



Haringey Council

Agenda item:

[No.]

**Standards Committee**

**On 14 January 2010**

Report Title: Raising the profile of ethical standards and of the Standards Committee in Haringey

Forward Plan reference number : N/A

Report of: Monitoring Officer

Wards(s) affected: All

Report for: Non – Key decision

**1. Purpose**

To consider steps that the Standards Committee could take to raise the profile of ethical standards and that of the Committee itself in Haringey.

**2. Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Standards Committee consider the initiatives proposed at paragraph 6.3 of the report and decide which it would like to take forward and whether it would like further work to be carried out by officers on any of the proposals. The Committee is asked to indicate an order of priority to any proposals that it adopts.

Report Authorised by: Monitoring Officer

Contact Officer: Clifford Hart – Committee Manager

Tel 0208 489 2920

Email : clifford.hart@haringey.gov.uk

**3. Director of Finance Comments**

3.1. Support for the Standards Committee is charged to the Legal Services Budget. The cost implications of particular initiatives suggested in this report will have to

be considered at each stage and a view taken whether an alternative means of resourcing should be investigated.

#### 4. Head of Legal Services Comments

The legal implications are indicated in the report

#### 5. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

5.1. Local Government Act 2000 and relevant regulations.

5.2. Haringey Council Constitution.

5.3. Standards for England Annual Report 2009.

### 6. Report

#### 6.1 Background

The **Annual Report of Standards for England 2009**, quotes some results of research it has carried out as showing that public confidence in the ethical governance of local authorities has taken a dip. This research shows that the public's confidence in local authorities' ability to uncover and deal appropriately with breaches of the Code by local councillors has dropped since 2007.

Part of the explanation for this lack of confidence is likely to be to do with the backlash caused by the MPs' expenses scandal and therefore outside the Committee's control.

The research, however, also shows that public awareness of the standards framework is very low - less than one in five members of the public know that their local authority has a Standards Committee (19%), and of those 79% say they know 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about what it does. Low public awareness of the standards framework and how it works will undoubtedly influence the level of public confidence in the ability of local authorities to put their house in order on ethical issues.

Any reluctance on the part of local authorities to publicise the standards framework locally to Members and to the general public, however understandable, fails to recognise the many positives that derive from the authority being seen to be concerned with ethical issues, being seen to tackle them in an effective and timely way and doing this openly.

## 6.2 The Role of the Standards Committee

Putting the ethical standards and the local standards framework on the map is a key role for the Standards Committee and one which it has engaged in but which now with its role in local determination it needs to review.

The Standards Committee has the express role in the Constitution of:

- Promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Members, assisting them to observe the Members' Code of Conduct
- Monitoring the operation of the Code (including local assessment processes)
- Advising and training on ethical conduct issues
- Advising the Council on codes and protocols forming the Council's ethical framework and governance arrangements and making recommendations accordingly;

To undertake this role effectively, the Standards Committee must become active in promoting and developing:

- **Awareness and understanding** of ethical standards, the Members Code of Conduct and the local standards committee framework among elected members, officers of the Council and the members of the public
- **Confidence** among members of the public and elected Members and officers of the Council that Member conduct issues will be dealt with fairly, efficiently, effectively and transparently.

## 6.3 The next steps

It is timely to consider what are the key next steps to be taken to raise the profile of ethical standards and of the Standards Committee in the governance of the authority

- Local determination has been in place for almost a year – the functioning of Assessment and Review Sub-Committees and determination hearings and issues they have raised needs to be assessed and reflected in any report
- Elections in May next year, will mark the end of the current administration and the lessons from the past 4 years of the ethical governance framework should inform our future strategy.
- In May 2010 there will be a newly elected Council. A new Council will present challenges for the Standards Committee in performing its leadership role in promoting ethical standards.

The next steps are to do with providing greater support for elected members in their compliance with the Code of Conduct, increasing the contribution of the Standards Committee in the ethical governance of the authority and improving public awareness of the standards framework and ethical conduct issues. Members are invited to consider the proposals set out below and prioritise those that they feel it would be helpful to adopt.

### **6.3.1. Supporting elected Members**

Helping members to better understand their obligations under the Code and making it easier for them to comply with them is a role that Members can legitimately expect the Standards Committee to carry out. The following are examples of steps the Standards Committee could agree to take:

- i) Using complaint outcomes in training sessions- learning from 2 recent cases – bullying and breach of confidentiality
- ii) Monitoring Officer to produce briefing notes to members following recent cases
- iii) Standards Committee to develop an e-learning course for members on aspects of the code of conduct (see Appendix 1)
- iv) The Committee to look at ways of assisting Members with the task of declaring interests – e.g. designing a declaration of interest form containing guidance on the back to help Members decide whether they have an interest that should be declared.
- v) Holding pre- Council briefings for members on ethical issues
- vi) Producing a user friendly guide and flow chart for local assessment, review and determination processes.
- vii) Regular mailings of SfE Bulletins to all members

### **6.3.2 Raising the profile of the Standards Committee and developing its contribution to the ethical governance of authority**

The Standards Committee has established its ability to deal effectively with complaints made against Members. Aside from this enforcement role, it needs to consider carefully what interventions if any it could usefully make in improving the ethical governance of the authority. The Annual Return Questionnaire from Standards for England provided some pointers on this subject and there are national examples of good practice that the Committee should consider, for example:

- i) members of the standards committee attending Council/council committee meetings to gain first hand experience of council business, member conduct and member officer relations.
- ii) Standards Committee to seek Constitution Review Working Group's agreement for Standards Committee to send one (independent)t member to the meetings of that body.
- iii) Agreement with new Chief Executive that he holds regular meetings with Chair of Standards Committee and Monitoring Officer and an annual meeting with Standards Committee.
- iv) Meeting of Chair and Monitoring Officer with leader of Council and with leaders of other political groups.
- v) Reviewing the Member/officer relations protocol and its interface with the Code and the standards framework.

### **6.3.3. Improving public awareness of the standards framework and ethical conduct issues**

Building the public's awareness of the standards framework and the Member obligations in the Code of Conduct can only improve the public's level of trust and

confidence in the Council as a body that is maintaining high levels of ethical conduct. A reputational advance here has the capacity to influence public perceptions over a broader area. The following are examples of possible steps the Committee may wish to consider :

- i) Conduct a survey of public perceptions on Council ethical governance arrangements at Area Assemblies or by other means (Haringey People)
- ii) Develop a media/public awareness strategy to include articles, announcements etc in local press, Haringey People, notices/leaflets in the CAB offices and Council front line offices, council employee payslips.
- iii) Webcast determination hearings
- iv) Meetings of the Standards Committee held on a specific conduct issue – inviting members of the public to ask questions and debate this.
- v) Produce programme of media training for Chair and vice chair on how to handle media inquiries.
- vi) Draft Media protocol setting out the publicity issued at various stages of dealing with complaints and the bases for private hearings.
- vii) Organise series of presentations at the Area Assemblies on ethical standards issues

## **7. Equalities Implications**

7.1 The implementation of any of the initiative outlined above will be conducted in accordance with Council procedures and will pay due regard to the Council's policies on equality and diversity.

## **8. Use of Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Introduction to Leeds City Council e-learning course

## Appendix 1

### Leeds City Council – E learning Course development

LCC developed its e-learning course using the software available from the IDeA Learning Pool website (which is available to members of the Learning Pool).

It used a mixture of Standards for England guidance and references to its own local codes and protocols. The e-learning course at Leeds covers all sections of the Members' Code of Conduct, provides advice on how Members should behave in Leeds, and then follows with a short quiz on each of the sections. These are a mixture of multiple choice questions and drag and drop tables.

The software is quite easy to use but can be time consuming. Approximate officer time - two officers. two to three days work each to develop and produce the course.

There is also another service available nationally called Modern Councillor which has lots of ready made e-learning software available for member Councils to use. This has a course on the Code which is quite brief but still useful. This software also incorporates a database so officers can keep track of who has started and completed each course. It does require Members to have their own log ins though and internet access. You can access more details here: <http://www.moderncouncillor.com/nwin/>