

Sixth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

Report of the Clerk

For further information about this report please contact Sharon Lloyd, Corporate Services Manager, on 01743 260210.

1 Purpose of Report

To advise Members of the main issues discussed at the Sixth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees. Also to ask Members to review the constitution of the Fire Authority's Standards Committee in light of developments.

2 Recommendation

Members are requested to:

- a) Note the report;
- b) Consider whether an increase in size and independent membership of the Standards Committee is required in the light of the additional work, which is likely to fall to the Committee following the introduction of the local filter; and
- c) Make recommendations to the Fire Authority accordingly.

3 Background

The Sixth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees, headlined 'Down to detail: Making local regulation work', took place on 15 and 16 October 2007 at the International Conference Centre in Birmingham. The aim of the Assembly was to help participants to tackle all of the key issues raised by the revised Code of Conduct and the local filter and to focus in depth on the detail and practice of making local regulation work.

The Chair of the Standards Committee attended together with the Corporate Services Manager. The Fire Authority's Monitoring Officer, Deputy Monitoring Officer and Solicitor also attended but in their capacity as officers of Borough of Telford & Wrekin.



A brief summary of the issues considered during the conference is given in this report.

4 Defining the Detail Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

In his plenary session Mr Dhanda, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government, described how responsibilities across local government are moving back to where they belong – at a local level.

The Minister said that, following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, which was currently going through its final parliamentary stages, there will be consultation on the regulations needed for the detailed operation of the new system. He recognised that there are concerns about resources and that the new system will bring new challenges. Standards Committees and Monitoring Officers will, however, be aided by the support and guidance of the Standards Board and the clearer, simpler Code of Conduct, which will be looked at again early next year to make sure that it is absolutely fit-for-purpose.

The Minister finished by emphasising the vital contribution that delegates attending the Assembly can make to building trust and respect in local governance.

A full transcription of the Minister's speech can be found at the following site:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/standardscommittee>

5 Local Filter: Countdown to 2008 Deputy Chair, The Standards Board for England

Patricia Hughes, Deputy Chair of the Standards Board for England, outlined how the new ethical framework will be implemented.

Ms Hughes described the new roles and responsibilities the changes will bring for authorities and the Standards Board, gave details of possible issues arising from complaints, and explained how performance will be reported and monitored. She said that the new framework is on track to be in place by April 2008. The Standards Board is already preparing advice and guidance for the change to ensure that it is both smooth and effective.

Findings from two recent pilot trials and details of a third pilot were also revealed. She said that the thought-provoking results from these pilots will be used to help the Standards Board monitor performance and publish appropriate guidance. She concluded that there is strong evidence that authorities are already gaining confidence in their role as champions of high standards and that this will be further strengthened by the new framework.



A full transcription of Patricia Hughes's speech can be found at the following site:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Programme/Sessionmaterials/filedownload.6386.en.pdf>

Chief Executive David Prince also spoke of new responsibilities in his speech earlier in the morning. He said that the building blocks for local ownership are already in place and that the Standards Board will strive to ensure that the system is operated effectively at local level.

6 The Local Filter: In Detail

For these sessions delegates divided into eight groups, each with a maximum of 100 delegates. Using a case example, the sessions took delegates through the local filter process from handling the initial complaint to evaluating the outcome.

The presentation from the session attended by the Corporate Services Manager can be found at the following site:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Programme/Sessionmaterials/filedownload.6315.en.pdf>

7 Breakout Sessions

After lunch on the first day there were a number of 'breakout sessions', which aimed to prepare delegates for the changes expected in April 2008. They looked in depth at the process and practice of managing the local filter and focussed on helping delegates to develop the skills and knowledge they need to deliver a high standard of effective local governance.

The first session attended by the Corporate Services Manager, entitled 'Cracking the revised Code', gave an overview of the revised Code of Conduct, using practical case examples to bring delegates up-to-date with all of the major changes and how they work in practice.

The presentation from this session can be found at the following site:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Programme/Sessionmaterials/filedownload.6340.en.pdf>

The second session, entitled 'Safeguarding local standards', mapped out the monitoring and auditing role of the Standards Board and how it fits with other regulatory bodies and the forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment. Delegates learned what information the Standards Board will be collecting from local government from 2008 and how it intends to collect it. The session also explored ways in which the Board can support delegates in ensuring that local arrangements are working effectively and when the Board will intervene to support authorities, which face difficulties.



The presentation from this session can be found at the following site:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Programme/Sessionmaterials/filedownload.6326.en.pdf>

Breakout sessions on day 2 of the conference addressed vital issues linked to managing the wider impact of the local filter and the revised Code. Training and hands-on workshops helped delegates to focus on raising their authorities' standards to an even higher level, improving communications with their stakeholders and confidently delivering effective local regulation.

The Corporate Services Manager attended the session entitled 'Anything to declare? Understanding interests'. This was a practical session, which gave delegates the opportunity to build a sound knowledge of the changes to the Code relating to interests. Delegates were presented with a series of short scenarios and asked to debate the likely conclusion.

The second practical session, 'Striking a balance: Disclosure and Public Interest', gave delegates the opportunity to build a knowledge of the key changes to the Code relating to public disclosure. Delegates heard short scenarios and debated whether they constituted disclosure in good faith or were examples of disclosure in the interests of political gain.

8 What's the Score?

What is the current state of the regulatory framework? Is it fit for purpose and robust enough to deal with greater local ownership? Key opinion formers discussed, and drew conclusions from, the results of recent studies, including Audit Commission research into ethics and Standards Committees.

The handout from this session can be found at:

<http://www.annualassembly.co.uk/Programme/Sessionmaterials/filedownload.6381.en.pdf>

9 Implications of the New Framework

It became obvious as the conference progressed that there is likely to be a significant increase in the work, which Standards Committees are expected to undertake following introduction of the new framework. Not only will the Committees have to filter cases locally to decide how they should be dealt with but also the number of local determination and investigation cases is likely to increase. Members of the Committee, are, therefore, asked to consider whether it would be prudent to increase the size and independent membership of the Committee and make recommendations to the Fire Authority accordingly.

10 Financial Implications

If the Committee recommends to the Fire Authority that its size and



independent membership be increased, this would result in an increase in the amount of allowances paid. This is, however, likely to be minimal and could be met from existing budgets.

11 Legal Comment

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

12 Equality Impact Assessment

Officers have considered the Service's Brigade Order on Equality Impact Assessments (Personnel 5 Part 2) and have decided that there are no discriminatory practices or differential impacts upon specific groups arising from this report. An Initial Equality Impact Assessment has not, therefore, been completed.

13 Appendices

There are no appendices attached to this report.

14 Background Papers

There are no background papers associated with this report.

More information relating to the various issues summarised can, however, be found on the Standards Board for England website:

www.standardsboard.co.uk

Implications of all of the following have been considered and, where they are significant (i.e. marked with an asterisk), the implications are detailed within the report itself.

Balanced Score Card		Integrated Risk Management Planning	
Business Continuity Planning		Legal	
Capacity		Member Involvement	*
Civil Contingencies Act		National Framework	
Comprehensive Performance Assessment		Operational Assurance	
Efficiency Savings		Retained	
Environmental		Risk and Insurance	
Financial		Staff	
Fire Control/Fire Link		Strategic Planning	
Information Communications and Technology		West Midlands Regional Management Board	
Freedom of Information / Data Protection / Environmental Information Regulations		Equality Impact Assessment	*

