

DRAFT

ISLE OF WIGHT COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS
COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 2005 TO FEBRUARY 2006

Bruce Claxton
Chairman of the Standards Committee

Introduction

It continues to be a privilege to chair this committee. We welcome new members and thank those who served during the period but have moved to other activities. There is little point in summarising the issues that are detailed below. However it is worth recording that various members of the committee contributed to the Standards Board for England's consultation process regarding revisions of the Code of Conduct. The publication by the ODPM in December 2005 of a White Paper indicating the way ahead for the conduct regime for local government in England will give further development for the Standards Committee to embrace in due course.

We thank John Lawson for his services as Monitoring Officer and congratulate him on his new appointment. We are also grateful for the services provided by the several members of the Committee Services Team and the Deputy Monitoring Officers.

Bruce Claxton – Chairman Standards Committee

Main Highlights

1. Changes to the membership of the Committee

During the period covered by this Annual report the term of office for all previous members of the Committee expired in May 2005. Since that time the following have been appointed:

Independent Members:

Bruce Claxton
Shirley Dalby
Keith Fagan
Joy Harding
George Hibberd
Mark Southwell
David Watson

Isle of Wight Council Members:

Cllr Mike Cunningham
Cllr Heather Humby
Cllr Muriel Miller (Deputy)
Cllr Erica Oulton (Deputy)

Parish and Town Council Members:

Denis Russell
Ron Mew (Deputy)

Of the above we have three new Independent Members (Shirley Dalby, Keith Fagan and Mark Southwell), one new Isle of Wight Council Member (Cllr Erica Oulton) and one returning Isle of Wight Council Member (Cllr Heather Humby).

Departing members since the last report are Jackie Scott as an Independent Member and Peggy Jarman, Vic Morey and Ken Pearson from the Isle of Wight Council.

It is pleasing to note that for the first time for some months we now have a full complement of Members on the Standards Committee and a refreshed pool from which to develop our experiences and work.

2. Ethical Audit

This will be the third Annual report that mentions the Ethical Audit and the Committee finally approved, for Council's consideration, the final Ethical Audit at its meeting on 11 October.

The Council noted the report and the following recommendations from the Standards Committee on 23 November 2005:

- (i) That the publication of the Ethical Audit report be noted.
- (ii) That the Council commit to continuing to prioritise ethics and probity as the third element of the modernising agenda
- (iii) That the Council commit to challenging and supporting Town and Parish Councils – and to driving up good governance standards including ethics and probity – in formal and informal partnerships; and
- (iv) That the constitution be amended to add the ability of the Chairman of the Standards Committee to report to full Council at his initiative on ethical/probity issues.

The Committee were pleased to be able to conclude from the Ethical Audit that there is reason to believe that “The majority of local government councillors and officials unflinchingly adhere to the high standards that Government expect and the public deserve.”

However, there is of course no room for complacency and the summary to the report noted that during 2004 an Isle of Wight Councillor was disqualified from holding public office for a lengthy period of time for bringing his office into disrepute. There have been disqualifications of two Town/Parish Councillors in recent years.

More worryingly the report did find evidence of a significant gap between evidence of generally high standards of conduct within the Isle of Wight Council (albeit with some exceptions) and a widespread perception that standards are, endemically and seriously, lacking.

To a significant degree perception *is* reality so far as standards of conduct are concerned. Creating a bad impression is as corrosive in public life as genuinely bad behaviour. It erodes public confidence in the quality of services; it tarnishes the reputations of institutions and of individuals; it deters the next generation of talented public servants from coming forward to offer their services, and it undermines the sense of community of which the Island is rightly proud.

The challenges set out in this report are generally about perception. As such, they are as serious, and as difficult to address, as any set of challenges rooted in evidence of serial failures of standards. Further evidence of this perception is reflected in the pages of the local press on various issues in the weeks following the production of our report. There is clearly a lot of work for us all to do to tackle this perception.

3. Induction Programme

During this year we had the local elections and the Committee played a role in ensuring that the induction package developed by the Isle of Wight Council for members elected in May paid due regard and predominance to ethical and probity issues.

For the first time all those standing for the election were aware of the Code of Conduct (and had copies of it) prior to the elections and so following their success should not have been surprised by its contents.

The Committee are aware that a number of “refresher” courses on the Code of Conduct need to be established for Isle of Wight Councillors (following the receipt of a number of requests) and more significantly we need to provide a training package for the Town and Parish Councillors on the Island.

4. Mayoral Referendum

In the early part of 2005 the Isle of Wight Council received a petition calling for a referendum to be held on the possible establishment of a Mayor for the Isle of Wight. There were a number of procedural and checking issues that needed to be undertaken on the petition and the Committee were pleased that one of its members – David Watson – was asked to oversee these procedures to act as the eyes and ears of the public to ensure that all was correct, clear and accountable.

This additional piece of work demonstrates how the Standards Committee can contribute to improving the general ethics and probity of local government on the Island.

5. Standards Board Conference

The Committee were pleased to hear that our Chairman – Bruce Claxton – was asked to be part of the steering committee that helped set up and run the Standards Board for England Annual Conference in 2005. As part of this Mr Claxton helped facilitate a session at the conference entitled ‘Beyond the Code’. The session demonstrated the statutory duties and obligations of Standards Committees regarding issues beyond the Code of Conduct.

The conference is a useful way for all those involved in the running of Standards Committee to hear latest thinking and to develop ideas with national players. The involvement of the Isle of Wight Council at this level also helped to raise the profile of the Isle of Wight amongst a national audience.

6. Regional Independent Members Forum

Bruce Claxton continues to be heavily involved in the Regional Independent Members Forum. This is a forum for Independent Members of Standards Committees whereby ideas and thoughts can be discussed. Whilst the Isle of Wight has always ensured that there is a majority of Independent Members on its Standards Committee this is not replicated elsewhere across the country where occasionally Standards Committees have a very restrictive role. There is evidence that the ability for Independent Members to discuss their own thoughts and ideas has helped to increase the role of Standards Committees in some authorities.

Bruce Claxton is also a member of an Informal Committee of regional co-ordinators of independent Forums chaired by the Standards Board for England.

7. Matters from the Standards Board

A number of complaints against Island Councillors (both Isle of Wight Council and Parish/Town) have been considered by the Standards Board for England and with one exception none of these have been proven.

In one case the Standards Committee had to hold a hearing into an allegation by an Ethical Standards Officer of the Standards Board for England that a Cowes Town Councillor had breached two parts of the Code of Conduct. The Standards Committee considered the matter and disagreed with the Ethical Standards Officer on one count. It passed a sanction on the member concerned for the other breach which it upheld. The Member appealed and the Adjudication Panel upheld the appeal.

The Standards Committee is looking at its own procedures and processes and is keen to learn from this experience which is the first on the Island.

8. Parish and Town Councils

The Standards Committee undertook a much more simplistic Ethical Audit of Town and Parish Councils on the Island and again were generally pleased with the results. However two specific matters of note arose.

The first was the need for the Monitoring officer to revitalise his relationships with the Parish and Town Councils – and we are pleased to note the improvements in this area.

The second, and more significant, issue that arose was that it emerged that there appeared to be a significant issue at one Town Council. This further emerged as a consequence of the hearing mentioned in 7 above. This Town Council of its own account identified that it had a problem and decided, with the assistance of the Deputy Monitoring Officer and a

mediator, to try and resolve its difficulties. A productive, if difficult, meeting of the Town Council has been held and it is hoped that they have made a significant step to resolving the issue. We shall continue to monitor this and provide help and advice as necessary.

9. Future Work Programme

- a. The Committee has established a work programme for the remainder of the year and this is set out below:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Town and Parish Councils
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitoring Members Attendance
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitoring Appointments of Councillors to Outside Bodies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitoring Member Officer Protocol
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Training