

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE
10 NOVEMBER 2008**

**STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND 7TH ANNUAL ASSEMBLY
FEEDBACK FROM THE CHAIRMAN, MR K SHIPMAN**

Consideration is being given to separating out the code into two parts 1) conduct in office and 2) conduct in private life. Consultation will end on 24th December

Legislation is being considered to impose a code of conduct on senior *officers (at the Aimsce presentation they were only referring to declaration of interests in a register).*

The conservatives are proposing to disband the standards board. It is not clear how they would then deal with a local regime. *Should we seek Jane Scott's views on this and, if she supports standards committees, get her to lobby the Tories.*

The number of complains is down and it is believed this is partly due to alternative action. There was some discussion about informal resolution but this closes the door on further action if the person complained about does not co-operate. *The police have used informal resolution for years and, if the dispute cannot be resolved, it goes on for investigation by another person.* Some councils are wriggly around complains because the wording of the act is written complaint to the Standards Board and if the complaint is not in writing or not addressed to the standards board there is a little wriggle room to deal with by informal resolutuon.

At the assessment stage it is essential there is no whiff of judgement on the complaint, particularly if alternative action is considered.

There was some concern about the issue of the code applying in a partnership arrangements and the degree to which other partnership members should adhere to a code where public money is being spent.

Publicise role of Standards committee

Easy access to complaints form – is it user friendly

Easy access to register of interests – is it sustainable that the register is not on-line

Standards board could invite guest speakers to committee meetings and invite whole council – where this has been tried the councillors become enthusiastic about the standards board. (do not know where)

Many officers do not know about the Standards Committee – they need training.

The annual governance statement should make mention of standards board.

Many Standards Committees Chairmen meet routinely with chief Exec. I am not sure there is a need for that at the moment but once we have parishes this may become necessary.

Many Standards committee members observe council committee meeting to familiarise themselves with what is happening (Time?)

The annual return from the committee to the SB should identify any good practice in WC

PARISHES

There are a number of issues which apply to both standards and the council as a whole, some thoughts of which were triggered by the conference.

1. It is worth checking that all areas have a town or parish council or are proposing to have one. At the last election one Salisbury parish, I think it was Anstey, put up no candidates. The area is then managed by the principle authority. You may think that, if there is no enthusiasm for a parish council the parish should be encouraged to consider combining with the next parish.
2. It is worth checking that all parishes have a clerk and whether the clerk is paid or voluntary.
3. You may wish to consider subscribing the The Clerk – the town and parish council clerk's circulation
4. You may wish to consider inviting Nick Randle of the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) at Taunton to speak to a selected group of the Cabinet.
5. You may wish to form a better working partnership with WALC at Devizes as there will be training issues which emerge from becoming Unitary.
6. Half of all complains come from parishes.
7. Quite a few come from Clerks.
8. The clerk is usually the sole employee of the Council and as such is very isolated when bullying and malpractice occur. There is a need for clear and timely support for clerks. If the clerk contacts standards board for advice THEY MUST NOT be told that standards cannot get involved as an investigation may take place. It is recommended that a parish support team is in place (see Milton Keynes and Isle of Wight). It is worth identifying mentors and support mechanisms for councils in trouble. Early identification of problems is the key to resolving difficulties.
9. A bad comment on a complaint from the clerk is that pressure is inevitable in the cut and thrust of local politics – you will just lose the clerk.
10. The parish is the basic building block of local government
11. The chairman is responsible for the conduct of meetings and for troubleshooting within the council amongst councillors. Chairmen need training.
12. Tit for tat complains must not be tolerated and jumped on at an early stage.
13. Standards board have a list of problem councils and probably so do districts. There is a danger these will be lost if we do not get the details before april 09.
14. SLCC have a parish council toolkit on their website
15. All councils have basic level of functions eg data protection and FOI, Some clerks have a lack of capacity if they are voluntary or if only paid for 3 hours a week.
16. Parishes must ensure they have a complaints and a grievance procedures as part of their contract of service. Often this can be used as an alternative to a Standards Board complaint.
17. The local government ombudsman does not cover the parish sector

18. Effective use of resources. Target problem councils with resources. Use resources innovatively. Use the ward member as the local eyes and ears – they go to PC meetings
19. Develop relationship with clerks and also with chairmen.
20. Use parish reps and advocates and ambassadors.
21. Should there be charge-on for investigations from parishes – there is no legislation back-up for this but consider withholding grants or having bonuses from the central pot for well run councils – standards are often not considered so use money to focus attention.
22. Make better use of quality councils, encourage councils to go for qualification but there must be something in it for them and the clerk who has to get the qualification.
23. Ensure that parish reps are welcomed into the standards committee. Remember they are the only ones not getting an allowance (or should they).
24. There must be a clear and robust complaint assessment procedure laid down. (we do not have this in place yet)
25. Parish Chairman and Clerks need advice / training on how to manage the media if and when a complaint goes public.
26. Disfunctional councils have to positively managed.
27. Consider standards being in a newsletter to parish councils
28. Some councils sponsor their branch of NALC – ie WALC – Do we?
29. Routine meetings with parishes – how will this be managed – at present districts have meetings, will it be by area board and will this number be so large that key speakers will not go to every meeting
30. Should WALC have a role much broader than secretariat and trainer. Some other councils use their NALC committee in a parish representative function