



NORWICH
City Council

ANNUAL REPORT of the CHAIR of STANDARDS – NORWICH CITY COUNCIL 2010-2011

Norwich City Council treats ethical issues seriously. The ethical framework and standards are established and accepted as part of corporate life and the standards committee takes a pro-active role in promoting good conduct.

Sound ethical governance encompasses the processes, procedures, cultures and values which ensure high standards of behaviour.



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Introduction by the Chair

I have great pleasure in presenting the annual report of Norwich City Council's standards committee for civic year 2010 - 2011.

This civic year saw the standards committee continuing its role which was newly established in May 2008 when the standards committee became responsible for the initial assessment of complaints that a member may have breached the code of conduct. This function had previously been carried out by Standards for England.

Since the coalition government's announcement that Standards for England is to be abolished as part of the "Decentralisation and Localism Bill" for which royal assent is anticipated to take place this autumn; this will lead to the final closure of Standards for England some time between December 2011 and March 2012. Whatever role the standards committee is asked to take in the future, and once a decision is made regarding the local standards framework, we will continue to ensure that standards and ethical conduct remain high in Norwich City Council.

I would like to thank the members of the standards committee for the role they have played when called upon; and on behalf of the committee I thank the officers of the council who have supported the work of the committee.

Peter Franzen – Independent Chair of the Standards Committee of Norwich City Council

Members of the Committee for the year up to April 2011

Both the chair and the vice – chair of the standards committee have to be independent appointees and not council members.

Chair: Peter Franzen

Vice – Chair: Colin Thrower

Councillor Janet Bearman

Councillor Roy Blower

Councillor Deborah Gihawi

Councillor Adrian Holmes

Councillor Jenny Lay

Councillor Judith Lubbock

Background

Presently the government requires every local authority to adopt a code of conduct for members and to appoint a standards committee. There is also a national body called Standards for England and its role provides supervision, support and guidance for local authorities in the performance of their ethical governance functions.

The standards committee has a key role in promoting and maintaining ethical governance and supporting members in following the highest standards of conduct.

Meetings of the committee are usually held in public. However it is sometimes necessary to exclude the Press and public from parts of the meeting if reports which are exempt for the purpose of the Local Government Act 1972 need to be discussed.

The standards committee of Norwich City Council is committed to openness and transparency and only excludes the press and public if it is absolutely necessary to do so.

The responsibilities of the standards committee are set out in the council's constitution which is published on the council's web-site www.norwich.gov.uk

Monitoring Officer

The council's monitoring officer, Philip Hyde, together with the officers from legal and democratic services support the standards committee in its work. In October 2010 the Council's lawyers services joined forces with Norfolk County Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council legal staff to form Nplaw (Norfolk Public Law). The council formally recognised the relationship between Nplaw and the work of the standards committee by appointing David Johnson, Chris Skinner and Victoria McNeil of Nplaw as deputy monitoring officers under secondment arrangements.

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The monitoring officer is a statutory role and is responsible for ensuring that the council, its members and officers carry out their functions in a lawful manner.

The Work of the Standards Committee 2010 - 2011

Since May 2008 the standards committee has been responsible for operating a locally-based system for initial assessment of complaints that a member may have breached the code of conduct for members.

In operating the locally-based system the standards committee has sub – committees, each chaired by one or other of the independent members, that undertake the assessment of allegations that a member has breached the code and to consider any request made by a complainant for a review of a decision to take no further action in respect of an allegation. Also to hold hearings in connection to investigations.

In the past the council was required to report to Standards for England on a quarterly basis any activity with regard to the local filter. With the formation of the coalition government this requirement was ceased. However, Between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2011, none of the council's elected or co – opted members was found to have breached the code of conduct for members by either standards for England or the council's standards committee.

This year the standards committee looked at a case study of issues that could arise from the suspension of a councillor and received a report which encouraged the standards committee to consider possible requirements for any communications which would be used during standards cases and the levels of disclosure which would be appropriate within any future communications with the media.

The committee also explored issues around possible initiatives to develop a '10 principle of public life campaign'. Out of this it was suggested that the Chair and Vice Chair continue to attend council meetings but that the Lord Mayor be asked to introduce them at the beginning of each meeting. Another idea coming out of the standards committee work around ethics, standards and public life in the past year has been to request all the Council's representatives on outside bodies to raise standards issues and the code of conduct at an appropriate meeting of each organisation.

With regard to the future of Standards for England and any future local role for the standards committee, there has been discussion of the government's proposals in relation to the future abolition of Standards for England and the standards framework. Any future decisions regarding local standards regime would need to be taken by the council and the standards committee have heard that it is likely that officers would recommend that a local regime be developed on a similar basis to the statutory system currently in operation.

Issues for 2011 - 2010

There is currently no specific reference in the Decentralisation and Localism Bill to the role of the monitoring officer but the secretary of state has been given powers to make specific regulations which may affect the role in the future.

Under the new proposals, any standards committee set up by a council will only be able to censure and not suspend or disqualify members from council membership. However, there would be a new criminal offence created relating to failure to register or declare interests.

With the details soon to be agreed and emerge out of Whitehall the next twelve months will see changes to how issues around standards and ethics are handled in local government.

To Find Out More

If you would like more information about standards and ethical governance you may find the following web-sites useful

Standards England
www.standardsengland.co.uk

Department for Communities & Local Government