

East Northamptonshire Council Standards Board Annual Report 2009

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The East Northamptonshire Standards Committee (known as the 'East Northamptonshire Standards Board') was established by the Local Government Act 2000, to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by District Councillors and members of the Town and Parish Councils in East Northamptonshire.

2 Membership

- 2.1 Committee membership this year was as follows:-

East Northamptonshire Councillors

Glennil Greenwood-Smith
Barbara Jenney
Brian Northall
Roger Powell (from May 2009)

Parish Council Representatives

John Denning (to October 2009)
Sue North
Arthur Whittaker (from November 2009)

Town Council Representatives

Gwen Radcliffe (to April 2009)
Prudence Goss
Don Campbell (from July 2009)

Independent Members

Graham Blagden (Chairman)
Hilary Daniels
Lance Quantrill
Canon Roger Knight (resigned July 2009 - replacement to be appointed January 2010)

- 2.2 The Board would like to express its gratitude to Gwen Radcliffe and John Denning for their service to the Board since its inception some eight years ago. Gwen Radcliffe passed on a wealth of knowledge of rural issues to the Board throughout the period of her membership which contributed greatly to its decision-making. John Denning was always a fount of wisdom and common sense. Both were formally thanked for their service by the Chairman of the Council. Canon Roger Knight also resigned his membership of the Board in July 2009.
- 2.3 2009 also saw the retirement of the Council's Monitoring Officer, Barbara Ding, who had served the Board so well from its fledgling first steps to its present established position. The Board passed on its grateful thanks for her wonderful work and wished her well in her retirement. We welcome Sharn Matthews in her stead.

3 Meetings

- 3.1 The Board met on four occasions during the year for scheduled meetings. An additional meeting took place concentrating on training of Board members.
- 3.2 Last year, in order to ensure a transparent process for handling any complaints we receive, the Board established three sub-committees: Assessment, Review and Hearing, each of which would handle a different aspect of a complaint, with each sub-committee having a different membership. In order to achieve maximum flexibility each sub-committee consists of at least one Independent Member, an East Northamptonshire Councillor, and a Town or Parish Councillor; a total of three members. The sub-committees do not have fixed membership and the Council's Monitoring Officer selects the membership of each committee, to ensure there is a separation of roles and that the legal requirements are met. Each sub-committee must have an independent Chairman. One Assessment Sub-Committee meeting was held this year (see 6.1).

4 Local Government Ombudsman's Investigations 2008/09

- 4.1 The Board received a report summarising the Local Government Ombudsman's investigations into complaints against the Council during 2008/09. The Board was pleased to note that not only were there no findings of maladministration against the Council during the year but the number of complaints had reduced considerably from that of previous years. It was encouraging to note that the Council's actions to improve services were having a significant effect.

5 Standards for England

- 5.1 The Council's Monitoring Officer has continued to submit the requisite on-line returns to the Standards Board for England (SBE) as a quarterly reporting process of our actions. The SBE became known as Standards for England from 1 July. The first annual return was submitted to Standards for England highlighting the good practice carried out by the Council and identifying certain issues for Standards for England to consider, such as promoting awareness of the Code of Conduct among political parties for inclusion in their recruitment process.
- 5.2 Councillor Glenvil Greenwood-Smith, Ms Hilary Daniels, Mr Lance Quantrill and the Monitoring Officer attended the Standards for England Annual Assembly in Birmingham on 12/13 October. After debating members' views of the Assembly agenda the Board decided to consider a proactive programme of visits to Town and Parish Councils by the Independent Members to promote the work of the Board. This would complement the Awareness Training on the Code of Conduct delivered by the Monitoring Officer for Councillors across the District at a range of locations.

6 Investigations into Complaints

- 6.1 As has been noted above, in 2009 the Standards Board received only one complaint. This related to a possible breach of the Code of Conduct by 18 Town Councillors in relation to a decision made by a Town Council on a lettings policy. The sub-committee decided to ask the Monitoring Officer to take alternative action on this occasion. (This means that no findings of fact were made in relation to whether the Code was breached or not). The 'other action' took the form of a meeting by the

Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer with key Members of the Town Council concerned with discussions around declarations of interest and corporate governance. The Board is pleased to record the positive response of the Town Council and their desire to revise their approach to ensure transparency and high standards in their activities. A training session for members of the Town Council on the Code of Conduct has also been undertaken.

6.2 We now have no open cases on our quarterly return to Standards for England.

7 Other Matters

7.1 The Board considered a formal request for dispensations from two Oundle Town Councillors in respect of their status as Trustees of the Queen Victoria Hall charity. The Board determined to grant the dispensations in the best interests of the management of the Trust and to accord with precedent.

7.2 The Board made contributions to the preparation of the Council's Local Code of Governance and commented in detail on the draft of the Council's statutory Annual Governance Statement.

7.3 The Board attended a training session dealing with the latest guidelines on dealing with the Code of Conduct from Standards for England. New members, and those who had missed this earlier meeting, were brought up to date later in the year. At each meeting the Board discusses relevant national cases and considers how they could be dealt with if they had occurred within our own District.

7.4 The Board wishes to acknowledge and thank Sharn Matthews, the Monitoring Officer, who joined us midway through the year, for her valuable work; Keith Osborne, Deputy Monitoring Officer, for his advice and help; and Rachel Reeds for her constructive support.

8 Future Work of the Board.

8.1 The introduction of local arrangements for handling complaints has not brought any workload problems this year and the Board is satisfied that its earlier restructuring has coped with demands. However the Government is still reviewing the Councillors' Code of Conduct and we are still awaiting the introduction of a similar code for Council employees, which will bring further training needs. The Board needs to be fully prepared for changed or new responsibilities and will need to continually review not only its own training needs but those of all District, Town and Parish Councillors in East Northamptonshire.

8.2 The Board is aware that the Government's focus on community engagement being facilitated by the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill will impact on the Council's Constitution, including a new duty to promote understanding of the Council's democratic arrangements. The Board will wish to be part of this process, both to ensure full public awareness of the complaints procedure but also to enable all Councillors to cope with their increased responsibilities.

8.3 Although the Board still awaits Government promised changes to the Members' Code of Conduct it recognises that a General Election could bring other changes for our consideration. Meanwhile we will continue to take a proactive approach to training for Councillors, particularly Town and Parish Councillors and their Clerks, and

continue to promote good standards of conduct across the district. We hope that the Board's present full membership will be maintained during 2010 furnishing us with the experience to continue to make a positive contribution to the effective governance of the Council and the promotion of high standards of Councillor conduct throughout East Northamptonshire.

Graham Blagden
Chairman

On behalf of the East Northamptonshire Standards Board

February 2010