

Report to Standards Committee

Date: 11 December 2008

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**Subject: Seventh Annual Assembly of Standards Committees - 13/14
October – ICC Birmingham**

The Seventh Annual Assembly was attended by Mrs Sue Sale, Monitoring Officer of the Council, and Mr John Baggaley, Independent Chairman of the Standards Committee over the course of the two day event.

This year the Assembly title was “Delivering the Goods: local standards in action” and was aimed at illustrating the operation of the devolved conduct regime and highlighting practical issues not only in the handling of complaints, but in the appreciation of the underlying philosophy of the regime, in particular its importance in the public perception of its local representatives.

The introductory plenary session was opened by the recently appointed Parliamentary Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government, Sadiq Khan, followed by the new Chair of the Standards Board, Dr Robert Chilton and the new Chief Executive, Glenys Stacey.

The main thrust of this, and the other plenary sessions during the Assembly, was to emphasise the importance of the Code of Conduct and its role in guaranteeing the probity, honesty and effectiveness of elected local representatives to their constituencies. It was stressed that this was particularly important at a time when the public perception of all politicians and public servants was coloured by a large degree of scepticism, often engendered by emotive, at the least, and frequently misleading media reporting, overlying a basic endemic lack of even the most basic knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Given this basic lack of comprehension on the part of the public, evidenced by the results of a number of academic studies commissioned by the Standards Board, the importance of improved and increased communication and education of the public, and communication and training for local government and public service practitioners was stressed.

Although the devolved administration and application of the Code had only been in place for a few months, the amended Code itself had been in place for over a year, and the Government had already put in place a consultation exercise with a view to the possibility of making further amendments thereto as a result of experience of its application both under the old arrangements and the “Local Filter”. Probably the most significant matter within the consultation would be a re-evaluation of the relationship of behaviour in a

private capacity, hitherto essentially outside the scope of the Code, to the ability to fulfil the requirements of the Code in the public arena.

The deadline for responding to the consultative documents is 24 December 2008.

In addition to the above, there would also be consultation on a Code for employees, and whether such a policy should come under the jurisdiction of the Standards Board and Standards Committees when many of its precepts were probably already covered under the terms and conditions of employment of the various authorities involved.

It was stressed once again that the position of the Standards Board for England (SBE) was now strategic and regulatory, with most of its work involving forward planning, advice and monitoring of the application of the regulations at a local level. The question of whether this would lead to a “downsizing” of the “head office” operations of the SBE was not addressed.

With regard to particular areas of concern to local authorities, the SBE had noted a number of “hot topics”; these included alternative action, best practice, consistency, parishes, levels of sanction and joint working.

In addition to the major plenary sessions there was a wide range of “breakout” sessions covering more of the practical issues involved in the application of the devolved conduct regime, a continuing concern on the part of the SBE being the propensity of the Local Filter to set a lower threshold for referring complaints for investigation than under the old system.

The areas covered in the smaller groups included joint working, problems resulting from imprecise investigations, the importance of full and accurate record keeping to enable the monitoring function of the SBE to be meaningful, practical issues for investigations and hearings and training and communications. In the Q and A sessions, both in the smaller groups and at a plenary level, the difficulties experienced in adopting the alternative action route and doubts concerning consistency across the local authority community were raised many times.

More detailed information relating to the Assembly is available on the SBE conference website: www.annualassembly.co.uk

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the report.