

# **REPORT ON THE FOURTH ANNUAL ASSEMBLY OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES**

**5-6 SEPTEMBER 2005**

## **INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE BIRMINGHAM**

Three years ago I attended the first annual assembly of standards committees representing Northampton Borough Council. The assembly was organised by The Standards Board for England. The theme was 'Confidence in Local Democracy'.

Those were the early days. The Local Government Act 2000 had just introduced a Code of Conduct to be adhered to by the 100,000 or so people who give their time as members of local authorities, police and fire authorities as well as national park authorities throughout England and Wales. The aim of the first annual assembly was to bring together members of standards committees and those who support them to share their experiences of the new system.

A year later it was back to Birmingham again with the second annual assembly spreading over two days. The theme of the assembly was 'A Practical Approach'. The second annual assembly was billed as providing an opportunity for members and officers to come together to discuss the practical implementation of the Code of Conduct. The Regulations concerning local determination of complaints by standards committees were hot off the press. Referrals of cases from The Standards Board to standards committees for local determination were expected from September 2003. At that time we were told that the Regulations concerning local investigation of complaints were expected in Autumn 2003.

In September 2004 it was back to Birmingham again for the third annual assembly and we were still waiting for the Regulations concerning local investigation of complaints. As it transpired, those regulations were only days away. The theme of the conference was 'Cracking the Code'. At the 2004 conference, the Rt. Hon. Nick Raynsford MP, Minister for Local and Regional Government invited the Standards Board to begin its review of the Code of Conduct, investigating how the Code could be improved upon and Sir Alistair Graham, chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, set out the progress of the Tenth Inquiry into codes of conduct and standards in public life.

So on 5 and 6 September 2005 it was back to Birmingham for the fourth annual assembly and, as in previous years, the conference followed the format of keynote speeches, workshops, discussion forums and a debate.

Phil Woolas MP, the local government minister, explained to the conference that the government is now considering how best it can support authorities in increasing public trust and confidence in local democracy. The government is considering the recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life alongside the recommendations of the Standards Board following the review of the Code of Conduct.

Sir Alistair Graham shared with the conference the findings of his committee's Tenth Inquiry, which called for greater local involvement and ownership of the ethical framework and liberalisation of some of the aspects of the Code of Conduct.

David Prince, the chief executive of the Standards Board, outlined to the conference the recommendations of the Standards Board for a new and improved Code of Conduct. The recommendations are designed to produce a Code which enables members to fully represent their communities without undue hindrance or red tape, whilst maintaining a commitment to the highest principles of public service.

This year, the workshop and discussion forums were split into three groups focusing on investigations, hearings and public confidence. The 'Investigation' sessions guided delegates through the theory and practice of carrying out investigations. There was also a session looking at the possible alternatives to an investigation, emphasising the important role that council leaders and chief executives play in ensuring that the culture within an authority encourages members to follow the Code. The 'Hearings' sessions guided delegates through the theory and practice of standards committee hearings whilst the 'Public Confidence' sessions shifted the focus away from the Code of Conduct towards promoting public confidence in the system and in local democracy more generally. The sessions looked at how to handle the press, how to measure progress on standards and ethical issues through the comprehensive performance assessment, and how to improve behaviour through the use of ethical diagnostics and toolkits.

As in previous years the conference provided an opportunity to concentrate for two days on the local government ethical framework as well as providing an opportunity to discuss experiences and views with colleagues from other authorities. The conference proved to be generally informative and worthwhile attending.

Margaret Roberts  
Chair of Northampton Borough Council Standards Committee  
3 October 2005