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**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**  
**CHAIR: MIKE AIREY**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to present to Members of Council the Annual Report of the work of its Standards Committee.

**Summary**

2. Each year the Standards Committee presents to Council its Annual Report. The first report was produced last year in anticipation of the introduction of local assessment. This year's report reflects on the first year of local assessment and the other work carried out by the committee.
3. The report also contains the recommendations by the Standards Committee to the Leader of the Council, and the response of the Leader to the issues raised.

**Recommendation**

4. Council are requested to note the Annual Report of the Standards Committee.

**Reasons**

5. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
  - (a) To enable the Authority to receive information about the work of the Standards Committee.
  - (b) To enable the Standards Committee to advise the Council about how to improve public trust in the organisation.
  - (c) To advise Members about the work of the Committee since the implementation of local assessment.

**Catherine H. Whitehead**  
**Borough Solicitor**

## **Background Papers**

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

## **Appendix**

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S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no implications for Crime and Disorder
Health and Well Being	There are no implications for Health and Wellbeing
Sustainability	There are no specific issues in relation to sustainability.
Diversity	There are no specific issues in relation to diversity
Wards Affected	All wards are affected equally
Groups Affected	The only groups specifically affected are members of the council
Budget and Policy Framework	The report does not propose amendments to the Council's budget and policy framework. The report is required to be referred to Council.
Key Decision	This is not an executive decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The ethical agenda and the promotion of trust and confidence in the organisation support all of the objectives of the Community Strategy in so far as they facilitate public involvement in decision making. This is specifically addressed in the national indicator NI 4.
Efficiency	There are additional staff resources required for the implementation of the Standards Committee work programme.

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

6. The Standards Committee presented its first Annual Report to Council in anticipation of taking on its new role in local assessment of complaints from the Standards Board for England.
7. As the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act was going through Parliament, consideration was given to whether an Annual Report should be submitted to the Standards Board for England as part of its role in monitoring the work of the local Standards Committees. The decision has, however, now been made that monitoring will be provided through completion of a computerised quarterly database questionnaire. It is however recognised as good practice for the Authority itself to monitor the work of the Committee and that the preparation of an Annual Report is a useful way of demonstrating this. The Annual Report is intended to be a summary of the work of the Committee, to highlight areas for improvement and will help to raise its profile with Members. The new Use of Resources Assessment asks how the Standards Committee advises the Leadership of the authority how it can influence trust and public confidence in the organisation.

### Annual Report

8. The report looks at the work of the Standards Committee in 2008/2009 and looks back on the implementation of local assessment, the allegations received in relation to Members of the Authority, and the proposed revisions to the Code of Conduct. From May 2008 all complaints against Members have been made directly to the Authority.
9. Complaints received locally are referred to the Assessments Sub-Committee to make an initial assessment whether the complaint should be investigated. The complainant has a right of review to a different Sub-Committee if they are unhappy with the outcome at the Assessment Sub-Committee. If the complaint is referred it will be investigated by the Monitoring Officer and heard by the Standards Committee unless the complaint warrants national investigation. Darlington Standards Committee increased its independent membership to three, its parish membership to three and its elected membership to five. Even with that number of members, the number of meetings has kept members of the committee busy.
10. In all, the Authority has received 15 complaints since local assessment was implemented. Of those 15 only three have been referred for investigation and only one of those resulted in a full hearing. Of the complaints received eight were about parish councillors and eight were about members of Darlington Borough Council. The Initial Assessments Sub-Committee met six times and the Review Sub-Committee met on two occasions. The Consideration and Hearing Sub-Committee met on three occasions, to deal with complaints referred to the local authority by the Standards Board for England prior to local assessment as well as the complaints referred for investigation referred to above. The full Standards Committee met as it usually does five times during the course of the year.

11. The authority received ten complaints in the year prior to local assessment and a total of 29 complaints between 2002 and 2008. Looking at the average number of complaints during that period there has been a marked increase since the introduction of local assessment. It is possible that this is due to greater publicity, including an article in the Town Crier, about the ability to make a complaint. It is also due to the number of complaints coming from one particular parish council, which has had 18 complaints in the last two years, but no parish council had received a complaint in the five years prior to that.
12. The Annual Report refers to the regular Ethical Health Indicators which the Committee receives to monitor a range of issues which can indicate difficulties with the ethical health of the organisation and allow the Committee to conduct further enquiries if the indicators raise concerns. The Committee also has a significant role in Member training and development and, alongside the Audit Committee in the authority's Corporate Governance.

### **Looking Forward**

13. The Code of Conduct is likely to be further reviewed and the Committee will have a role in responding to that consultation and referring any changes for implementation to Council.
14. The Committee is currently reviewing its guidance for determination for complaints, initial changes have been referred to this Council. As the year progresses the Committee will liaise with colleagues in the Tees Valley and will learn from national experience and data from the quarterly monitoring to keep the procedure under review and improve where necessary.
15. The Committee will conduct an assessment of its own effectiveness in promoting high standards of conduct amongst members and officers, and in raising public trust and confidence in the organisation. This survey will inform further work during the course of the year, and future recommendations to the authority.
16. The Committee will have an ongoing responsibility to handle any complaints referred to it for assessment, review or consideration.

### **Outcome of Consultation**

17. The draft report was presented to the Standards Committee at its meeting on 2 February 2009 and a revised draft was submitted to the Committee on 16 March 2009 for approval. The report is attached at **Appendix 1** to this report.