

## The Work of the Standards Committee in 2009

Firstly may I introduce myself to those of you who do not know me. I am Ted Butt, Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee. As part of the Committee's drive to promote ethical and transparent Government in East Devon, I wish to report you on the work of the Standards Committee during the past twelve months. With the media and public focusing on MP's expenses during the summer, the scrutiny of elected representatives has been put into the spotlight. It is most important that the work of Local Councillors is both ethical and transparent as it is now under closer scrutiny than ever before.

2009 has been the busiest year yet for the Standards Committee after taking over the assessment of complaints locally. The procedures and assessment criteria have been developed and reviewed to provide an effective but efficient service. The majority of councillors will never find themselves subject to a complaint or investigation, but for the small number of cases where there is cause for concern, the Committee will aim to deal with the allegations quickly and efficiently. We have dealt with 15 complaints during this past year. Three of these cases have so far resulted in further investigation and we have, in fact, just received the first request for the review of a decision.

A large number of complaints this year, against Parish and District Members, have involved planning issues. It is important that Members learn from these cases. Many complaints have concerned the basic issues of transparency of decision making, respect for speakers by committee members and prejudicial interests when dealing with planning applications. In many cases, Members have pleaded ignorance to any wrongdoing. This is simply not acceptable. Members must make themselves aware of the Code of Conduct and remind themselves of the rules and guidance on declarations of interest. When a clear interest arises, Members must declare them at the earliest opportunity and withdraw from the meeting in question if that interest is of sufficient strength to be prejudicial. They may, of course, still present their views to the committee if the public are permitted to do so, but members with a prejudicial interest cannot engage in the debate or the vote, but must instead leave the room. It is no longer a defence to simply declare that "I didn't realise".

Several training and briefing sessions have since been held on tackling planning issues raised by complainants to your Standards Committee and I understand that these were well attended. They should hopefully help Members in future deliberations. Other action was also taken following the consideration of various planning complaints resulting in changes to the processes involved when dealing with planning applications within the Council.

The Probity in Planning guidance brought before you this evening should also help Members in balancing the needs and interests of individuals and the community, with the need to maintain transparent decision-making. I urge you to support and adopt this document. We must not only ensure that our decision-making about planning matters is ethical and transparent but is *seen* by the public to be exactly that. The public must have confidence in the system.

Several cases this year have also highlighted Members individual behaviour at meetings. Whilst not going into detail about the relevant cases, it is important for me to remind members of one of the General Principles of the Code:

### "Respect for Others

Members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers, and its other employees."

I am sure that elected members never set out to offend or indeed disrespect anyone but it is important to realise that what *you* may consider to be a harmless quip or joke may well be construed as offensive by individual members of the public. Also, your line of questioning must be relevant and equitable to all parties so that all sides feel they have been heard and all views taken into account.

The Standards Committee does not exist simply to deal with the complaints against Councillors. We are working closely with Ann Liverton, the Member Champion for Member Development to help progress the development programme to help new Members understand the Code of Conduct more easily. The Standards Committee wants to be more proactive and help Members to avoid having complaints made against them in the first place. We will be publishing a quarterly update in the Council's newsletter, The Knowledge, which will detail the work of the Committee and any new guidance published. We will also be adding a new web page to the Council's website showing and promoting the work of the Committee. If there is any other way in which you feel we could support you in the ethical agenda, then please let me know and I will feed your ideas into the working group the Standards Committee has set up to develop good practice in raising standards in East Devon.

Finally, I'd like to finish by reminding Members of the General Principle of the Code of Conduct which sums up not only the work of the Standards Committee but the work that the Council should be striving to achieve:

*"Leadership*

Members should promote and support the principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence."

If we are to serve the public and to prove that we can govern effectively at local level we should aspire to this idea. Public confidence in the way the authority functions is key to the whole idea of Local Government, and I would like to support you in this.

Thank you for your time.