

STANDARDS COMMITTEES – INDEPENDENT MEMBERS NETWORK

Meeting in Southampton 11 March 2004

Background

At last years conference it was suggested that Independent Members may wish to establish formal contact with their counterparts on other Standards Committees. Some Independent Members felt isolated and pointed out that all other groups involved with Standards Committees (Monitoring Officers and Elected Members) already had their own “support groups” in place. This meeting was called by Bruce Claxton, Chair of the Isle of Wight Standards Committee to see if the proposal had general support.

It was originally hoped that representatives would come from across the South of England but it was found that Kent, Gloucester and Dorset plus all counties to the West had already set up their own individual groups. However, approximately forty people attended and at least forty sent apologies along with messages of support.

The Meeting

This lasted from 10.30am until 2pm (no lunch!) There was general agreement that the proposal had merit. The Forum could allow:

- Issues worrying Independent members to be discussed
- Networking
- Interface with the Standards Board
- Independent members to feel more empowered
- Training specifically for Independent Member to be given.

It was felt the proposed area was too big, involving high travelling and time cost and that meetings of over forty people were too large. As a result, it was suggested that Wiltshire, Oxford and Berkshire may well constitute a sensibly sized and manageable group. A maximum of 2 meetings a year with a revolving location (a different place each time NOT a roundabout at a local fair) was suggested.

A most interesting part of the meeting was hearing of the wide variations in the set-up, work undertaken, success of different committees and the contribution made by Independent members e.g.

- Only a couple of authorities have a majority of Independent members.
- About half are chaired by an Independent member – Southampton is chaired by the Mayor.
- Some pay allowances, others will not even reimburse expenses.
- Most are well established – Eastleigh has had one meeting.
- A few felt fully empowered but many felt they had no influence and were obstructed by Elected Members and even, in some cases, Officers – North Wiltshire likened it to being “worse than drawing teeth”.

- Many Committees carried out only the basic requirements. It was interesting to note that the Isle of Wight and Wiltshire, the only 2 with a majority of Independent Members, had completed by far the most additional tasks.

The Future

Full details of all items discussed and background information will be circulated by the end of April. I have asked that our copy be sent to the Chairman via the Monitoring Officer as I do not like to give our private addresses. At that time decisions can be made on the extent of our future involvement. The Monitoring Officer of the Isle of Wight may contact our Monitoring Officer to see if we would be interested in hosting a future meeting of the “splinter group”. No commitment has been given, but I sensed that the Isle of Wight saw Wiltshire as a kindred spirit in that we have been prepared to push forward the boundaries.

Overall it was a useful meeting, but without wanting to sound smug and complacent, I feel we would be passing on a lot more experience and help to others than we are likely to receive. However, I have seen it written – “It is better to give than receive.”

George