



The

Standard

 the
Standards Board
for England

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Road ahead for standards framework



This year's closing plenary looked back at the key issues that had been discussed over the conference and outlined the next steps for those involved with the strategic framework.

Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of the Standards Board, returned to the list of hot topics that she had discussed in her opening session and what should now be done with each. She spoke of the need to gather together examples of best practice and publicise them. She also responded to calls for

more information on alternative action and its pitfalls, and to look at the guidance that the Standards Board provides.

Glenys observed that the need for delegates to communicate their work was a theme that ran through the conference. She also mentioned anxiety around the issue of confidentiality. She said the Standards Board would be looking at its work programme in the light of these views.

At the same time, however, she would be aware of the line to be drawn between the role

of the Standards Board and delegates' own responsibilities and discretion, which lie at the heart of the locally based system.

She also reminded delegates to consider the consultation on revisions to the Code of Conduct and the officers' code.

Dr Robert Chilton, Chair of the Standards Board, said the Assembly had confirmed to him that those involved in the standards framework are doing an outstanding job. Dr Chilton said he felt the challenges facing standards committees fell into two categories –

some were problems requiring a fix, for example like further guidance. Others were dilemmas, like how to change ingrained attitudes, which required a longer term strategy. In both cases, the Standards Board would be doing its best to help.

Dr Chilton concluded by outlining his personal commitment, and those of his colleagues, to the job ahead. He said standards and ethics, and the system that gives those ideals substance and structure, are vitally important to the future of our local democracy.



Fringe sessions

Several optional fringe events were held at this year's Annual Assembly.

The Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSeS) presented **Question Time with a Twist**. This was an informal forum that allowed delegates to discuss all they had learnt over the past few months. A mixed panel consisting of those involved with the

standards framework considered the progress made since local assessment.

The panel said that the new framework allows the Standards Board to focus on significant cases, that local decision-making represents local involvement, and that some monitoring officers have received fewer complaints.

Areas to consider included a perceived lack of consistency, a demand for more flexibility in the regulations and a potential lack of resources among those responsible for parish councils.

The Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMSce) led a session entitled **Delivering the goods: the leadership and skills of the independent chair**. The session covered the skills necessary to lead an effective standards committee.

These included being able to set priorities within the wider plans of the council and how to achieve your goals. There was also a section on recruitment and the need to replace the skills of a departing chair. A general Q&A session followed the presentation with many

independent members sharing good practice examples from their own standards committee.

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) held **Partnership and Governance – the role of local standards committees**. This session gave an overview of the work the IDeA is undertaking with cross-sector partnerships to assess the culture, values, behaviour and relationships that make partnership working more sustainable and effective.

And the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) presented the session **'Changes to the Local Government Ombudsman's service: Are you up to date?'**. This allowed delegates to discuss changes to the new framework and to put questions to the ombudsman.



Download our conference material

Material from this year's conference is now on our dedicated Annual Assembly website. You can find handouts and presentations under 'Session materials' in the Programme section of:

www.annualassembly.co.uk

‘Start spreading the news ...’

Many local authorities show a strong commitment to ethical standards and raising confidence in local democracy. However, fewer actually promote this commitment and show the good work they are doing.

The **Communicating with communities** session encouraged delegates to think of ways to promote their commitment to ethical standards and to engage with officers,

members, the public and the media.

Ben Dudley from the Local Government Association (LGA) spoke of the difficulties in achieving positive media coverage and in communicating quickly and proactively with the public directly and through the press. He cited research suggesting that authorities with more effective and well-developed communications departments

consistently get higher satisfaction rates.

Delegates suggested several methods of communicating the work of standards committees. These included using authorities’ websites, producing newsletters, using local newspapers and publishing case studies.

Richard Scott, Head of Communications at the

Standards Board discussed the various methods proposed and highlighted that the media poses the biggest reputational risk to a local authority.

He urged authorities to develop media policies and pointed delegates to a toolkit the Standards Board has produced, which is aimed at local authority press officers.

The press toolkit is available by emailing publications@standardsboard.gov.uk.

Online monitoring system reviewed

In August we conducted a review of the Standards Board’s online monitoring system.

We carried out telephone interviews with a sample of monitoring officers and those nominated by monitoring officers to make online returns.

The majority of comments received were positive and the simplicity of the form was valued, with the majority experiencing minimal or no difficulty in making their submission. This was confirmed by 98% of

authorities submitting their return on time.

A large majority (83%) of monitoring officers/nominated staff interviewed said that the system is working effectively. We asked interviewees if they had contacted the Standards Board for assistance with the completion of the online form.

A small number of those interviewed (25%) had contacted the Standards Board for help. We invited those that had made contact to rate the response received in terms of speed, politeness and

helpfulness. All respondents rated the response for all categories as very good.

Respondents were also asked how the Standards Board can improve the support we provide. We received some useful suggestions. These included having a confirmation receipt upon completion of the submission and receiving a reminder when the submission is due.

We were also interested in finding out about any technical issues that you may have experienced and were glad to hear that there were only minor technical problems, such as forgetting passwords.

Improvements have already been made to the system and we will continue to review it. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all who participated in the review.

If you have any questions about this review or future reviews of the system please contact: Cara Afzal, Deputy Research and Monitoring Manager
email: cara.afzal@standardsboard.gov.uk

Your thoughts

Thank you for your feedback about this year's conference. We'll be analysing all your feedback comments in detail to help us plan future work, including next year's assembly.

“ Overall a most enjoyable assembly. My thanks to all involved in delivering the programme... I particularly enjoyed the sessions when we were encouraged to get involved eg Mediation in Action. ”

“ I think some specific examples of good practice would help. ”

“ The increased time of breakout sessions is much better. ”

“ Learnt a great deal - know what I want to go forward. ”

“ More specific guidance would be better, how legal arguments are formulated and how conclusions are reached. ”



Conference in pictures



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