

1st Annual Assembly of Standards Committees (Birmingham, 20 May 2002) –Report back

1. INTRODUCTION

Approximately 900 delegates attended the Conference, organised by the Standards Board for England (SBE). Haringey was represented by John Suddaby and myself.

The day consisted of common sessions plus one period of eight concurrent workshops. John and I attended different workshops, so his perspective might consequently differ from mine.

2. MAJOR ISSUES

Delegation of complaints from SBE

This seemed to be *the* major concern: that SBE will keep too many complaints to itself and not delegate enough down to the local Standards Committees. As a consequence:

- a) Local Standards Committees could become “window dressing”, with no real powers;
- b) Independent members would not feel that they were making a difference, or that their role was worthwhile.

SBE made no promises on this matter. Their reply was that a centralised system of complaints-handling was necessary to ensure uniformity of approach.

It was reported that the Minister had promised SBE that if it needed more funds in order to carry out its work then more funds will be made available. In my view, this could act as a positive incentive for SBE to keep as many complaints as possible to itself, so as to maximise the case for the promised additional resources.

This will probably be a matter of learning from experience, so it may be too early to form a judgement now. It is, however, something that we should perhaps keep an eye on for ourselves. For example, I note that the section of SBE’s website containing details of the complaints procedure makes no mention of local Standards Committees.

Disciplinary Powers

Within my workshop, widespread disquiet was expressed by delegates at the thought of an unelected Standards Committee being able to prevent democratically mandated Members from carrying out their duties.

It was accepted that there might be extreme cases where a Standards Committee might need to take such action as a matter of emergency without waiting for an election to test the electorate’s opinion. Nonetheless, the general view was that as a matter of principle the only disciplinary action that a Standards Committee could reasonably take would normally be that of public censure.

If we decide to follow this line, then we might want to consider having various levels of censure, eg. ranging from ‘rebuke’ to ‘severe censure’, rather than having simply one type of censure for all degrees of ‘offence’.

Independence of Chairs

There was lengthy debate in my workshop about whether or not Standards Committees should be Chaired by independent members.

There were split views on this, and a show of hands was asked for. No count was taken, but from where I was seated it seemed that approximately 60% thought the Chair should be independent, 30% thought the Chair should be one of the elected Members, the rest having no strong view.

Granting of dispensation

Concern was expressed at the mechanism by which local Standards Committees grant dispensation to elected Members.

The circumstances under which dispensation could be granted are so tightly proscribed that this problem will rarely arise. However, when it does arise the immediate nature of the problem could necessitate the calling of a meeting of the Standards Committee at an hour or two's notice. There is clearly a practical difficulty here which will need to be addressed in advance at local level.

SBE gave no positive response, other than thanking the delegate for having raised the point.

Consultation

SBE chose the Assembly as the launching point of a Consultation Paper, which is included as a separate Agenda Item.

Roger Lovegrove
6 June 2002