

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO STANDARDS COMMITTEE

DECISION

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: WEDNESDAY, 3 FEBRUARY 2010
title: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES
submitted by: LEGAL SERVICES MANAGER
principal author: LEGAL SERVICES MANAGER

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To inform Committee of research which has been carried out to assess the impact of Standards Committee.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Council Ambitions - }
 - Community Objectives - }
 - Corporate Priorities - }
 - Other Considerations - }
- The Council aims to be a well-managed Council. The research details examples of good practice, the Committee can, by considering these examples, determine how best to develop the work of the Committee.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 In October 2009 a research paper was published on behalf of Standards for England, which sought to summarise the impact of Standards Committees and to provide examples of notable or best practice in the work of Standards Committees.

2.2 A copy of the Executive Summary is attached at Appendix 1. The full report is available on the Standards for England website.

3 ISSUES

3.1 As can be seen from Appendix 1 the research identified 9 case studies where authorities had demonstrated notable practice.

3.2 Set out below are brief details of each of the case studies in order that Members may consider whether this Committee wishes to explore similar opportunities to embed best practice. Within each case study the information provided is separated into notable practice and developing practice.

1. Notable Practice – Organisational Learning
Case Study Authority: Bristol City Council

The notable practice that was identified at Bristol was its approach to organisational learning, the researchers referred to the dissemination of other notable practices to the wider Government community.

In this case the notable practice revolved round Bristol Standards Committee acting as a hub for other authorities and independent members in the southwest. Examples of developing practice were described as follows:

- Aim for good balance of skills from members of the Standards Committee, which allows for a high profile internally and externally.

- A balanced Standards Committee can profitably apply its expertise to a wide range of authority issues in order to continually develop the Committee's own learning.
- Knowledge and experience travel well from committee to committee and should be shared.

2. **Notable Practice – Working with Town and Parish Councils**
Case Study Authority: Taunton & Dean Borough Council

The notable practice at Taunton and Dean revolved around the contribution made by the Council's Parish Liaison Officer who had sat on the Standards Committee since its creation in the late 1990's.

The Parish Liaison Officer advised on matters of standards and ethics but also acted as a general conduit between Parishes and Borough Councils. The research concluded that to fulfil a role of this type notable practice would comprise a postholder who was:

- flexible and prepared to work out of hours;
- had good interpersonal skills;
- act as a critical friend;
- is prepared to admit that one does not know everything and bring back queries to the Council;
- recognises the unique difference that Parish and Town Councils bring to Local Government; and
- is both reactive and proactive ie able to respond quickly to issues but also lead on new matters of interest.

The developing practice identified is described as follows:

- Face-to-face contact is extremely important so develop direct relationships between Parish and Town Members and Members of the Standards Committee.
- Personal relationships help develop trust.
- Flexibility and empathy are key virtues and recognise that managing the boundary of different organisations requires particular skills.

3. **Notable Practice – Developing Members Police Authority**
Case Study Authority: Surry

The authority has a Standards Committee whose terms of reference are wider than many Standards Committees. The notable practice described relates to the wider role of the Police Authority Standards Committee eg the Standards Committee has been overseeing the implementation of the Authority's self-assessment as part of preparation for inspections carried out by the Audit Commission. Members are given a 4-day workshop as part of the induction of new Members. 33 different training courses are offered in a variety of areas, not just in relation to the Code of Conduct, the focus is on developing Members in 5 key areas:

1. Role and deployment.

2. Individual objectives and deliverables.
3. Self-assessment supported by 360° assessment.
4. Personal development.
5. Longer term “own wishes”.

Advise regarding developing practice is as follows:

- Be sensitive to the role of the Standards Committee within the wider authority.
- Demonstrate a commitment to training and development.
- Locate responsibility for self-development with individual Members.

4. Notable Practice – Working with Partnerships
Case Study Authority: Newark and Sherwood District Council

The Standards Committee of Newark and Sherwood District Council aims to encourage partnership work and in particular work with schools.

The Committee has begun to develop a partnership tool kit with over 120 partnerships characterised as strategic, operational and consultative and classified in risk management terms.

Developing practice is summarised as follows:

- Engagement with the wider community is an important part of the Standards Committee role and SDC takes its “duty to involve” citizens in the democratic process seriously and believes that promoting the work of the Standards Committee will help build the communities trust and confidence in its elected representatives.
- Standards Committees, in seeking to deliver a wider remit will face challenging issues and will have disagreements on how to deal with them. This is normal such debate should be encouraged.
- If Standards are part of the vision for the community as a whole, then ethics and standards should be at the core of the authority and not a bolt on.
- Standards Committee Members have a wealth of experience of expertise and are drawn from all works of life and this can be drawn upon to enhance the work of the Committee.

5. Notable Practice – Recruitment and Retention
Case Study Authority: South Cambridgeshire District Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council has a long history of problems with Standards as a result of entrenched political divisions and the high number of parishes (100) in its area.

Despite such entrenched problems South Cambridgeshire Standards Committee has been extremely pro-active in addressing these local issues. Notable practice included creating a Mission Statement for the Committee followed by a series of operational procedures designed to enhance the local Standards agenda eg by

creating a Parish Council Tool Kit to enable Parish Councils to create “a self-administered health-check”.

Key performance indicators have been identified and training has been expanded to incorporate specific sessions for the new sub-panels. Developing practice is summarised as follows:

- Ensure that you understand who you want to attract as an independent member.
- What skills, knowledge and other attributes are required for your Committee.
- Use effective media, target the newspapers you wish to advertise in and utilize situations vacant sections in local press rather than public notices.
- Ensure that candidates have the fullest available information regarding the role and if necessary develop job descriptions and person specifications.

6. Notable Practice – Joint Training and Developments
Case Study Authority: Herefordshire Council

Herefordshire Council Standards Committee provides a good example of organisational learning in the local standards arena. Over the last 2 years the Standards Committee has taken a role in developing and shaping many key elements of the authority’s constitution including revising the planning code, Member/Officer protocols, communications protocols and the protocol for the use of Council resources. The most notable aspect of Herefordshire’s commitment to learning is its extensive use of joint working for training and development purposes, which has involved numerous other authorities.

Herefordshire Standards Committee has established a close relationship with the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils and this extends to joint briefing sessions between the two organisations immediately before Standards Committee meetings. Developing practice is summarised as follows:

- Keep your options open – joint training is an efficient and effective way of covering crucial ground in a number of authorities as well as sharing experiences, problems and good practice. It also builds trust and adds weight to what can often be viewed as an onerous task.
- Cast your net far and wide – joint provision can be very useful. It can usefully be extended to organisations other than neighbouring authorities.

7. Notable Practice – Joint Standards and Audit Committee
Case Study Authority: Runnymede Borough Council

Runnymede Borough Council has a long standing joint Standards and Audit Committee ie since 2003.

During the process of establishing the joint committee a working party met regularly and this has resulted in successful remit for the joint committee. The joint committee also looks into staff grievances and appeals.

Developing practice is summarised as follows:

- A joint committee requires very careful planning so take your time and establish clear boundaries; rules and responsibilities need to be explicitly communicated to all members from the outset.

- Committee Members should not be overloaded with audit information.

8. Notable Practice – High Pressure Investigations
Case Study Authority: Greater London Authority

The Research report explained the way in which the Greater London Authority's (GLA) conducted an investigation into an allegation that the Mayor of London had jeopardised the integrity of the Metropolitan Police Authority. Notable practice of the Standards Committee was identified in that the GLA was confident in its process for complaints handling and confident in its ability to make big decisions. The GLA has a clear step-by-step procedure and this case was therefore treated no differently than any other.

A decision was taken by the Metropolitan Police Authority and the Greater London Authority to conduct a joint investigation producing a single report. The investigation was completed within 6 weeks.

Developing practice:

- In conducting the investigation in such a high profile case, demonstrating that acting without fear or favour will enhance the integrity of the Standards Committee and their authorities.
- By appointing their own investigator, the Standards Committee retained control over the timescale.
- Ensuring that existing processes are robust and focussing upon the specific complaint to be investigated diminishes the 'background noise'.
- Communications and good relations between the monitoring officer and the respective authorities and ensures there are no surprises or mixed messages.
- In high profile cases it would be difficult to manage the media, particularly with instant reporting on the web. Standards Committees need to be aware of the change in dynamics, for example, communicating the results for committee meetings to relevant parties in a timely manner.

9. Notable Practice – Embedding Standards
Case Study Authority: Newcastle City Council

The Committee demonstrated a long-term commitment through the continuing engagement of leaders, whether these were political, officers or independent members of the Standards Committee itself. Notable practice was identified in that from its inception, and prior to the legislative requirements coming into force, the Committee had been chaired by an Independent Member.

- Developing practice was summarised as follows:
 - A committed independent chair is invaluable.
 - Political support is crucial for long-term development.
 - Committee Members need to be valued by the authority.

The report sets out its conclusions and these are summarised as follows:

1. Context does not appear to be crucial.

2. Notable Standards Committees are notable for several reasons.
3. Leadership is essential.
4. Composition of Standards Committees need to be balanced.
5. Standards Committees learn from each other.

5 **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

- 5.1 Consider the examples of good practice identified in the research project.
- 5.2 Consider whether this Committee should consider implementing similar measures.

LEGAL SERVICES MANAGER

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 1 Assessing the impact of Standards Committees October 2009. Professor Alan Lawton (University of Hull) and Director of Resources Michael Macaulay (Teesside University).

For further information please ask for Diane Rice, extension 4418.

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