

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

15TH JANUARY 2004

INAUGURAL MEETING AT KENT & MEDWAY INDEPENDENT STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEMBERS LIAISON GROUP – COUNTY HALL, MAIDSTONE – 21ST OCTOBER 2003

INFORMATION

Members are requested to note the Report by Ray Haines in respect of the inaugural meeting at Kent and Medway Independent Standards Committee Members Liaison Group attended by Mr. Alan Riddell, Chairman of Sevenoaks Standards Committee.

Members are requested to note this report

Report by Ray Haines

(1) This was an inaugural meeting to decide whether or not a group should be formed, in order to further the interests of Independent Standards Committee members within the County. The meeting had been convened by Ray Haines of the Thanet District Council Standards Committee, who welcomed the attendees. These numbered 17 in total, plus a speaker from the Standards Board for England. A list of attendees, together with contact details, is appended to this report. There were two apologies for absence from Ted Rogers of Tunbridge Wells, and Mahendra Gill of Gravesham.

(2) Ray Haines began by explaining the nature of the meeting and those present will be considering whether or not a liaison group should be set up.

(3) There was then a round-table discussion, with each member introducing himself by name and authority to the assembled group.

(4) Anne Rehill from the Standards Board for England then addressed the meeting, first introducing herself as an ex-town planner and past Policy Officer for Redbridge. She said that the Standards Board of England were keen to foster such independent groups and felt that there was a voice that needs to be heard. She outlined the Nolan Principles of ethical behaviour, listing accountability, selflessness, objectivity, integrity, openness, honesty and leadership as the guiding factors. She said that the Local Government Act of 2000 stipulated that 25% of Standards Committees must be independent. Throughout the country some Standards Committees have a majority of Independents, though this is not the general norm. The Chair is preferred to be an Independent Member. The Independent Members bring much experience to their position and duties. The committees do not need to have a political balance and act in a neutral way as a self-confident and critical friend, they must be non-judgemental. It was felt by some that there was a possibility that Standards Committees could become toothless tigers and there was discussion on how to decide what the role of Standards Committees should be. The question was raised, 'Are Independent Members supported and helped?' and the relationship

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with elected members was varied and not always facilitated. Some other questions, which Anne raised, considered the local knowledge of the Standards Committee, press publicity, job descriptions, the remit and tenure of office of Independent Members, inductions to local authorities, access to support and information on training provided. She felt that Standards Committees could have a promotional role, power to adjudicate on referrals back and anticipated the second half of legislation to allow local committees to investigate cases. To date, the Standards Board for England had adjudicated on 15 cases and referred them back. However, it was admitted that this had to be viewed in the light of the 4-500 cases which are awaiting adjudication. Approximately 25% of these are expected to eventually be referred back.

(5) It was felt that the pre-hearing process was important and Anne discussed aspects of this. The actual hearing process with new regulations is expected to be enacted by November this year following limited consultation. There was discussion on the level of influence of Standards Committees and Independent Members. Some details of the operation of hearings is already being circulated and good hearings proceedings should be in place, ready for increased responsibilities which the Standards Board anticipate will be coming soon. Extra responsibilities which can be considered are:

- review of local authority protocols
- review of complaints procedures
- ethical audit
- review of constitutions
- training of Local Strategic Partnerships
- representation to Government
- local mediation in disputes

There was some discussion on various aspects of these responsibilities

(6) Anne outlined the benefits of our network, explaining that there was one already established in Wigan and several more on the way. She felt the benefits would be reduced isolation for Independent Members, a sharing of ideas and best practice, and a strong, clear lobbying voice to be exercised at local, regional and national government levels. Problems derived from lack of resources, time and ability to make a commitment, from the attitude of some local authorities and from the wait for legislation. She believes Standards Boards can assist with a national database of contacts, with a newsletter, which is a preparation, and as a clearing house for sharing ideas and best practice.

(7) The meeting then conducted a round-up around the table of the views of the Independent Members on the place that Standards Committees and they themselves have within their authorities. Differing views were heard from Swale, Sevenoaks, Canterbury, Dartford,

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Tunbridge Wells, Ashford, Medway, Maidstone, Thanet, KCC and from the County's police and fire authorities. These views will be circulated on a separate pink sheet with these minutes.

(8) The Chairman then put the question to the group, "Do we want to form a liaison/contacts group for the County of Kent and called for a vote. The vote was unanimously: yes. It was then decided to elect a Chairman, a Vice-Chairman and a Secretary. Ray Haines was unanimously elected as Chairman; Ron Gooday, unanimously as Vice-Chairman; and Mike Coulson, unanimously as the Secretary.

(9) Philip Lennard volunteered to act as a collator and distributor of e-mail addresses and all were asked to e-mail their addresses to him at philip.lennard@bt.com

(10) It was agreed that the liaison group should meet 3 times a year, dates will be selected and circulated for one year ahead. It was agreed that we would try to hold the meetings at County Hall, Maidstone, subject to availability at no charge, and that meetings should be held subject to Chatham House Rules for certain sectors of the meeting. With the agreement of the meeting, the Chairman undertook to approach KCC about the meeting room.

(11) At the next meeting terms of reference will be discussed and different interpretations of Standards Committees activities around the County will be considered.

(12) Having commenced at 5.30 p.m., the meeting terminated at 7.40 p.m.

Sources of Information

Notes by Ray Haines received
from Mr. Alan Riddell

Contact Officer:

Christine Nuttall Ext. 7245

ROBIN HALES
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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