

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

9 November 2007

Report of the Interim Head of Civic, Democratic and Legal Services

6th ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES

Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to advise the committee of the proceedings of the 6th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees held in Birmingham on 15th – 16th October.

Background

2. The 6th Annual Assembly of Standards Committees was held in Birmingham on 15th – 16th October. City of York Standards Committee was represented by the Chair, Christine Bainton.
3. As in previous years, the Assembly was extremely well attended with several hundred delegates comprising members of Standards Committees both elected and independent as well as Monitoring Officers. All available places at the conference were sold.
4. The focus of the Assembly was very much on meeting the challenge of the local filter for complaints. The legislation to enable this to happen, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, is currently going through Parliament but the intended start date is still 1st April 2008. Once the Bill receives Royal Assent there will be consultation on the regulations to give effect to the provisions. Given the time available it seems unlikely we will have the regulations much in advance of April.
5. The Assembly was addressed by Parmjit Dhanda MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State who put the introduction of local filtering of complaints in the context of the wider agenda of local accountability and the shift of power to local government. The local route would become the norm and the Standards Board for England would assume the role of a light touch national regulator responsible for national standards, ensuring consistency across local government and handling those few cases which cannot be dealt with locally. He made no promise of additional resources to local authorities to assist in fulfilling this new role.
6. About 40 local authorities have been participating in pilot studies on the operation of the local filter and a number of sessions were held to give members and officers who had participated in the pilots an opportunity to

share their experiences. The pilots used a number of scenarios of varying degrees of complexity based on real complaints to test how local Standards Committees would manage with the local filter. The feedback has generally been positive and encouraging that local Standards Committees have the expertise to cope.

7. The national picture is that last year over half of all cases requiring investigation were handled locally and that proportion will continue to grow with most case being dealt with by a local investigation and local hearing. The new Code seems to have been well received and is seen as more appropriate to members' roles as community advocates.
8. There is still the unresolved issue about how the Code will impact on members when they are not acting as members. This is being dealt with in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill and is likely to restrict its impact to behaviour which has resulted in certain criminal convictions.
9. The total number of complaints is slightly down but is fairly constant year on year although the number of referrals is down with the Board filtering out vexatious and trivial complaints and concentrating on those with the potential to damage public confidence in local government. That will become an issue for local Standards Committees when they commence filtering complaints. Greater use is being made of directions to bring about mediation where there are personality clashes and behavioural problems.

Consultation

10. Not applicable. This report is intended for the information of the standards Committee

Options

11. The option is for members to receive the report.

Analysis

12. Not applicable

Corporate Priorities

13. Compliance with the Local Government Act contributes to the corporate priority of improving leadership at all levels. The Standards Committee needs to be kept informed of national developments.

Implications

14. There are no specific financial, HR, equalities, legal, crime and disorder, IT, property or other implications arising out of this report.

Risk Management

15. There are no known risks associated with this report.

Recommendations

16. The Standards Committee are asked to note the contents of this report.

Reason:

To keep the Standards Committee advised of the current national picture in relation to the ethical agenda.

Contact Details

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Report Approved

Date 25th Oct 2007

Specialist Implications Officer(s) *List information for all*

None

Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

None