

2009 ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES

ICC BIRMINGHAM 12-13 OCTOBER 2009

As ever with large conferences the trick is to choose the best breakout sessions interspersed with informative and entertaining plenary events. This is, of course, impossible and one ends up with "the good, the bad and the ugly" with little inkling of which is which until each session has been completed. So I will attempt to make some general observations and impressions and avoid judgements on individual presentations apart from one. The main speaker at the "On the brink: Coming back from ethical collapse" plenary was Shropshire Council's new Chief Executive, Kim Ryley. His presentation was excellent and very well received. We should hope that all the experience he gained at "the worst local authority in the country" will not all be required in his new job.

The opening plenary "State of the Nation" set the mood of the conference. The Conservative Party Green Paper on returning power to local communities which advocates the abolition of the Standards Board was seldom mentioned but always present. The impression was that whatever this meant at central level it would probably not mean the disappearance of standards committees locally. However, "business as usual" was unlikely to be the way forward. The buzz-word was "proportionality". In summary this meant reducing the present cumbersome process to something less bureaucratic involving some or all of the following; investigations completed more quickly; joint committee working perhaps including councils, police and fire; committees made up of independent members only; more transparency for members being complained about; shorter, cheaper, simpler processes; the possibility of trying for earlier apologies to speed the system and, to aid all of the above, a simplification of the Code.

The "problem" of parishes was widely aired. The reluctance of parish members to undertake training, either through unwillingness or cost, was highlighted although it was pointed out that 80% of parishes were complaint free. Some parish-rich authorities hold an annual "parish and town council forum" built around planning matters, which engage parish members, with standards issues, which do not, tacked on. The view was expressed that positive outcomes were more likely if parish members were treated as experienced volunteers and less as just a problem. There appeared to be little common ground on this matter between largely urban authorities with few parish responsibilities and the heavily-parished rural councils.

On the subject of Standards Committee public profiles the summary of advice was the necessity of regular contact between Committees, Political leaders and Chief Executives. Consideration should be given to the Standards Chair presenting the annual report to the full Council. Standards members could also play a part in Council meetings and in parish training. Members who choose not to be involved in training may be influenced by local press coverage of standards issues.

The Standards for England Chief Executive asked standards committees to look out for the annual review which was now available and for a new standards DVD which would be sent to Monitoring Officers. Minor changes to the Code would be issued before the end of 2009. These involved a clarification of "conduct in a private capacity" where the Code will be extended to "criminal activity that leads to a criminal conviction".

The Chair of Standards for England hoped to see as many delegates at the 2010 Assembly. Beyond that the picture was less clear.

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19 October 2009