

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in the Conference Room, Caledfryn, Denbigh on Friday, 2nd March, 2007 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

Mr C.B. Halliday (Chair), Councillors P.A. Dobb, P. Glynn and R.LI. Williams, Mr I. Lawson, Mr G.F. Roberts and Mrs P. White.
Councillors R.E. Barton and C.L. Hughes attended as Observers.

ALSO PRESENT

The Monitoring Officer and Administrative officer (C.I. Williams).

1 URGENT MATTERS

No items were raised which in the opinion of the Chair, should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency pursuant to Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act, 1972.

2 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Standards Committee held on Friday, 20th October, 2006 were submitted.

Matters arising:-

3. Attendance at Meetings. (a) Henllan Community Council – The Monitoring Officer informed Members that information pertaining to the new Code of Conduct would, when available, be conveyed to Town and Community Councils at meetings with their respective Chairs and Clerks.

***RESOLVED** – that, subject to the above, the Minutes be received and approved as a correct record.*

3 ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

(a) SACRE

A report by the Chair, which provided details of his attendance at a meeting of the SACRE Committee held on the 31st January, 2007, had been circulated with the papers for the meeting.

The Chair confirmed that the meeting had been well-ordered and had run very smoothly. However, he had expressed reservations as to whether the respective Committee Members had a clear understanding of the guidance on disclosure of interests. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that he would pursue the issue of the

provision of training and advice for Members of the relevant Committees which would also include co-opted Members.

In response to a question from the Chair, details of the role and remit of the Religious Education Inspector/Adviser at the SACRE Committee were provided for Members of the Standards Committee.

RESOLVED – *that the position be noted.*

(b) Bodfari Community Council

A report by the Chair, which provided details of his attendance at a meeting of Bodfari Community Council, held on the 14th February, 2007, had been circulated with the papers for the meeting.

The Chair informed Members that, in response to an invitation from Bodfari Community Council, he had provided a summary of the role of the County Council's Standards Committee, as previously agreed by the Committee Members. He confirmed that the area which had generated the most interest had related to matters pertaining to the declaration of interests, with particular reference having been made to planning applications.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that, as stated by the Chair in his report, help and assistance in respect of training would be made readily available for all Members of the respective Committees.

RESOLVED – *that the position be noted.*

(c) Llanferres Community Council

A report by the Chair, which provided details of his attendance at a meeting of Llanferres Community Council held on the 15th February, 2007 had been circulated with the papers for the meeting.

The Chair informed Members that, in response to an invitation from Llanferres Community Council, he had provided a summary of the role of the County Council's Standards Committee, as previously agreed by the Members of the Committee.

He confirmed that the area which had generated the most interest had related to matters pertaining to the declaration of interests, the Chair explained that he had provided details pertaining to 'The Code to protect you' card produced by the Standards Board for England, together with, information on how to obtain a copy of the card via the website.

RESOLVED – *that the position be noted.*

Mr G.F. Roberts referred to the Code of Conduct, explaining that it also applied to Members of Local Health Boards, and suggested that it might be beneficial to circulate details of the Code of Conduct to current Members of the local Health Board. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that documentation relating to this matter

had previously been circulated, but had not been updated, and he agreed to monitor the position.

In reply to matters raised by Mr G.F. Roberts pertaining to the Democratic Renewal Scheme and Members Appraisals, the Monitoring Officer agreed to examine this issue and report accordingly.

4 MONITORING THE CODE OF CONDUCT

A copy of a letter from Stephen Phipps, Head of Partnership and Ethics Team, Local Government Policy Division, Welsh Assembly Government, to Mr Steve Thomas, Director Welsh Local Government Association which provided a response for information in respect of the timetable for the progression of the implementation of the review of the revised Code of Conduct, had been circulated with the papers for the meeting.

The Monitoring Officer referred to the timetable contained in the letter and confirmed that there had been a slippage of approximately one month. He explained that a considerable amount of work had been undertaken in England, with regards to the Code of Conduct, but informed Members that the Code of Conduct to be implemented in Wales could differ and he felt that any close examination of that document might cause confusion in the long term.

He stressed that it would be important for the revised Code of Conduct to provide clarification in respect of the roles of Councillors serving on both Town and Community Councils and County Councils.

Councillor R.LI. Williams explained that he felt that the manner in which Community Councils conducted their meetings differed considerable between the respective Councils. He suggested that all Community Councils should be encouraged to adopt an agreed Code of Practice and made particularly reference to the importance of ensuring consistency when considering planning applications.

The Monitoring Officer responded and explained that the Welsh Assembly Government had already provided an indication of their intension to address this matter, he also stressed that it would be important for officers within the County Council, and particularly within the Planning Department, to assist and provide training for Members of Community Councils. Concern was expressed that due to a lack of resources within the Planning Directorate difficulties might be experienced in providing the required assistance.

During the ensuing discussion Members agreed that the Monitoring Officer investigates the possibility of the County Council, with the assistance of the Planning Department, producing guidance notes based on the current rules for circulation to all Community Councils. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a report of this nature had been already been circulated. However, he would investigate the matter further.

RESOLVED –that

- (a) the position be noted, and*

- (b) *the Monitoring Officer investigates the possibility of the County Council, with the assistance of the Planning Department, producing guidance notes based on the current rules for circulation to all Community Councils.*

5 FUTURE MEETINGS

The Monitoring Officer informed Members that the next meeting of the Standards Committee would be held, as previously agreed, on Friday, 18th May, 2007.

Mr G.F. Roberts explained that he would be unable to attending the meeting of the Standards Committee scheduled for the 18th May, 2007 and submitted an apology for his non attendance.

Members agreed that the Monitoring Officer write to Members of the Standards Committee seeking agreement on possible future dates for meetings of the Standards Committee.

RESOLVED –*that*

- (a) *the next meeting of the Standards Committee be held on Friday, 18th May, 2007, and*
- (b) *the Monitoring Officer write to all Members of the Standards Committee seeking agreement on possible future dates for meetings of the Standards Committee.*

6 URGENT ITEM

In reply to a request from the Chair who sought clarification with regard to the correct procedures to adopt following the receipt of complaints from Members with regard to other Members, officers or the treatment of Members, the Monitoring Officer referred to the County Council's Constitution.

He explained that procedures were in place to deal with complaints registered against an officer of the County Council, and that in the case of a complaint being registered against a Member of the County Council the matter would be referred to the Ombudsman.

Members of the Standards Committee agreed that the procedures, as set out in the County Council's Constitution, be adhered to.

RESOLVED –*that the procedures for addressing complaints against Members and officers of the County Council, as set out in the County Council's Constitution, be adhered to.*

Meeting ended at 11.20 a.m.

Report to: Standards Committee

Report by: Monitoring Officer

Date: 29 June 2007

Subject: Dispensations

1 DECISION SOUGHT

- 1.1 To consider granting dispensation to members of the County Council to vote on matters where those members declare interests as Governors in certain circumstances and subject to provisos.

2 REASONS FOR DECISION

- 2.1 At your meeting of 15 April 2005 your Committee considered and granted a number of dispensations to enable governor members to vote on matters relating to the management of school places. During the course of the Committee's deliberations it was suggested that a wider dispensation would be helpful and I agreed that there was scope for this.
- 2.2 I did not pursue the matter further at the time since the Assembly embarked on a review of the Code of Conduct and it was anticipated that the position of governors might be addressed in some way in the new Code. It also seemed likely at the time that a new Code would be in place before the Council would have to take fundamental decisions relating to schools.
- 2.2 As is reported elsewhere to your Committee, it seems very unlikely that the new Code will be finalised and in place as anticipated and accordingly it is necessary to revisit the question of dispensations.
- 2.3 As previously reported to your Committee, Section 81 of the Local Government Act 2000 deals with the disclosure and registration of members' interests and sets out the basic framework which requires registers of interests to be maintained and prescribes how interests should be dealt with.
- 2.4 Councillors who are governors of schools or of further and higher education bodies are deemed to have an interest by virtue of paragraph 12 of the Code of Conduct. To be able to vote on matters that have an impact on the various bodies on which they serve, a dispensation is necessary under the Standards Committees (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) Regulations 2001. These regulations set out the circumstances where you can grant dispensations and I attach a copy of the list at Appendix 1.
- 2.5 It appears to me that the circumstances that arise in the case of governor members are those set out in Regulations 2(a) and 2(i). The whole spectrum of education and learning has been and continues to be very much in the public eye and the granting of dispensations will enable democratically elected members to participate fully in the broader public interest and particularly in the achievement of the vision for the County.

2.6 As previously, it is suggested that the dispensation be qualified to exclude the very personal and pecuniary interests as suggested in the recommendation.

3 RECOMMENDATION

That dispensation be granted to members of the County Council to vote on matters where those members declare interests as governors of schools or further or higher education bodies in which they hold a position of general control or management or to which they have been appointed or nominated by the Council as a representative provided that dispensation does not apply where the proposed decision could benefit or disadvantage the member, one of the member's family or a friend or any person with whom the member has a close personal association.

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Rheoliadau Pwyllgorau Safonau (Caniatau Gollyngiadau) (Cymru) 2001

Yr amgylchiadau lle gellir caniatáu gollyngiadau

2. Caiff pwyllgor safonau awdurdod perthnasol ganiatáu gollyngiadau o dan adran 81(4) o'r Ddeddf -

(a) os oes gan ddim llai na hanner aelodau'r awdurdod perthnasol neu hanner aelodau un o bwyllgorau'r awdurdod (yn ôl fel y digwydd) y mae'r busnes i gael ei ystyried ganddo fuddiant sy'n berthnasol i'r busnes hwnnw;

(b) os oes gan ddim llai na hanner aelodau gweithrediaeth arweinydd a chabinet y mae'r busnes i gael ei ystyried ganddo fuddiant sy'n berthnasol i'r busnes hwnnw a bod naill ai paragraff (ch) neu baragraff (d) hefyd yn gymwys;

(c) yn achos cyngor sir neu gyngor bwrdeistref sirol, os byddai anallu aelod i gymryd rhan yn tarfu ar gydbwysedd gwleidyddol yr awdurdod perthnasol neu'r pwyllgor o'r awdurdod y mae'r busnes i'w ystyried ganddo i'r fath raddau nes y byddai'r canlyniad yn debygol o gael ei effeithio;

(ch) os yw natur buddiant yr aelod yn gyfryw fel na fyddai cyfranogiad yr aelod yn y busnes y mae'r buddiant yn berthnasol iddo yn niweidio hyder y cyhoedd yn y modd y mae busnes yr awdurdod perthnasol yn cael ei gynnal;

(d) os yw'r buddiant yn gyffredin i'r aelod ac i gyfran arwyddocaol o'r cyhoedd;

(dd) os oes cyfiawnhad i'r aelod gymryd rhan yn y busnes y mae'r buddiant yn berthnasol iddo oherwydd rôl neu arbenigedd penodol yr aelod;

(e) os yw'r busnes y mae'r buddiant yn berthnasol iddo i'w ystyried gan bwyllgor trosolygu a chraffu i'r awdurdod perthnasol ac nad yw buddiant yr aelod yn fuddiant ariannol;

(f) os yw'r busnes sydd i'w ystyried yn berthnasol i arian neu eiddo corff gwirfoddol y mae'r aelod yn aelod o'i bwyllgor neu ei fwrdd rheoli heblaw fel cynrychiolydd yr awdurdod perthnasol ac nad oes gan yr aelod unrhyw fuddiant arall yn y busnes hwnnw ar yr amod na fydd unrhyw ollyngiad yn ymestyn i gymryd rhan mewn unrhyw bleidlais mewn perthynas â'r busnes hwnnw; neu

(ff) os yw'n ymddangos i'r pwyllgor ei bod o les i drigolion ardal yr awdurdod perthnasol i'r anallu gael ei godi, ar yr amod bod hysbysiad ysgrifenedig bod y gollyngiad yn cael ei ganiatáu yn cael ei roi i Gynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru o fewn saith diwrnod a hynny mewn unrhyw fodd y gall ei bennu.

The Standards Committees (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) 2001

Circumstances in which dispensations may be granted

2. The standards committee of a relevant authority may grant dispensations under section 81(4) of the Act where -

(a) no fewer than half of the members of the relevant authority or of a committee of the authority (as the case may be) by which the business is to be considered has an interest which relates to that business;

(b) no fewer than half of the members of a leader and cabinet executive of the relevant authority by which the business is to be considered has an interest which relates to that business and either paragraph (d) or (e) also applies;

(c) in the case of a county or county borough council, the inability of the member to participate would upset the political balance of the relevant authority or of the committee of the authority by which the business is to be considered to such an extent that the outcome would be likely to be affected;

(d) the nature of the member's interest is such that the member's participation in the business to which the interest relates would not damage public confidence in the conduct of the relevant authority's business;

(e) the interest is common to the member and a significant proportion of the general public;

(f) the participation of the member in the business to which the interest relates is justified by the member's particular role or expertise;

(g) the business to which the interest relates is to be considered by an overview and scrutiny committee of the relevant authority and the member's interest is not a pecuniary interest;

(h) the business which is to be considered relates to the finances or property of a voluntary organisation of whose management committee or board the member is a member otherwise than as a representative of the relevant authority and the member has no other interest in that business provided that any dispensation shall not extend to participation in any vote with respect to that business; or

(i) it appears to the committee to be in the interests of the inhabitants of the area of the relevant authority that the disability should be removed provided that written notification of the grant of the dispensation is given to the National Assembly for Wales within seven days in such manner as it may specify.

**EXTRACTS FROM
COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE:
ANNUAL REPORT 2006**

The Seven Principles of Public Life

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

FOREWORD BY SIR ALISTAIR GRAHAM, CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE

This is my final report as Chairman as my three year term of office comes to an end on 25th April 2007. It has been both a privilege and an honour to act as the fourth Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the national standing advisory Committee which has played such an important role in putting ethical standards issues at the heart of British public life over the last thirteen years.

In looking back over my three years I believe the Committee has continued to make a significant impact through the adoption of its practicable solutions in specific policy areas of public concern. The Committee's Tenth Report is leading to a major reform of the ethical framework for local government; events have led to the adoption of some, but not all, of its Ninth Report recommendations on the Ministerial Code; and the recommendations in our latest Eleventh Report on the Electoral Commission, have been widely endorsed, and I am confident that the majority will be adopted. In addition the Committee has added significantly to the body of research evidence through publication in 2004 of the first national quantitative survey into public attitudes towards conduct in public life. This was followed by the second survey in 2006, which, thanks to the Scottish Executive and Northern Ireland Administration, also included disaggregated information on the public's views in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The survey will be repeated every two years so that, critically, the public's views can be tracked over time and hopefully with the support of all the devolved administrations.

However, and perhaps inevitably, I am more conscious of the areas where we have failed to make progress, rather than the successes. My greatest regret has been the apparent failure to persuade the Government to place high ethical standards at the heart of its thinking and, most importantly, behaviour. This is despite many of the promising measures, such as the Freedom of Information Act and legislation on political party funding, brought in during this Government's first term.

As a result, I believe, we have seen a loss of trust by the public in ministers and politicians as a class, highlighted by the Committee's surveys of public attitudes, among others.

The restoration of trust between public and politicians and the political process is now a central issue of political debate. As I have argued during my term I believe that this is fundamentally an issue of culture; the culture within which our political class operates. Members of all parties need to show leadership in their behaviour and truthfulness in their public statements. Of course politics involves a central tension between the power of leadership in making uncomfortable decisions in the national interest and seeking to respond to the aspirations of the voting public. However, culture is critically dependent on the behaviour of leaders. All the available research shows that it is better for leaders of organisations to say nothing at all about ethical behaviour, than to make bold statements and then fail to follow these through in their subsequent actions and decisions. There is an important lesson here, I believe, for the Government.

The Committee has nevertheless recognised that we are now in transition to a new government following the Prime Minister's announcement that he will stand down some time later this year. I have briefed senior politicians of all parties about the Committee's current thinking about how a new government might start to create a more trusting atmosphere around politicians and the political process. One issue in particular, and on which I have made statements throughout my term, can set a new tone of seriousness about ethical standards – that is radical changes to the Ministerial Code of Conduct. Such radical changes should, in my view, include:

- a short and simple principles based Code of Conduct which gives Ministers clear guidance on their expected behaviour and helps trigger the taking of expert advice when uncertain;

- associated procedural rules for private offices. Ministers would only become involved if and when they overruled or ignored advice based on such rules;
- expert independent advice on Ministers' private interests provided to Ministers on appointment. After complying with any advice, confirmation that any interests had been satisfactorily dealt with, and a summary of those interests, would be made public;
- an independent assessment of allegations of ministerial misconduct to determine whether an investigation is warranted;
- independent investigation of the facts about an allegation without removing the Prime Minister's ultimate responsibility for deciding the consequences of any breach of the Code; and
- proportionality of both investigation and sanction. We must move away from the situation where the only possible outcomes are either complete clearance on any allegation or dismissal for any breach of the Code. This is neither credible with the public nor is it fair to Ministers.

There are three other issues I would highlight as worthy of the early attention of an incoming Prime Minister.

First, the system of expenses and allowances for Members of Parliament are attracting too much attention for the good of the body politic and have the potential for a corrosive effect on public perceptions of MPs. My concern, and one that I believe many others share, is not that the rules are being broken, but that the rules themselves are less rigorous and transparent than those that apply for all other public office-holders, and indeed private sector employees.

Second, I am concerned that there remains complacency about the vulnerability of our electoral system for electoral fraud. This has been brought into sharp relief by problems caused by postal voting on demand and the Government's insistence on pursuing pilots of internet and telephone voting in this May's elections. Such concerns can be addressed by the adoption of the Committee's recommendation to introduce a new system of individual voter registration, based on an objective personal identifier. This would replace the Victorian system of "head of household" registration which is both anachronistic in today's modern world

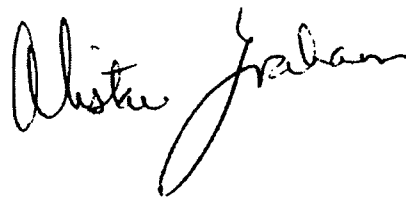
of personal responsibility and equality, and one that is wide open to electoral fraud. To ensure an orderly and fair transition to the new system the Committee has recommended that the main Political Parties should start discussions now in order to reach agreement on the precise form of the new system and legislation developed to implement it immediately following the next General Election; and

Third, the long awaited introduction of a Civil Service Act to ensure the maintenance of the fundamental principles underpinning the Civil Service. Legislation itself is no panacea, for this or any other issue. Conduct is about individual behaviour which in itself is affected by organisational culture and values. However a Civil Service Act would provide a clear and explicit basis to guide the behaviour of Civil Servants, and indeed Ministers and Special Advisers, to fulfil their proper and important constitutional roles within the Executive. This has been a long-standing recommendation of the Committee. All political parties now agree on the principle of an Act. What is now needed is the political will.

Such early actions of a new Prime Minister would set a critically important tone for the future, but must not be a substitute for a sustained commitment to high standards of conduct through the behaviour, actions and decisions of those in the administration.

Finally, I wish to pay particular thanks to all the members of the Committee for their hard work and support during the past three years and in the face of the inevitable criticisms the Committee's work attracts.

I have been fortunate in the quality of support in the two Secretaries to the Committee during my term. Both Rob Behrens and more recently Richard Jarvis have been outstanding public servants giving the Committee and myself first class support. The Committee has a tiny staff who punch well above their weight. They do a wonderful job and I am grateful for all their hard work.



Alistair Graham

- that taken together these would enable the Standards Board for England to transform into a **strategic regulator** of the ethical framework.

The Government³ and the Standards Board for England responded positively to the majority of the Committee's proposals and significant progress towards their implementation occurred in 2006 with the publication of the Local Government White Paper on 26 October 2006 and the subsequent introduction of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill on the 12 December 2006. The Bill is currently being considered by a Public Bill Committee (Standing Committee) in the House of Commons. In particular the Bill seeks to implement the locally-based conduct regime and strengthen the independence of local standards committees. On 22 January 2007, the Government then published a revised Model Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members⁴ for consultation alongside the Bill. This is based upon the recommendations put forward by the Standards Board for England following their extensive consultation in 2005, which itself took account of the Committee's Tenth Report recommendations. At the time of drafting this Annual Report the Committee is considering the detailed provisions of both the Bill and revised Model Code of Conduct and will be submitting its comments to the Government and Public Bill Committee shortly. The Committee's response will be published on our website.

Follow-up to the Tenth Report: *The Ethical Standards Framework for Local Government*

Chapter three of the Committee's Tenth Report², published in January 2005, recommended changes to the legislative framework for ethical standards in local government. The main proposals were for:

- a move to **locally-based arrangements** for the initial handling, investigation and determination of complaints by existing local standards committees for all but the most serious cases of alleged misconduct;
- a strengthening of the **independent composition** of local standards committees in preparation for their new role of complaint handling from 2007;
- changes to the **Code of Conduct** to make it more accessible to councillors and the public; to remove unnecessary restrictions on councillors representing their constituents; and to make a clearer distinction between private and official conduct; and

The Committee welcomes the overall approach that the Government and Standards Board for England are now taking to the ethical framework for local government. It continues to believe that a more proportionate and locally-based approach to ethical standards in local government will help embed high standards of conduct in individual authorities and increase the public's trust in their locally elected representatives.

² Tenth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: *Getting the Balance Right Implementing Standards of Conduct in Public Life*, January 2005 (Cm 6407).

³ The Government's Response to the Tenth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Cabinet Office December 2005, Cm 6723.

⁴ Consultation on Amendments to the Model Code of Conduct for Local Authority Members, Department of Communities and Local Government, 22 January 2007.

APPENDIX 1

ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

Terms of reference

The Committee on Standards in Public Life was established, under the chairmanship of the Rt Hon Lord Nolan, by the then Prime Minister, the Rt Hon John Major, in October 1994, with the following terms of reference:

“To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life”.

The term “public life” includes: Ministers, civil servants and advisers; Members of Parliament and UK Members of the European Parliament; members and senior officers of all NDPBs and of NHS bodies; non-ministerial office-holders; members and other senior officers of other bodies discharging publicly-funded functions; and elected members and senior officers of local authorities.

On 12 November 1997 the Prime Minister announced additional terms of reference:

“To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements.”

The current Chairman is Sir Alistair Graham.

Other members of the Committee are Lloyd Clarke QPM, Rita Donaghy CBE, Professor Dame Hazel Genn DBE, Dame Patricia Hodgson DBE, Baroness Maddock, The Rt Hon Alun Michael JP MP, The Rt Hon Baroness Shephard DL, Dr Elizabeth Vallance JP, Dr Brian Woods-Scawen DL. The Committee is supported by a small secretariat of five civil servants.

Status

The Committee is an independent advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). Its members are appointed by the Prime Minister for renewable periods of up to three years. Seven of its members, including the Chair, are appointed by the Prime Minister through open competition and under the rules of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Three of the members are appointed by nomination from each of the three main political parties. The Committee is not founded in statute and has no legal powers, either to compel witnesses to provide evidence or to enforce its recommendations. In particular it has no powers to investigate individual allegations of misconduct.

Method of working

Since its creation the Committee has produced eleven major studies. It established its method of working early on:

- publishing a consultation paper setting out the issues and questions it believes are of specific importance;
- where appropriate commissioning research to support evidence-based inquiry;
- inviting written submissions based on the issues and questions paper;
- holding informal meetings with practitioners and experts;
- organising formal hearings open to the public and media, at which the issues are explored in detail;
- publishing a report containing conclusions; and
- making recommendations supported by a complete record of written and oral evidence and any associated papers.

When it began its work, the Committee agreed that its public hearings should be open to radio and television as well as written media. Agreement was reached with the broadcasters to enable them to have a presence at the hearings in a way that kept disturbance to witnesses to a minimum.

Written evidence received for our first four reports have been deposited in the Public Records Offices of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; for subsequent reports written evidence is published on a CD-ROM as part of the report. Committee practice is now to also publish written evidence and transcripts on its website as its inquiry proceeds.

Policy on openness

As an integral part of its first report the Committee defined and endorsed the Seven Principles of Public Life, which have since been adopted widely – either in response to specific recommendations from this Committee or as a matter of best practice. Several of these principles, which have of course been incorporated into the Committee's own Code of Practice, are directly relevant to Freedom of Information policy (Leadership, Openness and Accountability). The Committee takes its public responsibilities extremely seriously, and throughout its existence has sought to implement its principles both in fact and in spirit. The Committee has always been as open as possible with its own information. It welcomes the move towards a wider culture of openness which the provision of publication schemes across all public bodies will encourage.

The Secretary of the Committee has responsibility for the operation and maintenance of our publication scheme under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Day-to-day operation and maintenance of the scheme is undertaken by the Secretariat Manager; please see 'How to Contact Us'.

Funding and administration

The Committee is an independent advisory body which presents its recommendations direct to the Prime Minister. It receives its budget through the Cabinet Office, but day-to-day responsibility for financial controls and budgetary mechanisms are delegated to the

Secretary of the Committee. The Secretary and the rest of the team which make up the Secretariat (five staff) are permanent civil servants on loan or seconded from the Cabinet Office or other government departments. For this reason, some of the material which other public authorities are likely to include in their publication schemes on management and staffing issues may be found in the main Cabinet Office Publication Scheme <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publicationscheme/>

Freedom of Information Act

Most of the information held by the Committee is readily available to everyone, and does not require a request under the FOIA to access it. Besides contacting the Committee in writing, by email (public@standards.x.gsi.gov.uk), by telephone or fax, the public can access information via the Commission's website at www.publicstandards.gov.uk and can request copies of publications promoted on the website. Details of how to do this are on the website. The Secretary to the Committee has overall responsibility for the publication scheme and for co-ordinating requests for information under the FOIA.

How to contact us

The Secretary to the Committee is Dr Richard Jarvis. He can be contacted in writing, by telephone or e-mail to:

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