

Brief Report on The Sixth Annual Assembly Of Standards Committees.

- 1) Headlined 'Down to detail: Making local regulation work', its aim was to help participants to tackle all of the key issues raised by the revised Code of Conduct and the local filter and to focus in depth on the detail and practice of making local regulation work. All 3 Independent Members of the (then) Standards Committee attended.
- 2) A summary of the issues considered during the conference:
 - a) Mr. Dhandu, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government: responsibilities across local government were moving back to where they belong – at a local level; following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, soon to be enacted, there would be consultation on the regulations needed for operation of the new system; he 'recognised' that there were concerns about resources and that the new system would bring new challenges; Standards Committees and Monitoring Officers would be aided by the support and guidance of the Standards Board and the clearer, simpler Code of Conduct, which was to be looked at again early next year to make sure that it remained fit-for-purpose.
 - b) Patricia Hughes, Deputy Chair of the Standards Board for England: how the new ethical framework would be implemented; described the new roles and responsibilities the changes would bring for authorities and the Standards Board; details of possible issues arising from complaints; how performance would be reported and monitored; the new framework was on track to be in place by April 2008; the Standards Board was preparing advice and guidance for the change to ensure that it was both smooth and effective.
 - c) 'The Local Filter' took delegates through the local filter process from handling the initial complaint to evaluating the outcome after the changes in April 2008; the process and practice of managing the local filter; skills and knowledge needed to deliver a high standard of effective local governance. There was the usual amalgam of grinding of axes, local situations and (some) expert input. I picked out a few nuggets:
 - i) The monitoring and auditing role of the Standards Board and how it fits with other regulatory bodies
 - ii) The forthcoming Comprehensive Area Assessment
 - iii) The information the Standards Board will be collecting from local government from 2008 and how it intends to collect it
 - iv) The ways the Standards Board intended to support local authorities in ensuring local arrangements were working effectively (i.e. when the Board would intervene)
 - v) The need to raise local authorities' standards to an even higher level by improving communications with their stakeholders and delivering effective local regulation
 - vi) The changes to the Code relating to interests and when a disclosure was a Public Interest' disclosure and when it was not.
- 3) The message given was that there might be an increase in the work done by the Standards Committees in filtering cases, local determination and investigation. Unsaid, but I suspect to be the case, there may also be a 'try-on' period when those keen to complain try to test the local Committee to see if it is as 'robust' as the Standards Board.