

APPENDIX

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Tony Austin: Notes on Annual Assembly of Standards Committees, 12-13 October 2009

The overhanging shadow over the gathering was the possibility that if a Conservative government took over at the next election, probably Spring 2010, they would carry out a proposal to disband Standards for England.

Dr Robert Chilton, chair, referred to the prospect in his opening address and his message was that to survive the body would need to deliver a quality service for less money.

Among delegates there was a feeling that a new government would pull back from abolishing the current arrangements as it would be politically insensitive to remove a monitoring organisation when the emphasis in Parliament, and in the banking world, was to have higher standards and fewer scandals over expenses and allowances and bonuses through better regulation and guidance. Such a body as Standards Committees was needed to maintain standards. (I think it was previously called the Standards Board for England, a much more recognisable description) However, I lost count of the times I heard the expression "We have a sledgehammer to crack a nut".

There was much criticism (among delegates) of the present system by which a councillor who was alleged to have offended the rules was not told that he had been reported before an assessment was carried out. The majority view was that a councillor should be invited to comment on the allegations so that an assessment panel could take them into account when considering whether a complaint should be dropped or sent for further investigation.

Receiving comments from both the complainant, and anyone they complained of, at the initial stage would streamline the system, enable matters to be dealt with more quickly and efficiently and save money by leading to more "no breach" decisions with the benefit of the views of both parties. There was a general feeling, on the floor, that the whole set-up needed critical examination.

Among the interesting statistics I noted were that there were around 9,000 parish councils, 80/90% of whom were members of Kalc, and that the number of parish councils that had to be monitored ranged from over 200 to Sevenoak's approximately 30. In the case of a county with up to 220 parish council training was, logistically, impossible which was deeply unsatisfactory.

Monitoring officers I spoke to said that some parish councils genuinely feared the standards' committees --but some had never heard of them!

Apart from these considerations most workshops were useful further training and generally well conducted by people who had "hands on" experience. The conference was well organised, certainly worth the time (effectively two and a half days) and I was grateful to have been invited to attend.

Tony Austin