

Briefing note – Standards Board Assembly held in Birmingham 13/14 October 2008.

The event was opened by Sadiq Khan MP (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government). He had only recently taken up office and had little to say, other than mention of an ongoing consultation being undertaken into a revision of the current Code – this relates in part to clarification of the question - when is a councillor actually acting in the role, thus subjected to the Code of Conduct. This consultation has to be completed by 24.12.08

Talks were given by the Chairman of the Standards Board Dr Robert Chilton and the new Chief Executive Glenys Stacey – again both persons were new in post and whilst providing historical facts and figures, they did not proffer new thoughts for the future.

The Standards Board put forward their list of key areas of activities under a heading 'Hot Topics'

**Alternative action**

**Best practice**

**Consistency**

**Parishes**

**Sanctions**

**Standards in Local Partnerships**

**Standards Committees working together**

**Training**

**Wider role of Standard Committees.**

In relation to '**Alternative action**', several matters were mentioned:-

There is no investigation and no finding of fact.

Not as a matter of routine.

Use only rarely.

Treat each case on its merits.

This is not a cheap option.

Possible indicators for use:-

A number of members failing to comply with the same breach of the Code.

Officers giving incorrect advice.

Inadequate or incomplete protocols.

Use of Code to gain political points.

Tit for tat allegations.

Ongoing employment issues.

History of member or member complaints and personal conflict between members and/or members and officers.

To remember that under alternative action there is no finding of culpability and you cannot revert back to investigation, especially if a member reneges to do an act they may have agreed to earlier.

I attended a workshop under the heading of 'Communication' – there is still a desire by the Standards Board that local authorities put a lot of effort into spreading the word of what, why, how a 'Standards Committee' – to the local community. This was not fully supported and some criticism was made to the Board of why after many years they had not pursued such an approach.

Perhaps the main item which came out was to look at and review our Chorley Council website? Is reference to the purpose, role and makeup of our Standards Committee easily accessible – can you read the Code, are you told how you can make a complaint etc.

Delivering local assessment is still in an early stage, and there is not a lot of further guidance/best practice at this time. One item mentioned and recommended was the transparency of the process and that any decision should include details of who the assessment committee was.

Having attended a session on 'Parish Councils' it is fair to say that Chorley is ahead of the field in how we support/liaise and train our members.

Overall, meeting and discussing with fellow Standards Committee members proves invaluable and does somewhat confirm that this authority is on the right track, efficient, effective and progressive to the whole aims and ideas of standards in local government.

Tony Ellwood (Independent Chairman, Chorley Council Standards Committee)