

# Issues of independence

**Kirsty Cole**, Assistant Chief Executive, Newark and Sherwood District Council, and President, ACSeS

**Sylvia Fox**, Chair of Standards Committee, Poole Borough Council

**Tim Martin**, Monitoring Officer, Poole Borough Council

**Chair: Matt Richards**, Investigations Manager, The Standards Board for England

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# Appointment of independent members

- Legislative background
- Recruitment and selection

# Legislative background

- The *Relevant Authorities (Standards Committee) Regulations 2001*
- If a standards committee has more than three members, at least 25% must be independent
- Quorum: three members of a committee, including at least one independent member (unless conflicted out)

# Appointment process

- Must be advertised in one or more local newspapers
- Formal application
- Appointment must be approved by the council

Appointee must not:

- have been a member or officer of the authority within the preceding five years
- be a relative or close friend of a member or officer of the authority

# Recruitment and selection

- Putting together a recruitment pack
- ‘Marketing’ the position

# Recruitment pack

- Advert – market the opportunity to make a difference
- Background information:
  - what the standards committee does
  - keep it simple and punchy

# The question of remuneration

- Subsistence
- Travelling
- Allowance?



# Think about what you are looking for...

- Job description
- Person specification
- Design application form to enable applicants to highlight potential contributions to the committee
- Interview methodology/questions

## Who? Key attributes:

- Keen interest in standards in public life
- Desire to serve the local community and uphold local democracy
- High standards of personal integrity
- Objective, independent and impartial

## Desirable attributes:

- Experience of dealing with complaints/customer care
- Knowledge of local area and community  
– requirement to live/work in area?
- Active in the community or working with voluntary bodies or organisations in the area
- Sitting on tribunals or similar formal or informal bodies

## Desirable that appointee should not:

- Be actively engaged in politics or have a public profile in relation to political activities
- Have been convicted of any criminal offence other than minor traffic offences within the last five years
- Be subject to conflicts of interest, for example contractual relationships with the council

# Recruitment: how to go about it

- Newspaper advertisements – with article/news item?
- Local radio
- Informal information event
- Council website – links?
- Council newsletter/parish magazine
- Recruitment consultants – executive search
- Approach elected members/parish councils to encourage applicants

# Where?

- Public and community buildings:
  - churches
  - libraries
  - schools/further education
  - community centres
  - supermarkets
  - hospitals/doctors' surgeries/health centres

- Voluntary sector
- Local strategic partnership
- Residents' associations

# Selection: the process

## Short-listing

- Chair and monitoring officer?
- Sub-committee?
- Be clear about what you are looking for
- Have clear selection criteria



## Interview panel

- Monitoring officer – and chief executive?
- Standards committee or sub-committee?
- Remember this is a council appointment

# Selection

## Planning the interview process

- Meeting other stakeholders?
- Design the interview questions to test the suitability of candidates

## Length of appointment

- Legislation and regulations do not specify a term of office for independent members
- The Standards Board recommends that an independent member's term of office should be similar to that of other members of the authority
- Most authorities appoint for a term of between two and four years
- Can be appointed for further term – limits?
- Think about continuity

## External support

Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMSce)

**bandjclaxton@btinternet.com**

AIMSce, Dane Lodge, Main Road, Newbridge,  
Isle of Wight, PO14 0TR

Purpose: to provide peer group support, champion the role of independent members and represent their interests.

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# Desirable attributes for independent members

A sense of judgment:

- a need to be clear thinking
- able to listen to arguments and weigh up facts
- know what is acceptable and what is not
- knowing not to take sides

# Desirable attributes for independent members

Understanding of the public sector environment:

- knowing the basics of probity/propriety
- understanding the standards that apply and how they may differ from other sectors
- understanding or ability to learn about the work of local government

# Desirable attributes for independent members

Experience of position of responsibility:

- need to be able to resist pressure from complainants and councillors
- ability to preserve a fair and even-handed approach in difficult situations
- retaining a sense of proportion so that sensible outcomes may be achieved
- experience of dealing with people/life/organisations



# Initial orientation

- Learning about your local authority
- Induction training
- Getting to know your monitoring officer
- Attending other meetings of the authority
- Maintaining independence – don't get drawn into 'the system'. An independent member should be known to the councillors, but not over familiar
- Civic functions – to attend or not?

# Building a support network

- Ensuring you are not marginalised
- Independent members' networks?
- Attendance at training courses and conferences
- Standards Board website, bulletins and case alerts

# Training and development

- Ensuring full induction training – ask to go on the council’s officer induction course
- Access to same training that other councillors have
- Support for attendance at specific standards committee training and conferences
- Getting to know other local committees
- Methods of ensuring attendance at training
- Find out who deals with member training budget

# Conclusions

To function well, independent members need to be:

- known and recognised
- respected, not feared
- adequately supported
- well trained

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