



**WOKINGHAM  
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**Standards Committee Report  
June 2014 to March 2015**

## **Introduction by the Chairman of the Committee – Rob Stanton**

The Standards Committee has continued to meet at regular times during the Municipal Year.

At each meeting the Committee is updated with progress of any ongoing business including complaints.

Its main work is to ensure that the Councils policies as expressed in the Members Code of Conduct are up to date and relevant to current best practice. This has resulted in the Committee currently undertaking a review of Members/Officers Protocol which will come before the Committee this spring for later approval of Full Council if agreed. We are also considering if the process of handling complaints against Members can be improved to remove some of the concern that members experience if a complaint is made against them.

There has been one Hearing Panel this year the results of which were reported to Council on 19 February 2015.

The majority of areas of concern by both Members and increasingly members of the public has been around Declarations of Interest. This area of complaint has been against both Borough Members and Town/Parish members.

There are two areas where further improvements can be made around declarations of interest: business declarations and planning declarations. Often all that is needed is a declaration at the start of a meeting, but on a small number of occasions this has not happened.

I have asked that training for new members is improved in this area, and it is planned to bring a training session to all members later in the year to help fully understand this area.

Rob Stanton  
Chairman Standards Committee

## 1.0 What does the Standards Committee Do?

The broad role of the Standards Committee is to promote, monitor and enforce probity and ethical standards amongst Councillors within the Wokingham Borough area including Town and Parish Councillors.

In July 2012 the Localism Act introduced a locally focussed and designed system for the adoption of a Councillor Code of Conduct, and processes for the receipt, and consideration of complaints against Councillors. Although not obligated by the Localism Act, Wokingham Borough Council decided to maintain a dedicated Standards Committee.

As well as the receipt and consideration of Code of Conduct complaints against Wokingham Borough Council Councillors, the Committee is also responsible for the receipt and consideration of complaints against Town and Parish Councillors.

The Terms of Reference for the Committee as set out within Chapter 9 of the Constitution are set out below:

### Role and Function

The Standards Committee will have the following roles and functions:

- a) promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Councillors, co-opted members, including church and parent governor representatives;
- b) assisting the Councillors, co-opted members, including church and parent governor representatives, to observe the Members' Code of Conduct;
- c) advising the Council on the adoption or revision of its Members' Code of Conduct;
- d) monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct, the Officers' Code of Conduct and the Council's Whistleblowing policy and any other appropriate codes of conduct and procedures;
- e) advising, training or arranging to train Councillors, co-opted members and church and parent governor representatives on matters relating to the Members' Code of Conduct;
- f) the exercise of (a) to (e) above in relation to the parish/town councils wholly or mainly in its area and the members of those parish/town councils;
- g) the presentation of an annual report by the Chairman of the Standards Committee to Council.

## 2.0 Who sits on the Committee?

The Committee is comprised of six Wokingham Borough Council Councillors. These Councillors are voting members of the Committee and are appointed on the basis of political proportionality. A councillor from Wokingham Borough Council chairs the Committee.

The Committee is also comprised of three non –voting Town/Parish Councillor representatives.

The 2014/2015 membership of the Committee was as follows:

Rob Stanton, (Chairman)  
Pauline Helliard-Symons (Vice-Chairman)  
Chris Bowring  
Ken Miall  
Malcolm Richards  
Beth Rowland

Ray Duncan (Woodley Town Council)  
Roger Loader (Barkham Parish Council)  
Roy Mantel (Twyford Parish Council)

### 3.0 **Independent Persons**

Under the Localism Act, Wokingham Borough Council is required to appoint an independent person, (a member of the public, not a Council Officer or Councillor) whose views must be sought before the Committee takes a decision on an allegation it has decided to investigate and whose views may be sought on an allegation prior to that. In addition, a Councillor who is subject of an allegation may seek the views of the independent person.

Two people have been appointed as independent persons:

David Comben  
John Bingham

An independent person cannot sit as a Member of the Standards Committee, but may attend with the same rights as a member of the public.

### 4.0 **Who supports the Committee**

The Committee is supported by Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer of Wokingham Borough Council and Head of Governance and Improvement Services, Mary Severin, Deputy Monitoring Officer and Borough Solicitor. Administrative support is provided by Kevin Jacob, Principal Democratic Services Officer.

### 5.0 **Complaint Statistics June 2014 to March 2014**

Between June 2014 and the publication of this report 18 Code of Code complaints had been received, (of the 18 complaints 8 involved the same complaint against 8 individual councillors).

16 complaints were made against members of Wokingham Borough Council and two against town/parish councillors. In 13 cases no further action was taken by the Monitoring Officer in accordance with the powers delegated to him.

In one case a Standards Committee Hearings Sub-Committee was held in December 2014 following an investigation. The outcome of the hearing was reported to the Council as required by the Council's Constitution in February 2015.

Two complaints could not be considered further as the subject of the complaint ceased to be a Councillor.

One complaint has been referred for investigation by the Monitoring Officer and one complaint is awaiting consideration by the Monitoring Officer.

The Committee would stress that the number of complaints should be seen in the context of there being 54 members of the Borough Council and over 200 members of town/parish councils across 17 parishes. . As such the number of complaints received represents a very low percentage of the number of members. However, the Committee recognises the utmost importance of treating any allegation seriously.

## **6.0 Committee Activity**

Since the last report of the Committee to Council in July 2014 the Committee has met twice in October 2014 and January 2015. In light of the experience gained from the consideration of complaints the Committee has reviewed the current Member/Officer Protocol as well as the process for the receipt and consideration of complaints against councillors including the process to follow at Code of Conduct hearings. The Code of Conduct is also being reviewed to see if any improvements can be made to make it easier to understand and interpret. It is expected that the revisions to these documents will be considered at the Committee's meeting in March 2015.

Training for Members has been considered, particularly with regard to the provision of practical advice to Councillors around the declaration of interests and as a result supplementary guidance has been issued by the Council's Monitoring Officer. It is also intended that refresher training will take place in new municipal year and more emphasis be placed on this area of Code of Conduct as part of the induction process for new Councillors in May 2015.

## **7.0 The Future**

The Committee continues to look for ways to further improve the processes around the consideration of complaints and to expand its activity around the promotion of high standards of ethical behaviour.

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