

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

ETHICS AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

31ST MARCH 2009

Feedback on Independent Members' Forum held on Wednesday 4th February 2009

Mr Hobson attends the Forum as a representative for the Worcestershire County Association of Local Councils.

He has forwarded details of the items discussed for the information of Committee Members:

An address was held by Dr Robert Chilton, Chair of the Standards Board for England who raised the following points in his presentation:

Statistics

- 95 – 100% of authorities make quarterly returns to the Standards Board for England.
- England's 473 authorities have received 1988 complaints
- There was an upward trend in the number of cases received
- 53% not referred following initial local assessment
- 13% referred for alternative measures
- 55% complaints from the public, 34% from Members, 10% from other sources including officers.
- No significant differences between the different types of authority in the proportion of cases referred.

Potential Challenges

- Standards Committees which are not correctly constituted.
- Not taking the right steps to make initial assessment decisions.
- Slow to reach initial assessment decisions.

The Local Picture (Hereford/South Shropshire)

- Quarterly monitoring – Rural authorities very adept at handling complaints effectively because they have so many to deal with.
- Herefordshire Unitary has 160 parishes which are performing well.
- Good practice supporting local standards with ethical web page and annual report.
- Some authorities taking longer to assess complaints but dramatic improvements are being made.
- Quarter 3 statistics show South Shropshire time spent on initial assessment was just 2 days.
- Standards Committees need to ensure that complaints are not stored up for successor unitary authorities.

Proposed Changes to Code of Conduct

- Criminal offence
- Acting in non-official capacity
- Code for Officers
- Standards Board response on website (www.standardsboard.gov.uk)
- Generally, support principles behind proposals in consultation

Guidance and Support Available

- Revised Code
- Joint Standards committees
- Other Action
- Sanctions
- Quick Guides
- Local Assessment DVD

Standards Matter to You

- 93% of Members and Officers support the code.
- 70% of Members and 48% of Officers feels standards committees have made a positive difference.
- 80% think high standards of behaviour is an important issue for local government.
- In 2007 44% of Members thought behaviour had improved in 'recent times' compared with 27% in 2004.
- **But** only 11% of the public think standards of behaviour of local councillors have improved – 13% think they have got worse.
- Over two in five members of the public think that councillors do a good job.

Survey Results

Overall do you think councillors generally do a good or bad job?

- 6% don't know
- 12% very poor
- 15% fairly poor
- 24% neither good nor bad
- 7% very good
- 36% fairly good

In general whose Interests do you think Councillors put first?

- 8% don't know
- 25% The Local Area's Interests
- 32% Their Party's Interest
- 9% Their Friends or Families' interests
- 26% their own

Bad Member Behaviour makes for Juicy Stories and is bad for reputation:

Stories include:

Sieg Heil Councillor in new probe bid
Councillor 'wink' row
Chairman of 'racist' group will not go
Shame of ex-mayor over 'shooting' gaffe
Laptop loans stopped by Council after porn shame

Supporting Local Standards

- ***Pre-emption*** – setting the standards that are expected of standards committees and councillors.
- ***Prevention*** – making sure we deal proportionately with those who don't operate the system properly
- ***Protection*** – carrying out the investigations that can't be done locally, intervention to help you operate the system properly including taking powers away if necessary or requested.