



Report of the Director of Legal and Democratic Services

Standards Committee

Date: 21st December 2006

Subject: Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees: Bridging the Gap

Electoral Wards Affected:

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the Committee of the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees held on 16th & 17th October 2006 at the International Conference Centre (ICC) in Birmingham.
2. The main points of interest were the Local Government White Paper, the results of the BMG research into standards committees, and the inaugural meeting of the new Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMScE).
3. Members of the Committee are asked to note the contents of this report, the conference newsletters, and the attached research document.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

- 1.1 To inform Members of the Committee of the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees held on 16th & 17th October 2006 at the International Conference Centre (ICC) in Birmingham.

2.0 Background Information

- 2.1 The theme of this year's conference was the challenge for local government to become the champion of high standards across public life. The aim as outlined by Anthony Holland, the Chair of the Standards Board for England, is to have a system which has 'bridged the gap' which is both locally owned and driven, and in which the public have confidence.
- 2.2 Three editions of 'The Connection', have been published since the conference took place, and are attached for information. Members will note the range of speakers included; the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Standards Board (SBE); the local government minister Phil Woolas MP; Dawn Hands, research director at BMG research, who presented the study's recent findings during the conference; a number of Ethical Standards Officers and investigators from the Standards Board; and various Monitoring Officers and Standards Committee Chairs.
- 2.3 The Assembly was attended by Mike Wilkinson on behalf of the Committee and by Nicole Jackson, Monitoring Officer and Director of Legal and Democratic Services, and Stuart Turnock, Chief Legal Services Officer.

3.0 Main Issues

- 3.1 The main points of interest were the Local Government White Paper, the results of the BMG research into standards committees, and the inaugural meeting of the new Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMScE).

Local Government White Paper

- 3.2 The Local Government Minister, Phil Woolas, gave a speech at the Annual Assembly regarding the release of the new Local Government White Paper, "Strong and Prosperous Communities" which can be downloaded from the Department for Communities and Local Government website at <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503999>. The Minister described the paper as devolutionary and empowering of local government, Councillors and local people – and that the standards regime must follow suit.
- 3.3 The Code of Conduct is part of the local based ethical framework and the Minister outlined that the consultation document on the revised draft Code of Conduct will be issued very shortly. It is anticipated that the consultation period will be completed by Christmas and that the new Code will be in place in time for the local elections in May 2007. The Minister said that:
- "The Code will be user-friendly, fair and proportionate – in fact, a reflection of the conduct regime itself as it should be."*
- 3.4 In order to prepare for the new system outlined in the White Paper, the capacity and capability of both Monitoring Officers and standards committees will have to

improve. This will mean new training materials, development and guidance in place for officers and Members, and this will continue to be delivered by the Standards Board for England.

- 3.5 In order to retain public confidence the Minister outlined that all standards committee should have independent Chairs, but that they should not be required to have a majority of independent members on the committee as maintaining a balance of Members will help to ensure local democratic ownership.
- 3.6 The Minister acknowledged that there were concerns regarding the resource implications of the new regime and the need for Monitoring Officers to resist political pressure and to remain robust and consistent, and asked local authorities to work together to meet the challenges ahead.

BMG Research – national snapshot of standards committees

- 3.7 This research project was commissioned by the Standards Board with the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSeS) in response to the shift towards local ownership of the ethical agenda.
- 3.8 The aims of the research were to gain information about the following areas:
- a national profile of standards committees;
 - recruitment of independent members;
 - training, activities and experience of standards committee members;
 - the impact of hearings, both positive and negative;
 - role, profile and qualifications of monitoring officers; and
 - support needs of standards committee members.
- 3.9 The results as presented at the Annual Assembly are available as an appendix to this report (Appendix D), but some of the most significant results are listed here:
- Most standards committee members serve on the standards committee for between one and five years with just under 25% serving for five years or more.
 - The majority of monitoring officers surveyed said they attended standards committee meetings.
 - Advertisements in newspapers are the most common method for recruiting independent members and are also seen to be the most effective.
 - Four out of five monitoring officers reported having problems during local investigations, and 33% said that they can have a negative impact on their relationship with Members.
 - Most standards committees and monitoring officers have had training on local investigations, but almost 66% feel they need further training.
 - Standards committee members view their role positively, having good working relationships with their monitoring officer and receiving sufficient support from them.
 - Monitoring officers are positive regarding: their working relationships, their role in the authority, resourcing, training, and support from their chief executive and the chief finance officer.
- 3.10 Several Members of the Leeds City Council Standards Committee were asked to take part in the survey, and were amongst the 60% of authorities who responded to the survey. The results will be used to help inform debate and target future support.

A full report on the results and their implications will be available on the Standards Board's website in due course (<http://www.standardsboard.co.uk/Aboutus/Research/>).

Inaugural meeting of AIMScE

- 3.11 One of the fringe events at this year's Annual Assembly hosted the inaugural meeting of AIMScE. Some 70 independent members attended the meeting and the constitution of the association was adopted.
- 3.12 The Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England is a new organisation to provide peer group support to members, to champion their interest, to empower them in their role and function and to represent their interests.
- 3.13 The aims of the association are:
- To attract and maintain a membership of at least one from every relevant authority every independent chair.
 - To have the ability for members to find other members through a membership register.
 - To hold three events per year: a fringe meeting at the Annual Assembly of Standards Committees; the Annual General Meeting, with a key note speaker, and a conference or training event.
 - To facilitate training.
 - To carry out surveys on issues of importance to their members.
 - To develop a register of members who are able and available to provide Peer Support to other Standards Committees.
 - Through contact with stakeholder bodies to prove themselves to have a valid and additional voice to add to the debate in government, the Standards Board for England, universities and all appropriate places in the local government scene and arena.
 - To encourage and support regional forums (or branches) and to assist members or other Independent Members to set up forums (or branches) in geographical areas where none currently exist.
- 3.14 The Chair of the Committee is invited to feedback to the Committee on the Annual Assembly.

4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance

- 4.1 The Annual Assembly provides an opportunity for Members of standards committees to discuss their experiences and exchange examples of good practice. The Assembly also provides training on a range of conduct issues.
- 4.2 According to Sir Anthony Holland (Chair of the Standards Board for England), a major theme in this year's Annual Assembly was the importance of high standards of conduct and behaviour in underpinning good governance, especially for leaders and chief executives living out and exemplifying the values of good governance.

5.0 Legal And Resource Implications

- 5.1 There are resource implications to the new ethical framework as outlined in the White Paper, such as the resources required for an increasing number of local

determinations and training on the new Code of Conduct. However these can be met from within existing budgets.

- 5.2 Some of the changes proposed to the conduct regime will also require changes in legislation.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 The main points of interest were the Local Government White Paper, the results of the BMG research into standards committees, and the inaugural meeting of the new Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMScE).

- 6.2 The Chair of the Committee is invited to feedback to the Committee on the Annual Assembly.

7.0 Recommendations

- 7.1 Members of the Committee are asked to note the contents of this report, the conference newsletters, and the attached research document.