

7TH ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES 2008

Some notes and observations on the Birmingham Assembly.

Sadiq Khan the new minister with responsibilities for 'public trust and confidence in the local democratic system'. He is legally qualified and has been a Councillor and wants our involvement to be proportionate and fair. The Standards Board for England (SBE) is now the strategic regulator overseeing a single model code of behaviour, which all Members agree to abide by. Government is conducting a review of the code (comments by Christmas), in particular official conduct and private life, examining employees' code of conduct and shared resources with adjoining authorities.

Bob Chilton is the new Chair of SBE, now based in Manchester, who wishes to see a proven systematic process delivered reasonably quickly across the country.

Glenys Stacey is the newish Chief Executive of SBE. Since the new system started in May 2008, as expected the number of complaints against Councillors has risen, with overall 54% from the public and 36% from other Councillors. An average Standards Committee has 10 members-4 Independents and 3 Parish Councillors (maximum is 20). Her 'hot topics' are alternative actions, best practice, consistency, Parishes, sanctions, standards in local partnerships, Standards Committees working together, training and the wider role of Standards Committees.

WORKSHOPS:

'First Response'. SBE suggest only telling a Member there has been an allegation (complaint) not the detail.

'Assessment Committee'-role is to carry out a paper assessment of the complaint, not a mini-investigation. Should not adjourn for more information, but clarify presented facts.

'Review' request by complainant by a separate body of people.

'Decision' should be in private and clearly stated and notified.

'Publicity'. The complaints system should be publicised.

Monitoring Officer is carrying out an administrative procedure so no issues about 'Human Rights'.

'Mediation' is one of the 'other actions'. Requires early intervention with an independent 'mediator' following a structured approach. Is based on 'listening', 'patience' and 'neutrality'. The ideas for a solution come from the two being mediated.

Making an Impact-based on research.

Ben Page, Chair of IPSOS MORI believes we should have a better view of the services than the institution. We need to tell people who we are and what we do and they will like us better!

Sir Chris Kelly, from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which is an independent body that directly advises the Prime Minister.

Dr Richard Cowell, doing research for SBE at Cardiff University around the impact of standards on local authority work, the conduct of Councillors and public confidence dividends. Carrying out a longitudinal study in 9 authorities-2008/2010/2012 including media coverage. Early messages are that good complaints processes lead to better behaviour and the departure of 'offending' Councillors. He sees the 'virtuous circle' of respected Monitoring Officers supported by a leadership disposed to dealing with conduct giving a culture of respectfulness leading to better performance. Standards Committees need to be active with clarity in punishment decisions.

(Mr) Chris Nestor, Independent Member Standards Committee.
14 October 2008.