levels of trust by the public towards local government, declining democratic engagement and declining levels of satisfaction with local authorities. To address this perception, Standards Committees were urged to “up their game”, not just abiding by the Code but by conforming to the highest standards of behaviour.
- 4.2 To do this, it was suggested, Standards Committees should:-
- i. promote leadership by encouraging Chief Executives/Chairmen to take a higher profile on standards;
 - ii. meet "top people" in their authorities;
 - iii. be seen as a valuable resource by their authorities, providing opportunities for generating trust and confidence both within the authority and between the authority and the community;
 - iv. participate in "road shows" taking the authority's work out to local communities;

- v. tell leaders frankly what they think about the authority's ethical health, working with the authority to address any issues and redress any negative;
 - vi. carry out self-assessment of the authority by using the Audit Commission's use of resources key lines of enquiry approach;
 - vii. ensure the work of the Standards Committee forms part of the authority's Annual Governance Statement; and
 - viii. use this Annual Governance Statement to raise the Committee's profile, improve public trust and help build the authority's reputation.
- 4.3 In addition, speakers at the Assembly felt the following roles and relationships were important in making Standards Committees effective:
- (i) ensuring training is provided, either directly or indirectly;
 - (ii) contributing to the development of Member/Officer protocols, whistle-blowing policies, antifraud and corruption policies and internal and external audit;
 - (iii) raising awareness of ethical issues among Members and Officers;
 - (iv) "embedding" the Standards Committee within the authority, rather than seeing it as just an "add-on", contributing to "Committee fatigue"; the Committee needs to be seen as a resource and a consultative body;
 - (v) influencing changes in the ethical framework, rather than simply responding to changes promoted elsewhere; and
 - (vi) ensuring good access to ethical matters via the authority's website.

5 ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY AUTHORITIES JUDGED TO BE PERFORMING WELL

- 5.1 The following are the examples of initiatives taken by authorities shortlisted in the Local Government Chronicle Standards and Ethics award for 2009 taken verbatim from the Standards for England website:

Engaging Leadership

- Rossendale Borough Council has an engaged chief executive and council leader who champion standards at the authority. They have also worked closely with the Audit Commission to develop an experience based learning approach to ethical conduct.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council has a very proactive monitoring officer, Kirsty Cole, who regularly speaks at different events and has a national profile in the standards committee. This has enabled Kirsty to share her experience and knowledge at events both locally, regionally and nationally, in training

IDeA peers on Code of Conduct and ethical governance issues and undertaking work as an IDeA peer undertaking ethical governance reviews.

- Rossendale Borough Council's standards committee monitor current policies and proactively seek to influence and develop new policies, which helps to embed high ethical standards and good governance.
- Leeds City Council's Standards Committee produces an annual report that is reported to the full council. The standards committee also has a forward work plan, which is kept under review by officers with reference to national developments.
- Rossendale Borough Council has appointed lead officers to act as 'Governance Champions' to promote high standards and advise on issues such as contract procedures, their gifts and hospitality policy and whistle-blowing.

Training and Skills

- Rossendale Borough Council is focused on member development and have worked with the IDeA on a learning programme. All their councillors also have a personal development plan.
- Some councils ensure their members receive media and presentation skills so they are well equipped to deal with the local media's questions.
- Leeds City Council develop training in formats tailored to their members needs and now provide e-learning courses for councillors to give them extra guidance on the Code of Conduct. Their Standards Committee reviews the decisions of the APE and consider any lessons the council could learn.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council worked with the Local Government Training Unit and with qualified mediators to develop a course on mediation, which was attended by over 50 delegates from all over England and Wales.
- Leeds City Council has provided all their parish councillors with access to a new online training system from the IDeA called 'Modern Councillor'.
- As part of Rossendale Borough Council's standards committee's commitment to learning and development; at every meeting members consider a real-life case study of standards issues from another authority to discuss what can be learned from the situation and applied in Rossendale.
- Rossendale Borough Council's councillors serving on Development Control or Licensing Committee must receive training before taking up their position so that they are aware of protocols, policies and regulations governing these meetings.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council has developed a recruitment pack for the appointment of independent members containing a job description, person specification, advertisement and guidance on legislative requirements.

Communications with Staff and Stakeholders

- Leeds City Council has developed an internal newsletter called "Governance Matters" which promotes ethical and corporate governance issues and details the work of their standards committee.
- Leeds City Council has identified good ethical behaviour as part of the organisations overall aspirational culture
- Rossendale Borough Council has their own slogan 'Serious about standards' which helps to engage staff.
- Councils can hold events to engage their members and council officers and keep them up-to-date with what the authority is doing to maintain high standards. For example, some councils host clerk forums that are regular meetings between council officers and town and parish clerks.
- Lincolnshire County Council produce standards committee annual reports that outline the members of the committee, what they do, their work programme and the numbers of complaints and policies they've considered.
- Newcastle City Council has used their internal staff information bulletin to draw staff attention to the code of conduct for members and the work of the Committee.
- Some councils agree various ethics statements that are used in publicity and in engagement with the public and other stakeholders.
- Rossendale Borough Council's standards issues are reinforced through the corporate Team Briefing, in their staff newsletter 'Grapevine' and through specific information booklets on whistleblowing and their gifts and hospitality Policy.

Increasing confidence in democracy

- Waveney District Council's standards committee is calling on budding young filmmakers to help them raise awareness of their work. The Waveney Young Filmmaker competition gives young people a great opportunity to showcase their creative talents. The winning film will bring a new perspective to the work of the standards committee giving them a fresh way to promote ethical governance to the local community. Caroline Nixon, Chairman of the standards committee, encourages young filmmakers to get involved: "The Waveney Young Filmmaker Competition offers young people from across Waveney the opportunity to submit their films and have them judged by a panel, including industry professionals. Whether you are a first-time filmmaker or developing your skills, the competition is a fantastic opportunity for budding filmmakers to garner approval for their work and add valuable material to their portfolio. Their original idea will also be shown on the Waveney District Council website".

- Newcastle City Council made sure they promoted the changes to the complaints system with a number of articles in their residents' newsletter. This newsletter also included an article written by the standards committee Chair to promote the role of the standards committee.
- Leeds City Council's standards committee has their own communications plan covering members, parishes and the public.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council promotes the role of their standards committee to the local media and in their community newsletter.
- Colchester Borough Council held an "I'm a Councillor get me out of here" event that aimed to get young people and councillors talking. This involved a number of schools in the Colchester area.
- The chairman of Ceredigion County Council's standards committee took an active role in highlighting the role of the committee, the importance of the Code and the integral role of independent members in a local press article.
- Rossendale Borough Council hosts an annual Local Democracy Week, which aims to help young people understand more about their council and local democracy. Primary schools tour the Council Chamber, discuss council services and learn about the role of the Mayor and Councillors. Secondary school pupils also take part in a 'Question Time' event to pose challenging queries to local councillors and community leaders.
- Rossendale Borough Council has also produced a standards bulletin that is published on their website so that local people and partners can be assured of the correct conduct of the council.
- Lincolnshire County Council is one of the few councils providing live webcasts of council meetings with an archive on their website.

Working in partnership with other authorities

- Ceredigion County Council hosted the Welsh Standards Conference with Wales ACSeS Group at Aberystwyth University for monitoring officers and standards committee members to share their experiences of the new Code. The Council is also developing close links with the University and the Monitoring Officer will shortly be providing a talk to law students in the University in relation to legal careers in local government.
- Rossendale Borough Council advises Burnley Borough Council on their protocols and work for the standards committee.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council provide best practice, advice and support to other authorities via Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire standards forums, monitoring officer groups and the organization of an annual Monitoring Officers' conference.
- Newcastle City Council standards committee has built a proactive relationship with chief whips.

- Newark and Sherwood District Councils monitoring officer has been proactive in leading a Nottinghamshire Monitoring Officers Group which meets regularly to discuss ethics and standards and to share learning and knowledge. As a result, the Nottinghamshire districts have developed common procedures and protocols for dealing with standards complaints.
- Rossendale Borough Council's proposals for a Joint Standards Committee with other councils will provide increased capacity and make it easier to avoid any conflicts of interest. This will create a stronger support and advisory function which can draw on its collective experience to promote greater consistency in procedures and decisions.
- Ceredigion County Council produced a flow chart to assist with training for councillors, which has been distributed to all monitoring officers in Wales.
- Leeds City Council's Standards Committee maintains a close relationship with their Corporate Governance and Audit committee (CGA) and send them a progress report every six months.
- Newark and Sherwood District Council adopted a deliberate policy to share their learning and best practice not just locally, but regionally and nationally.
- Nottinghamshire Monitoring Officer Group identified a particular problem in respect of the understanding of governance issues within parishes and responded to this by developing a Parish Council toolkit. All parish councils in Newark and Sherwood District Council have received a copy and many have adopted its model procedures. This has been welcomed by the Society for Local Council Clerks (SLCC) who is working closely with the group to produce version three of the toolkit.

6 WHAT MORE MIGHT ROCHFORD DO?

- 6.1 While Rochford's Standards Committee has not been busy in terms of the number of complaints it has had to deal with so far, it has regularly reviewed performance and has undertaken a number of initiatives to raise awareness and promote high standards of behaviour. It has developed a comprehensive training programme and introduced mandatory training in key areas. Information has been placed in the Council's newspaper and on its website, the IDeA/Audit Commission Ethical Health Check has been completed and action plan followed through, the number of Independent Members on the Committee has been increased, etc. However, there is a need to continue to develop and to be acknowledged as performing well by Standards for England and the Audit Commission and, more importantly, to be seen to be doing so by residents. Members are therefore invited to consider the range of activities described above and any other proposals which Members may wish to suggest in support this objective.
- 6.2 Resources constraints mean that it is not feasible to undertake the full range of the above and it is suggested that key initiatives are identified to be

undertaken within an appropriate timescale. With this in mind, a draft Action Plan is appended for Members' consideration.

7 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES** to consider the draft action plan and determine a programme of initiatives to promote higher standards of behaviour within the authority.

John Honey

Corporate Director (Internal Services)

Background Papers:-

None

For further information please contact John Honey on:-

Tel:- 01702546366

E-Mail:- john.honey@rochford.gov.uk

If you would like this report in large print, braille or another language please contact 01702 546366.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE ACTION PLAN 2009-11 (Draft)**1. Aims**

- To raise the profile and understanding of the Ethical Governance agenda and the work of the Standards Committee internally and externally

2. Key Priorities:

- To communicate clear and consistent key messages highlighting the Council's commitment to being an ethical organization by ensuring that councillors uphold their civic responsibilities and conduct their business in an ethical manner.
- To clarify and raise the profile of the role of Councillors in order to enhance the public perception
- To encourage public involvement in and understanding of ethical standards at parish and district level

3. Actions

Aim	Action	How	Who	When
Internal				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved awareness of Standards issues • Greater understanding of the role of the Standards Committee • Role of the Standards Committee promoted • Improved understanding amongst Officers and Members as to the importance of Ethical Governance • Clear and consistent messages highlighting the 	Regular meetings between Chief Executive/Leader and Chairman of the Standards Committee	Twice yearly meetings	Cex/Leader Chairman of Standards	April & October
	Information in Members' Bulletin summarizing general developments in Standards	Regular updates on specific issues and a copy of the Standards for England Bulletin	Monitoring Officer	Quarterly
	Ensure Independent Members have a good understanding of how the business of the Council is conducted	Formal invitation for Independent Members to attend and observe meetings of the Executive and the Council and its Committees	HICS	Ongoing
	Staff briefings to promote and raise	Use of the monthly staff briefing	Monitoring	Annually

<p>council's commitment to being an ethical organization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater understanding of the role of Councillors and Officers and encourage pro-active promotion of ethical standards. • Greater understanding of the Code of Conduct and other Council protocols • Greater understanding of partnerships and members and officers interests • Improve the speed with which local determinations are completed 	awareness of standards issues	notes.	Officer	
	Continue programme of ethical standards training for Members and Officers	Ensure that ethical standards are included in the annual training programme.	HICS/HRM	Ongoing
	Review provision of ethical guidance in Members and Officers induction	Review training and written material in inductions	Monitoring Officer/HRM	By May 2010
	Hold training sessions for potential investigators	Internal training for Officers	Monitoring Officer	July-December 2010
	Review protocol on Member/Officer relations and code of conduct for officers	Officer review pending further consultation on a statutory code expect 2010	Monitoring Officer	April 2010
	Meet "top people"	Invite senior Members and Officers to present views on standards to the Standards Committee	HICS	Ongoing
	Promote all training sessions and keep attendance at mandatory training under review.	Continue to improve quality and relevance of training and promotional material. Use of IDeA Charter for Member Development. Annual report on attendance.	HICS/Charter Implementation Group	Ongoing

Aim	Action	How	Who	When
External				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved understanding amongst the public, local communities and 	Review information and presentation of Standards page on website	Improve accessibility, prominence and quality of information	Monitoring Officer/Communications	By January 2010

stakeholders about what the Council does to ensure it is governing ethically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and consistent messages highlighting the Council's commitment to being an ethical organization • Profile of the role of councillors promoted • Clarify the Council's complaints procedures • Provide full information to Standards Board • Improved understanding of whistle-blowing practices Agreed set of standards with entering into contracts			Team	
	Use Rochford District Matters to raise profile of standards and the work of the Standards Committee	Article for Rochford District Matters	Monitoring Officer	Spring Edition 2010
	Standards Committee annual report to Standards for England	Annual feedback	Monitoring Officer	Annually in May
	Include ethical topics for discussion during Local Democracy Week	Review potential for inclusion in activities at Schools and the Civic Suite	Standards Committee Members	Annually in October
	Review Whistleblowing policy and contracts procedure	Officer Review	Monitoring Officer/Chief Finance Officer	Annually

Aim	Action	How	Who	When
Parishes				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness amongst Parish Members of the role of the Standards Committee and the local determination framework • Raise awareness of the application of the Code of Conduct 	Ensure that all parishes have a copy of the Parish Council Governance toolkit	Write to all parish clerks. Provide advice and assistance as necessary	Monitoring Officer	By December 2009
	Provide a training session for Parish Clerks	Internal training through officers for all parish clerks	Monitoring Officer	By April 2010
	Feedback information from the Ninth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees to all Parishes	Briefing paper	Monitoring Officer	December 2009