



**Report to: Standards Committee**

**Subject: Eighth Annual Assembly of Standards Committee  
12/13 October 2009 – ICC Birmingham**

**Date: 26 November 2009**

**Author: J R Baggaley – Standards Committee Chairman**

The Eighth Annual Assembly was attended by Ms Helen Barrington, Deputy Monitoring Officer of the Council, and Mr John Baggaley, Independent Chair of the Standards Committee, over the course of the two day event.

This year the Assembly title was “Bringing Standards into Focus” and was aimed at considering the practicalities and technicalities of managing the local standards framework, together with more strategic issues of governance, such as engaging leadership, creating more effective committees, dealing with political parties and extending the benefits of the code to wider local authority partnerships.

The initial ministerial address from Rosie Winterton (by pre-recorded video) stressed the importance of improving the public perception of the political process, following the traumatic revelations on MPs’ expenses, and the part to be played at the local level in achieving this.

The Chair of Standards for England (SfE), Dr Robert Chilton stressed that its work had always been non-political, and that he would endeavour to maintain this, but that he was concerned over the Conservative party policy to abolish the Board, and reiterated the importance of its work.

The supporting introduction by Glenys Stacey (CEO of SfE) concentrated on the further development of the Local Assessment regime in the light of more than a year’s experience of it in operation. This was in particular based on the results of the quarterly returns from authorities and the evidence there from of the quantitative, if not qualitative, workings of the system.

Much of this was covered in the Annual Review for 2008/09, recently published, together with illustrations from individual authorities detailing their experiences relating to specific topics, such as training, leadership and joint-working/co-operation.

Overall, 2,863 complaints had been received, of which 54% were from the public and 36% from authority members. Of the total, over half were dismissed at initial assessment, but about one third were referred for investigation, of which nearly two thirds were eventually found not to be in breach of the Code. The proportion referred for investigation was much higher than under the pre-Local Assessment system which is worrying the SfE who will continue to monitor this closely.

The Revised Code (late as usual) would soon be available for implementation after the May 2010 local elections, while the quality of the regime, as against the base statistics, would be high in the list of priorities for SfE during the coming year. The Board was also concerned about the cost of the system in authorities themselves, as against headquarters, where the new concentration on strategy and monitoring, and the move to Manchester, had resulted in a fall in expenditure from almost £11m in 2007/08 to under £8m in 2008/09.

The subsequent “breakout” sessions (forums, discussion groups, workshops) covered a wide range of topics, most of which addressed issues of concern that were raised at the 2008 Assembly. Some of these were of a more technical/legal content such as the management of investigations, problems of predetermination and bias and the more detailed aspects of cases involving planning and licensing.

Other sessions were more general or strategic, including:-

The Revised Code: in the absence of the final official version, the presenters outlined the SfE recommendations which are likely to form the bulk of any changes, the most significant being the extension of the Code to cover behaviour in a non-official capacity where this involves a criminal conviction; otherwise mainly “tidying up” and clarifying terminology.

Best Practice/Engagement: varied sessions dealt with the role of Standards Committees proactively engaging with authority members, staff and party leaders in order to establish a more holistic base of good governance and behaviour. This also extended into the area of risk and standards involved in authority partnerships with external organisations.

The two most entertaining presentations under the heading “On the brink – heading back from ethical collapse” illustrated the restoration of sound governance and administration at Hull and Lincolnshire. These were salutary tales of dysfunctional councils and councillors which required the joint action of a number of agencies to rectify.

However, the most thought provoking presentation was that of Kirsty Cole (MO for Newark and Sherwood) which, while espousing entirely the need for proactive instilling of good behaviour and ethical governance, questioned the proportionality of the present regime criticising it as over-detailed and arcane, and suggested the work of the Standards Board itself could possibly be subsumed into one of the other audit bodies covering national and local government.

More detailed information relating to the Assembly is available on the SfE conference website: [www.annualassembly.co.uk](http://www.annualassembly.co.uk)

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Members are asked to note the report.