



County Hall, Colliton Park
Dorchester
Dorset DT1 1XJ

Mr P Hawthorne
The Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BD

Telephone: 01305 224177
Fax: 01305 224399
Minicom: 01305 267933
Email: e.m.taylor@dorsetcc.gov.uk
DX: DX 8716 Dorchester
Website: www.dorsetforyou.com

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Your ref:
My ref: EMT/FDB/CSS6/1

Dear Mr Hawthorne

**Consultation by the Committee on Standards in Public Life –
Local leadership and public trust: openness and accountability in Local and London
Government**

At their meeting on 29 January 2009, Dorset County Council's Standards Committee which includes an elected member from each of the three political groups on the Council, our one independent member and five co-opted independent members, considered the above consultation on local leadership and public trust: openness and accountability in Local and London Government. The County Council's comments on the issues relevant to all local government are set out below.

Local government: leadership and decision-making (Paragraphs 2.19)

The strength of the new executive models of decision-making is that both members and the public are aware of who is responsible for making decisions, and also that there are effective checks and balances in place for the executive i.e. scrutiny and challenge by other elected members.

A weakness of these models is the continuing frustration felt by some non-executive members about the number of issues which have become matters for the executive, leaving increased feelings of disengagement.

Local government: openness and accountability (Paragraphs 2.29)

From the public's point of view, openness and transparency are crucial.

Effective scrutiny is the key to ensuring openness and accountability. The County Council's Audit and Scrutiny Committee has been held up nationally as an exemplar for very effective scrutiny. However, it is important to remember that the accountability is ensured only partly by the system. It is the way people behave that marks out an organisations' culture and this needs regular reminders to all.

There is a role for standards committees in promoting openness and accountability. The County Council's Standards Committee produces an Annual Report which details the work undertaken by them. In addition to the statutory functions placed upon the Committee, members also consider issues relating to the Constitution, ethical governance and complaints annual reports. They also consider any findings of maladministration by the Local Government Ombudsman.

The work of our Internal Audit function also provides independent inquiry as to whether processes are working correctly or need to be amended.



Director for Corporate Resources Elaine Taylor



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Local government officers: role and accountability (paragraph 2.37):

It is unclear how well the public understand the role of senior officers within the County Council. There can be a perception that it is the officers, and not elected members, make all decisions. The scheme of delegation to officers and the fact that although officers do have the ability to make decisions they are still accountable to members can be difficult to explain to members of the public. It was felt that by comparison with other local councils information about how decisions are made, by whom and how the decision makers can be held accountable, the County Council's approach was robust.

The low level of complaints received by the County Council could be an indicator that the arrangements are working well. The public have the ability to complain about individual officers and most complaints tend to go directly to the Chief Executive to be allocated internally. Even if complainants are not happy with the outcomes they are generally content that the County Council's system is fair and open. It is recognised that timely responses are important as protocols and processes seem to take an endless time to the public

Members here were very keen to emphasise that it was particularly important to continue to promote to the public the principles of good conduct and what can be achieved by doing this.

Local government accountability and partnerships (paragraph 2.40):

It is recognised that as a result of the increasing emphasis on partnership working, there is a need for partnerships to ensure effective accountability and open decision-making.

The Standards Committee did not consider that it was appropriate to respond to the issues relating solely to London Government.

I hope that this is a useful contribution to the consultation exercise on local leadership and public trust: openness and accountability in Local and London Government.

Yours sincerely



Elaine Taylor
Director for Corporate Resources