

2009 ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARD COMMITTEES.

It was very noticeable that many of the delegates (including KCC) had eschewed the larger and much more expensive hotels, for more reasonably priced venues. Thus I feel, setting the standards for their councils, except that Standards Board for England put everyone up in the Hyatt (double standards).

During the early sessions, there was a fixation with Standards for England over their future, i.e. will they continue if there is a new Government. It actually became quite boring.

There is a new DVD coming out shortly on Assessments.

They were still talking of the new code coming out for us to see in November, with implementation sometime next year. The main change to the code will be how it covers conduct in a private capacity. The code will limit this to criminal conduct that has led to a conviction in court. Purely criminal convictions not cautions etc. There are likely to be a number of amendments, which are just tidying up existing sections.

Lot of talk about ethical collapse, i.e. jaunts overseas, the planning regime and unlawful policies. We heard later of two Councils (Hull and Lincolnshire) where there had been ethical meltdown, and the background behind how they took the road to recovery.

There is to be new guidance coming out on Gifts and hospitality, and we may wish to ask for the record kept to be shown at Standards Committee meetings.

There was a suggestion that we should ask the Planning Committee to explain to the Standards Committee how they work.

There was also a suggestion that the Leader and the Chief Executive should be asked to come to the Standards Committee to talk about their vision on Ethics. Mandatory training, especially on The Code of Conduct, was a topic of conversation during several of the sessions. This would apply to both newly elected Parish and Borough members, and they would have to sign up to this. Bill Stead was very forceful on this issue, and the impression was that the idea found favour, and would be taken forward.

There is a need for us to set agendas/work plans each year, and I will be talking to Paul about this.

There are 4507 members of Standards Committees in England of which 1658 are Independents.

The number of complaints received by Committees varied dramatically, from over 200 to nil.

We are being encouraged to carry out a review of the Standards Committee, and to look at peer group reviews of members.

There was a look of talk about how Standards Committees recruited both Parish and Council members. There was a great deal of talk about Leaders dumping people on the Standards Committees. One Councillor I sat beside said that she was voted onto the Standards Committee in her absence.

There were a considerable number of Parish Councillors present, and a lot of discussion on how to ensure they were trained on the Code of Conduct. There seemed to be agreement amongst the Parish Councils that the training should be done, but also agreement that it was difficult to make some of the dinosaurs take part. Thus the suggestion, that newly elected members have to sign an agreement to training.

The main causes of ethical failures are:

1. Pressure to meet targets.
2. Lack of understanding.
3. Personal differences.

Lots of discussion on how the Standards Committee could improve its image, to the public, to the Parishes, to Borough Councillors, and to Borough Council Staff. Something we in Maidstone have already started on, and having mentioned our article in the Downsmail, I have asked Paul to send a copy to Standards for England.

To sum up the Assembly was a bit like a curate's egg, and listening to the grumbles from regular attendees, was cutting corners on costs (but not hotels).

DJW