



Walsall Council

Standards Committee

12 April 2010

Assessing the Impact of Standards Committees

Summary of Report

In October 2009, Professor Alan Lawton, University of Hull and Dr Michael Macaulay, Teesside University published their research paper that sought to summarise the impact of Standards Committees and provide examples of notable or best practice in their work.

This report looks at the main conclusions drawn from this research.

A copy of the full report is attached as Appendix 1.

Recommendations

- (1) That the content of the report be noted;

Resource Considerations:

Financial:

None arising from this report

Legal:

None arising from this report

Staffing:

None arising from this report

Citizen Impact:

None arising from this report

Community Safety:

None arising from this report

Environmental:

None arising from this report

Performance and Risk Management:

Risk:

None arising from this report

Performance Management:

None arising from this report

Equality Implications:

This report complies fully with the Council's policies on equality and diversity

Consultation:

None arising from this report

Background papers

All published

Signed:



Bhupinder Gill
**Assistant Director Legal &
Constitutional Services and Monitoring
Officer**

Date: 24 March 2010

Contact Officer

Jo Whitehouse
Member Services Officer

☎ 01922 652025

✉ whitehousejl@walsall.gov.uk

Signed:



Rory Borealis
Executive Director (Resources)

Date: 29 March 2010

The research paper “Assessing the Impact of Standards Committees” was published in October 2009 by Professor Alan Lawton (University of Hull) and Dr Michael Macaulay (Teesside University). The paper looked at Standards Committee's in nine council's focusing on the arrangements and practices adopted by them. Building on research that had been undertaken previously, “notable practice” was drawn from nine case studies.

In the context of this research the report authors defined “notable practice” to mean practice that both innovative and had a positive outcome on the corresponding local authority.

Researchers looked at nine examples of notable practice as detailed below:

Authority:	Notable practice:
Bristol City Council	Organisational learning
Taunton Deane Borough Council	Working with Town & Parish Councils
Surrey Police Authority	Member development
Newark & Sherwood District Council	Working with partnerships
South Cambridgeshire District Council	Recruitment and retention
Herefordshire County Council	Training and development
Runnymede Borough Council	Joint Standards & Audit Committees
Greater London Authority	High pressure investigations
Newcastle City Council	Embedding standards

Bristol City Council:

Their Standards Committee consists of five independent members and three councillors who are party whips and provide more gravitas to the Committee.

As the Council had received only two complaints in 2008/09 they decided to focus on organisational learning acting as a “hub” for other authorities/independent members in the southwest.

To imbed organisational learning, the Committee's independent members attended other meetings in the authority and had a standing item on their own agenda to feed back on the meetings they had attended.

The transfer of knowledge was attained through a range of different work undertaken by the Committee particularly in commenting on various protocols, changes to the Code and other aspects of council business.

Taunton Deane Borough Council

The Standards Committee at Taunton Deane Borough Council comprises of seven independent members, three elected members and three parish members.

Covering a total of 42 Parish Councils, the authority had not received a single complaint regarding parish councillors although there have been four complaints logged against

borough councillors. The authority believed this was due to the work of the Parish Liaison Officer who was not only available to advise on matters of standards and ethics but also acted as a channel between parishes and the Borough Council. The majority of queries received by the Officer concerned conflicts of interest and were usually planning related.

Another aspect of the Officers job involved training. Previously, the Council delivered training for Parish Councillors at Council Offices. Due to the lack of attendance this has been revised and training is now delivered in half hour sessions at Parish Council meetings.

Surrey Police Authority

Surrey Police Authority consists of 17 members with nine elected members and eight independent members. The Standards Committee has six members, three of which are from the Police Authority.

The role of this Committee is wider than that of a Standards Committee in local authority and includes:

- The *independent members* of the Standards Committee review the Scheme of Allowances for *authority members* and bring recommendations to the Authority for approval.
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With the Standards Committee being particularly involved in remuneration, it has sought to develop a performance based culture which is driven by personal development. The Standards Committee has helped develop the processes for appraisal, objective setting and review.

A four day workshop forms part of the induction of new members to the Authority and a total of 33 different training courses have been offered focusing not just on the Code of Conduct but in areas such as equality and diversity, scrutiny and performance, management training, corporate governance, data sharing and security, audit committee training, risk management, chairing and recruitment of senior officers and overview of the budget setting process.

In addition the Committee also oversaw the implementation of the authorities self assessment which was part preparations for inspections carried out by the Audit Commission.

Newark & Sherwood District Council

The Standards Committee for Newark & Sherwood District Council is made up of seven district councillors, four parish councillors and four independent members.

An issue for the Council was that if elected members on partnerships did not observe the highest standards of behaviour they faced damage to their reputation and were subject to sanctions through a regulatory framework but there was no effective sanction against other partnership members who did not observe ethical standards. It had been

suggested that the Assessment Sub Committee could deal with complaints involving members of private sector organisations and that a sponsoring organisation might be asked to change its representative in the event of unethical behaviour.

The Committee agreed that it was unfair if some members of a partnership were being scrutinised more closely than others and felt that adoption of “partnership values” could be a starting point. The Committee endorsed the development of a “Partnership Protocol” which reflects the ten general principles for holders of public office which underpins the local government members’ Code of Conduct.

South Cambridgeshire District Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council has had issues with the recruitment and retention of independent members to their Standard Committee which could be divided into two distinct categories; dealing with around 100 rural parishes and entrenched political divisions amongst members.

Under the stewardship of the independent chair, the Standards Committee created its own mission statement: “to support and enhance the democratic process in South Cambridgeshire by acting as the guardians of ethical conduct for the public we serve and elected members”.

The Committee undertook a series of operational procedures designed to enhance the local standards agenda and was engaged with Parish Councils through the creation of a parish toolkit which was sent to each Council in order for them to perform a self-administered health-check.

When the Committee decided it needed to expand the recruitment of non-elected members had often been identified as a problem. To overcome this, a recruitment kit was created comprising of an overview of the Standards Committee and a job description, a person specification, an application form (along with a description of the appointments process) and a copy of the Code of Conduct.

Vacancies were advertised widely, in local newspapers and to key organisations (including Parish Councils, the NECC and CBI) in addition to a number of websites. The result was a three-fold increase in applications compared to those received during previous recruitment.

Herefordshire Council

The Council was noted for its commitment to learning and its extensive use of joint working for training and development purposes which involved a number of other authorities.

One example witnessed by researchers was a joint training session on the requirements of new assessment panels and local hearings which was organised by Herefordshire Council and Worcestershire County Council. This was delivered to members of Standards Committees in each of those authorities in addition to Standards Committee members from Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Authority, totalling some 35 delegates. The training covered many key aspects of the new arrangements and was

enhanced by scenario work in which small groups from different authorities could work through fictionalised incidents.

Herefordshire Standards Committee also has links with the Local Councils Association to deliver partnered training with a joint briefing session arranged between the two organisations before Standards Committee meetings.

Runnymede Borough Council

Runnymede Borough Council was a fourth option Council that chose to have a joint Audit & Standards Committee.

The decision to create a joint authority was one that was very carefully considered. Although pressure fell onto the Monitoring Officer to create a workable arrangement, it was made clear that to be successful, it was crucial the roles and responsibilities of a Joint Committee were firmly drawn and explicitly communicated.

In addition to looking at reports from the Chief Audit Officer and carrying out its statutory functions as a Standards Committee, the Joint Committee annually review Runnymede's Constitution following an initial redrafting by the Monitoring Officer and also looks into staff grievances and appeals.

Greater London Authority

The notable issue for Greater London Authority was the high pressure investigation involving the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.

In this case a complaint arose following the arrest of Damian Green, Conservative spokesman on Immigration and was made by Greater London Authority's Labour Leader, Len Duvall who accused the Mayor of jeopardising the integrity of the Metropolitan Police.

The investigation that followed involved two authorities; Greater London Authority and Metropolitan Police Authority who agreed to produce a single report. An external investigator from a small law firm specialising in such investigations was appointed and took a total of six weeks to complete.

Both Standards Committees managed the timescale so that the investigation would be completed as quickly as possible and made sure that the findings were published openly. Throughout this process the Monitoring Officers were in constant touch to ensure consistency in terms of the documentation being produced and communications with all parties concerned.

Newcastle City Council

Newcastle City Council has been noted for embedding standards across the Council.

Their Standards Committee is made up of six elected members, four independent members and three parish members.

Standards have been part of Newcastle's agenda before the Local Government Act, 2000 introduced Standards Committees as a legal obligation to local authorities.

Originally introduced in 1999 as a joint Standards/Audit Committee, the Standards Committee was not designed to tackle any particular problem but rather to reinforce the already favourable public view of the Council. From its inception it has been chaired by an independent member and it had always maintained three independent members as part of its structure.

The chair has remained in post since the Committee was first established and he has managed to build up sustainable relationships with others with sustained support from senior officers, perhaps most notably the Chief Executive who had often presented specific reports from the Standards Committees to Senior Management Meetings. These factors contribute to a Standards Committee that is held in high regard within the authority.

The Committee has demonstrated a long term commitment through community engagement of leaders, officers and independent member's.

In conclusion, the authors drew out five general considerations for the future of Standards Committees which included:

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

Finally the report authors made the important point that Standards Committees didn't have to "reinvent the wheel" whenever they wish to develop a new protocol or engage in new activities. They believe the willingness to learn is a sign of a healthy organisation and on that basis they have found many Committees to be in a robust condition.