

Annual Assembly

The assembly began with a session on the State of the Nation at which it quickly became evident that a major preoccupation for Standards For England at present is its own survival, the concern being prompted by the forthcoming general election and the Conservative Party's intention, as expressed in its paper "Control Shift", to abolish the board.

Areas that Standards for England are particularly considering at present are:

- **Risk:** where do risks to standards occur?
- **Sanctions:** are the sanctions available effective to change behaviour?
- **Local decision making:** is it value for money, fast enough, of good quality? They are concerned that 2 out of 3 investigations are finding "no breach" which suggests that too many cases are being sent for investigation.
- **Vexatious and persistent complainants:** how should these be dealt with?

Their Chief Executive stressed how high standards generally were, pointing out that in the last year nationally, there has been just one complaint for each 25 councillors and one serious sanction for every 3,000 members.

I also attended sessions on:

Engaging Leaders and Embedding Standards: Suggestions that I noted here were:

1. Political leaders should be asked to guarantee no interference
2. To get good independent members, ask local business and voluntary sectors to suggest people
3. The committee should have high level representation from councillors but not necessarily cabinet members
4. Good officer support essential but do not let them dominate the committee
5. Committee must not be party political
6. Committee should be the conscience of the organisation

Coming Back from Ethical Collapse: this demonstrated that, whatever problems SCDC may have had in the past, other authorities have been in far, far worse positions.

Highly Effective Standards Committee: this advised us to look at our people (e.g. how do we recruit and train) our processes (e.g. use of work programme) and our outcomes (impact on local authority and citizens)

Determinations Sanctions and Appeals: this stressed the timescales to be met, the importance of the hearing panel giving reasons for each decision made and identifying the correct breach and the correct paragraph of the code, the problems caused if the parties do not agree before the hearing which facts are in dispute and the problems caused if panels are too large.

It also advised that a local authority's allowance scheme specifically state that a suspended member will not receive allowances for the period of suspension. This is not currently in SCDC's allowance scheme and is an issue that should be addressed.

Putting the Public in the Picture; this gave advice on the contents of the website, and on considering your audience, suggested briefing would-be councillors on the code of conduct, advised using hypothetical cases to explain what the standards committee does and developing clear messages, always asking what it means for the person in the street.

Frequently the sessions provided reassurance that our committee and officers are doing a good job. One example is that our website complies with almost all the criteria laid down in the session on Putting the Public in the Picture. Occasionally the advice given by speakers, such as the suggestion that monitoring officers should not attend committee meetings, seemed bizarre.

I was particularly taken by one suggestion: that parish councils be risk – assessed so that training can be concentrated on those most likely to have problems (e.g. those facing significant planning applications.) Sometimes useful information came from unexpected sources, such as the talk by the director of Narrate about Changing Perspectives, which explained how the brain reacts to new information and made it clear just how long it takes to change people's ideas. As is common at these events, I learnt as much from chatting to other delegates as from the formal sessions.

There was somewhat conflicting advice for committee chairmen: Standards For England is to look again at its advice that they should meet regularly with the Leader, party leaders and the Chief Executive, because of concerns that this could compromise the chairman's independence. I was somewhat concerned to be told by one speaker that chairmen should "practise disappointment"! However, that the advice to be 'a guide dog, not a watchdog and certainly not a lapdog' was very apt.

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