

The Future of the Standards Committee Suggestions for Consideration

I have given careful thought and consideration to the future of the Standards Committee of RMBC in the light of the changes that are to take effect from the end of 2011. I believe that it is in the best interest of RMBC to adopt a code of conduct and retain its own Standards Committee albeit in a revised form, and offer the following suggestions to support this view.

Consistency

It is very important that any voluntary code of conduct is not adopted in isolation, and that there is consistency, across the authorities of South Yorkshire, in the way that Standards are maintained. If RMBC intends to retain a voluntary code of conduct governing the standards expected of its members, then it would seem only fair and ethical that the same code of conduct should apply to its members in whatever capacity they are serving. Elected members, who also serve as members of unitary authorities, should have the security of being bound by the same code of conduct in that capacity, as when serving within their own local authority.

There would be value in working collaboratively with other authorities to draw up a code that could be used across South Yorkshire, and given that RMBC had a code of conduct in place before this was a mandatory requirement they would be ideally placed to lead on this.

Composition of Standards Committees

There may be a case for joint standards committees in some areas of South Yorkshire e.g. unitary authorities, and this may have the support of some members, however, it is necessary to exercise caution when considering this route in respect of RMBC.

There is currently a very good working relationship between the Standards Committee and other committees, and senior officers, of the authority. Reports are regularly brought to the Committee which greatly enhance its work and ability to contribute to the work of the authority. It would be impossible for this to continue under joint arrangements, and that would be a great loss.

The breadth of understanding and experience offered by the composition of the current Standards Committee cannot be overestimated. The fact that the independent members live in Rotherham is important when considering cases, whilst the breadth of experience and understanding, particularly from the Parish Councillors and Elected Members is invaluable

However, the Standards Committee, under revised arrangements, could probably operate as effectively, and more cost effectively, with fewer members.

Using other standards committees to review complaints would not be acceptable for an authority serving a local area. It is a question of probity, and locally elected members should have the security of knowing that any complaints against them will

be considered at a local level. I would recommend the option of reducing the number on assessment and review panels to three members, and keep the whole process within the Authority.

Areas for future development

I believe that, in the case of RMBC, there would be value in retaining its own standards committee, and I would welcome the opportunity to be involved in its development.

I acknowledge that there may be potential value in working more collaboratively with partners, and with other committees within the Authority itself, and consequently the role of the Standards Committee could be developed and value could be added. In the four years that I have served on the Standards Committee of RMBC I have chaired many Assessment and Review panels and also a case that came to Hearing. In this practical application of the Code of Conduct I have become aware of the need to improve and/or clarify certain aspects of it. I believe that, if a voluntary code were to be adopted, there would be potential benefits in re-assessing the Code of Conduct. Additionally, this time of change would seem to provide RMBC with the opportunity to combine this reassessment with careful consideration of all the options open to it, in order to achieve the best outcome for the Authority.

I offer these suggestions for consideration, and if there are any aspects that you wish to discuss or to explore further please do not hesitate to contact me.

Angela Bingham, 21st May 2011.

Fox, Maureen

From: David Rowley [david.rowley46@tiscali.co.uk]
Sent: 17 April 2011 17:33
To: Mumford, Tim
Subject: Future of the Standards Committee

At the Standards Committee meeting on 14th April 2011 we were invited by the Chairman to write to you if we had any comments to make on the paper submitted under the above title.

Personally, I should prefer a change to the Localism Bill so that there is a statutory role for the Standards Committee and that a Code of Conduct for all members is maintained. No doubt others will be making representations to the Secretary of State on similar lines. However should the Bill in this regard be fundamentally unchanged I have the following points to make.

* Without the power of meaningful sanctions, the Standards Committee would be of limited value. A severe rebuke, even if made public, would have little impact and there would be little to deter those who choose to operate outwith the Code of Conduct.

* If Parish Councils are invited to join a voluntary scheme, there is a real danger that only the well regulated bodies would sign up. Those Parish Councils who have problems with regard to behaviour are likely to be the ones that would not sign up.

* It is probable that there may be cost implications for Parish Councils. RMBC may wish to defray the costs of running a Standards Committee by charging Parishes - in the current economic climate who could blame them - and if this were to happen I fear that many would not sign up. Parish Councils will already have to budget for extra costs (grounds maintenance, bowling green up keep etc) and this may be seen as an unnecessary burden.

I do not wish to appear unduly pessimistic but if the Localism Bill remains unchanged and RMBC adopts a voluntary Code and appoints a Standards Committee then the above three points are likely to materialise to the detriment of local government in Rotherham.

Regards

Councillor David Rowley