

STANDARDS COMMITTEE – 3 DECEMBER 2009

BRINGING STANDARDS INTO FOCUS 2009 ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES

Report of the: **Monitoring Officer**

Status: For Consideration and discussion

Executive Summary:

This report gives a summary of what took place at The Eighth Annual Assembly of the Standards Committees (the Assembly) organised by the Standards for England. 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. Elaine Bracken

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

Recommendation: Members are requested to note this report.

Background

- 1 The Assembly took place once again in Birmingham on the 12 and 13 October 2009 and was entitled “Bringing Standards into Focus” The two-day conference focused through practical sessions and workshops on helping authorities to deliver the local standards framework effectively.

Introduction

- 2 The first day of the Conference started with a Plenary session for all delegates and set out the latest standards statistics and trends, highlighting the successes of local assessment and explained some of the challenges that had been dealt with.
- 3 Glenys Stacey, Chief Executive of Standards for England, talked through a number of areas that had raised concerns at the close of last year’s conference. A summary of her presentation is as follows as set out in the Conference newsletter:-

“Best practice – We have been developing our approach to best practice throughout the year. Our annual returns have helped us identify notable practice, which features throughout our current Annual Review and on our website. We also sponsor the Standards and Ethics category at the Local Government Chronicle Awards,

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Communications – Many were keen for ideas on how best to put across the good work of standards committees. We have been working to identify ways of promoting best practice and attended a local government communications officers' conference in May to spread our views.

Other action – You asked for information on how to get the best out of other action and when you should use it. We have continued to offer advice on this over the past year, and in May we published specific guidance on it, which is available on our website.

Parishes – We have talked to authorities about practical ways of dealing with difficult parishes, in particular those that are serial complainants and that have a high volume of tit-for-tat complaints. We have worked with representative organisations in the parish sector to improve relations between standards committees and parishes in general. We have also tried a different way of working with parishes – whole parish mentoring – the initial results of which look promising.

Standards in local partnerships – We said that we were going to look at standards in local partnerships and identify any risks across all councils. We believe that there is a role for standards committees in taking a look at partnerships. A typical challenge is good governance arrangements. Advice is available on this and it is a topic of one of the sessions at this year's assembly.

Training – We have produced a new DVD on local assessment, copies of which are currently being distributed”.

Breakout Sessions

- 4 Those attending the Assembly spent a large part of their time in breakout sessions where delegates were offered the opportunity for discussion in a less formal setting. Breakout sessions included:
- Practical advice for single purpose authorities
 - Other action: examples and results
 - The highly effective standards committee
 - Understanding pre-determination and bias
 - Local assessment, sharing lessons learnt
 - Understanding political parties
 - Engaging leaders and embedding standards
 - Town and Parish Councils
 - Managing investigations with confidence
 - Focus on determinations, sanctions and appeals

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- Putting the public in the picture
- Supporting planning and licensing committees
- Focus on Code changes
- Effective joint working
- Standards and partnerships
- Train the trainer
- Sharing good practice
- The Parish Council toolkit
- Working together

- 5 The sessions looked in depth at standards in action, giving the opportunity to share good practice examples and allowed discussions on personal experiences of managing the practicalities of local assessment.
- 6 Information relating to what took place at the National Assembly can be viewed on the Standards for England's website.

Member's Comments

- 7 Delegates were encouraged to ask questions at the conference and one Member from this Committee Cllr. Austin attended the conference with the Monitoring Officer. A copy of this thoughts on the conference are set out in an Appendix to this report.

Options (and Reasons for the Recommendation)

- 8 This report is for information and discussion

Key Implications

Financial

- 9 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

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

Resources (non-financial)

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

Value For Money

- 12 Those Members of this Committee who have attended the National Assembly really feel that they have benefited greatly from the experience and that it represents value for money.

Equality

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

Conclusions

- 14 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.

Risk Assessment Statement

- 15 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. Ethical collapse can have serious consequences for an authority. It can affect the Council's reputation, performance, legitimacy and credibility as well as impact on its recruitment and retention of staff.

Sources of Information: Literature from the Board

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