

STANDARDS COMMITTEE – 13 NOVEMBER 2008

DELIVERING THE GOODS: LOCAL STANDARDS IN ACTION - SEVENTH ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES – OCTOBER 2008

Report of the: Monitoring Officer

Status: For Consideration and discussion

Executive Summary:

This report gives a summary of what took place at The Seventh Annual Assembly of the Standards Committees (the Assembly) organised by The Standards Board for England (the Board). The conference focused on helping authorities to deliver the local standards framework effectively.

This report supports the Key Aim of effective management of Council resources.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Loney

Head of Service Head of Legal Services and Democratic Services –
Mrs. Christine Nuttall

Recommendation: Members are requested to note this report.

Background

- 1 The Assembly took place once again in Birmingham on the 13th and 14th October 2008 and was entitled “Delivering the Goods: Local Standards in Action”. The two-day conference focused through practical sessions and workshops on helping authorities to deliver the local standards framework effectively.

Introduction

- 2 The new Chair of the Board, Dr Robert Chilton, stated that “it is clear that high ethical standards are key to building public confidence in local democracy”. “This is why a great deal of the conference is focused on helping you and your authority to deliver the local standards framework effectively”. He considered that local authorities had made good progress in adopting the new local framework.
- 3 Various speakers took part at the Conference. Sir Christopher Kelly, Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, discussed whether the standards framework had made a difference, the importance of high standards in public life and the challenge of influencing the public’s perception of Members.

Item No. 9

- 4 Dr Richard Cowell, from the University of Cardiff, drew on the results of research designed to assess the impact of standards arrangements on local government.
- 5 Ben Page from Ipsos MORI discussed the main factors impacting on public trust in politicians and confidence in local democracy. Public perception of local government was summarised as follows:
 - 44% of adults say they do not know very much about their local council.
 - 80% of adults cannot name the elected leader of their local council.
 - Councils rated excellent by the Audit Commission are generally better at communicating with their residents than other councils.
 - 38% of adults think councillors generally do a good job and this exceeds those who think they are not performing well.
- 6 Sadiq Khan MP spoke of the importance of the conduct regime to local democracy. He felt that the devolution of the conduct regime had been a success. He said that those involved had delivered the goods so far. He felt that the public should have trust in their elected representatives and talked of the probity, accountability and objectivity expected of Members. He felt that the revised Code of Conduct had bedded in well and was clearer, simpler and more proportionate. Consultation on the proposed amendments had now begun with a closing date of the 24th December 2008. Local authorities were encouraged to make use of the Board as a resource for support.

Workshops

- 7 Those attending the Assembly spent a large part of their time in workshops where delegates were offered the opportunity for discussion in a less formal setting. One of the workshops was entitled “Joining the dots” and showed how standards, audit and overview and scrutiny committees could work together to form an important part of the governance arrangements within a local authority. It explored their roles and responsibilities and outlined common features and differences between the committees.
- 8 Some other workshops included:
 - Alternative action master class – Mentoring, mediation and guidance.
 - Balancing Act – Is it possible, or even desirable, to have a consistent, national approach to managing standards.
 - Mind the Gap – setting the standards for joint working.
 - Delivering local assessment – looking at process.
 - Delivering local investigations – looking at process.

- The Code made clear.
- Communicating with communities.
- Keeping track of standards: Monitoring and Support.
- Delivering local assessment.
- Delivering local determination and setting sanctions.
- Mediation in action.
- The Parish perspective.

- 9 Fringe events took place such as “the leadership skills of the Independent Chair”, “Partnership and Governance – the role of local standards committees” and “Question time with a twist” which concentrated on the first experiences of local assessment.

Member’s Comments

- 10 Delegates were encouraged to ask questions at the conference and one new Member from this Committee attended with the Monitoring Officer.

Options (and Reasons for the Recommendation)

- 11 This report is for information and discussion

Key Implications

Financial

- 12 There are financial implications for not adhering to high Ethical Standards and enhancing the role of Corporate Governance within the authority. In addition public confidence can be eroded diminishing the standing of the authority.

Legal, Human Rights etc

- 13 Understanding the workings of the new governance arrangements is essential in order for the authority to deliver the new statutory framework.

Resources (non-financial)

- 14 No non-financial resources have been identified by this report.

Value For Money

- 15 Members may wish to consider how many delegates attend the next National Assembly bearing in mind budgetary constraints.

Equality

- 16 Facilitating understanding of the new ethical framework will help to achieve national consistency promoting a fair and equitable system.

Conclusions

- 17 The Assembly provided a useful sounding board for debating the way forward for the Board and local Standards Committees. The Assembly gave an insight into the Board's new role of providing support, guidance and information. Any members of the Standards Committee who feel that they would like to attend next years National Assembly should contact the Monitoring Officer.

Risk Assessment Statement

- 18 Attendance at the Assembly was beneficial in enabling this Authority to keep up to date with the work of the Board and the need to increase ethical standards within the authority thus enhancing corporate governance within the organisation.

Sources of Information: Literature from the Board

Contact Officer(s): Christine Nuttall – ext. 7245

Corporate Resources Director
Pav Ramewal