

Delegates Report :-

Fifth Annual Assembly of the Standards Board for England
16- 17 October 2006- I.C.C. Birmingham.

The Chairman of the Standards Board opened the conference with a short address about the progress since the last assembly. He then introduced the Minister for Local Government, Phil Woolas M.P. The Minister stated that we were now only weeks away from the publication of a white paper on the Code of Conduct. He stated that the white paper would be devolutionary and look to empower Local Government, councillors and local people- and the standards regime must follow. He stated that the Code of Conduct is the vital element of the locally-based framework and the consultation on the revised draft code will be issued shortly. The new code will be in place for the local elections on 3rd. May 2007. He went on to say for the new system to work effectively the capacity of monitoring officers and standards committees members to carry out their new roll must develop.

The new Code will be user friendly, fair and proportionate, in fact a reflection of the conduct regime itself as it should be. **This means having the right training, development and guidance in place for both officers and members** and this important roll will continue to be delivered by the Standards Board. To help retain the public confidence the Minister stated that standards committees should always have an independent chair but should not be required to have a majority of independent members. The Minister went on to say he recognised concerns about resources of the new regime and the need for monitoring officers to be robust and consistent and resist political pressure. Finally he would like to see authorities cooperate and work together and ask all delegates to meet the challenge facing them.

Patricia Hughes- Dep. Chair of the Standards Board also confirmed the workload would increase although she anticipated the volume of complaints would remain stable. Appropriate structures should be put in place to look at referrals ensuring that the timetable is met. (failure to meet timetables could be a case for an appeal by the Member). Ensure that public confidence was maintained.

The speaker from the Audit Commission stressed that there should be good leadership by both the Monitoring Officer and the Chair and this should be coupled with good and regular training and follow training when new committee members came on board. The new Code would require extra resources and a positive attitude by elected members to undertake training.

There was discussion regarding disparity of remuneration for independent members by Local Authorities throughout the country. Concern was expressed by some delegates regarding the financial implications the new Code will have and the need to raise public awareness of the Code. Some Authorities were having problems recruiting independent members. Some 54% of monitoring officers stated that they did not have sufficient support to do the job, especially with the onset of the new Code.

There was concern expressed by some monitoring officers that the new Code that there may be a conflict of interest by monitoring officers and it could put them in a difficult position with members, i.e. they could be involved in the investigation of some members. This may involve bringing in another person to act as monitoring officer for that particular case.

There was some discussion regarding some smaller authorities not having the capacity to undertake the work and that could lead to 'grouping' some authorities together for the purpose of administering the Code. It was also stated that could cause problems but in any case this was a long way off.

In May 2002 the Standards Board encouraged Local Authorities to widen the scope of their Standards Committees to help create an ethical regime and at the same time increase the public confidence in the Authority.

The main theme of all the speakers was the need for training and retraining using cases (factices or not) in roll play training, not only of standards committee members but the whole membership of the Authority as it was most important for all members to fully understand the new Code of Conduct.

There were a number of workshops covering all aspects of both the Standards Board and Local Authority working and how there was still problems as to how some authorities interpret the Code.

There was 800plus delegates attending over the two days and the conference closed mid-afternoon on the 17th. The full text of the conference and details of the speakers can be found on the Standards Board website within two weeks.