

CURRENT ISSUES

(Report by the Director of Central Services and Monitoring Officer)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report will –

- ◆ seek confirmation as to which Members of the Committee will attend the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees Conference to be held on 16th and 17th October 2006 at the International Conference Centre, Birmingham;
- ◆ request the views of the Committee on the inclusion of the contact details of the five non-elected District Council Members on the Standards Committee on the District Council's web site;
- ◆ refer to a new publication by the Standards Board for England called "How to Make a Complaint"; and
- ◆ advise of recent referral statistics, including those involving local investigations.

2. "A CONFERENCE TAILOR MADE"

2.1 The Committee is requested to confirm which Members shall attend the "Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees" Conference which is to take place at the International Conference Centre (ICC), Birmingham on 16th and 17th October 2006. Four conference places have been reserved.

2.2 This year's conference, "Bridging the Gap: Towards Effective Local Regulation", will encourage local authorities to assess their current performance and to identify and consider the strengths and weaknesses of the authority they represent in a range of areas relating to the Code and the ethical framework. The conference will seek to establish some key milestones for implementing changes and future improvements.

2.3 Phil Woolas MP, Minister for Local Government again is the keynote speaker and he will be joined by a number of senior figures including Professor Gerry Stoker, University of Manchester who will share his views on the key components of an ethical environment.

3. STANDARDS AND CONDUCT WEB SITE

3.1 The Chairman of the Committee has received a letter from the Vice-Chairman of a Parish Council in Huntingdonshire raising an issue which the Chairman considered should be discussed by the Committee. The Parish Councillor, having questioned the information, he was expected to register under the provisions of the Model Code of Conduct "was astounded to find that no less than five Standards Committee Members, including the Chairman, did not have their contact details published on the District Council web site".

- 3.3 Whilst their names appear, the contact details which are not published on the web site relate to five non-District Council Members of the Committee, ie. the three Independent Members and two Parish Council representatives. These feature in a section which allows access to the agenda of the Committee, contact details of the Committee Members, attendance and meeting statistics. The Parish Councillor contends that the details of all Members of the Committee appointed "to promote and maintain high standards of conduct" should be publicly available. It could be argued that the Independent Members and Parish Councillors appointed to the Committee are not elected District representatives and as such serve the Committee under different circumstances. However, the Chairman was of the view that the issue warranted discussion by the Committee and has undertaken to convey the Committee's decision to the Parish Councillor after the meeting.

4. STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND – PUBLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Standards Board for England has published a revised edition of the booklet entitled "How to Make a Complaint" which replaces one of the same name issued in November 2003. A copy of the booklet is enclosed for the Committee and has been circulated to all Members of the District Council. The booklet offers guidance on making a complaint to the Standards Board for England, the procedures for dealing with the allegations and their investigation and includes a form for use by complainants.

5. REFERRAL AND LOCAL INVESTIGATION STATISTICS

- 5.1 The Standards Board for England received 304 allegations in March bringing the total number of allegations for the 2005 – 2006 financial year to 3,836. The referral statistics for that period are reflected pictorially in the Appendix.

- 5.2 For the financial year 2005 – 2006, Ethical Standards Officers referred 352 cases for local investigation – equivalent to 44% of all cases referred during that time. Of those 352 cases, 125 reports have been received by the Standards Board and of that number a breach has been found in 58 cases. In those cases, the local Standards Committee has determined that –

- ◆ 19 Members had no sanction imposed;
- ◆ 2 were suspended for one month;
- ◆ 1 was suspended for one month with training;
- ◆ 2 were suspended for two weeks with an apology;
- ◆ 7 were suspended for two months;
- ◆ 1 was suspended for six weeks with training;
- ◆ 4 were suspended for up to three months;
- ◆ 10 were censured with training and/or apology;
- ◆ 4 were required to make an apology and/or undergo appropriate training and mediation.

During that period five appeals went to the Adjudications Panel from local investigations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The Committee is requested to –

- ◆ nominate four Members to attend the “Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees” Conference;
- ◆ consider whether to publish contact details of the Independent Members and Parish Councillors serving on the Standards Committee on the District Council’s web site;
- ◆ note the publication of a revised edition of the booklet “How to Make A Complaint”; and
- ◆ note the latest referral and local investigation statistics.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Bulletin No. 29 – Standards Board for England.

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