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This is the second newsletter of what has been a very interesting and active year. In our last bulletin we reported the findings of the Tenth Inquiry of the Committee on Standards in Public Life which, amongst other areas, looked at the work of The Standards Board for England and the statutory framework which had set us up. Since that bulletin a select committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has also published a report into the role and effectiveness of The Standards Board for England. Further details of their report are contained in a story below but we are particularly encouraged by their support for the role of the Board in overseeing a national framework within which parish councils, as a vital element of local democracy, should continue to be regulated. Nevertheless, we are aware that work still needs to be done in establishing the Code as a positive influence on parish democracy and not as a regulatory tool to be used to settle minor disputes and vendettas.

That is why the second major piece of work we report on in this issue is so important. We have just finished consulting on possible amendments to the Code of Conduct and have received some very helpful feedback from the town and parish sector — further details below.

MPs back Board progress

A select committee of MPs has praised The Standards Board for England's progress in speeding up investigations and endorsed our position as the central filter for complaints, but said that we need to do more to communicate with parish and town councils. The Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was reporting on its recent investigation into the role and effectiveness of The Standards Board for England, looking at all aspects of the Board's work and also our future role within the ethical framework. Evidence was taken from across all sections of the local government community.

The committee congratulated the Board on its progress in reducing the length of time of the average investigation, and put past delays down to the absence of regulations enabling the Board to pass cases back for local investigations. Recognising that we have often been criticised for these delays, the committee remarked that it was unreasonable to have expected us to function well within an incomplete statutory framework and without the necessary resources and powers. Now that the legislation is fully in place, we expect to see the improvements we have already made continue throughout the coming year, helping us to reach our target of completing 90% of investigations within six months.

The committee also endorsed the current system of handling complaints, with The Standards Board for England as a central filter. According to the report, "central initial assessment of complaints by experienced officers applying a consistent set of criteria is one of its unique strengths". The committee stated that it does not believe a local filtering system would enhance consistency in the process or increase efficiency.

Improved communications

We know that we have to be more effective at communicating with parishes, and the committee made a specific recommendation that we concentrate further resources on reaching out to parish councils and providing more help and guidance on the Code of Conduct. More active engagement with the parish sector may also help reduce the volume of allegations coming from parishes, and help eliminate trivial and vexatious complaints.

Communicating with the parish sector presents a particular challenge, both because of the number of councils and because town and parish councils are often the least well-equipped to receive information from us. The committee took on board the measures we have already taken to improve communications, such as this newsletter, and urged us to concentrate further resources in this area.

Complaints procedure

The committee made other recommendations too, including the suggestion that we tell members named in a complaint and their monitoring officers about a complaint as soon as it is received, rather than waiting until the complaint has been assessed.

However, the committee does not support the public naming of complainants, believing that it might deter people from reporting legitimate concerns. It noted our duty to protect whistleblowers and argued that it might be compromised by a policy of publicly naming complainants.

We are considering the full implications of the report, as is the Government. We will bring you details of any Government response in future editions of the *Town and Parish Standard*.

Meet the team

Members attending the National Association of Local Councils' conference this year are invited to come and meet some of our key officers and Board members at The Standards Board for England stand in the main foyer.

We will be manning the stand for the full run of the conference, from the 23–25 September 2005. It's the perfect opportunity to network with colleagues, share best practice and tell us what you think. We get very few opportunities to address so many members of our largest stakeholder group, so we hope you find time to drop by.

Standards Board heads bid to support parish development

Parish councils could get help putting systems in place to prevent misconduct if a bid for £100,000 from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's capacity building fund is successful.

The Standards Board for England, the National Association of Local Councils and the Society of Local Council Clerks are bidding for between £50-100,000 from the fund — an initiative established in 2003 to support improvement in local government.

The programme aims to enhance and develop councils' confidence, leadership and skills to drive forward improvement as well as developing their capacity to learn, innovate and share knowledge and expertise about what works and how.

Focus on local councils

Principal local authorities already have access to funding streams aimed at capacity building and leadership development, as well as peer support and inspection, but little of this support is replicated at the parish level.

We have come across a number of cases in the parish sector which show there are deficiencies in the way certain parishes are run, meaning they are unable to provide the leadership their constituents deserve.

Pilot projects in the pipeline

We are considering a range of pilot projects, including:

- developing peer and mentoring support from within the sector;
- developing a diagnostic toolkit, based on the toolkit used for principal authorities, to help parishes take a snapshot of their performance arrangements;
- developing a training pack to make sure councillors are all at a similar standard with regard to standards and conduct issues;
- piloting hub-and-spoke model working, whereby some larger parish and town councils play a role in developing and supporting other councils in their area;
- the development of compacts between county associations and the standards committees of principal local authorities to help them work together to support parish and town councils.

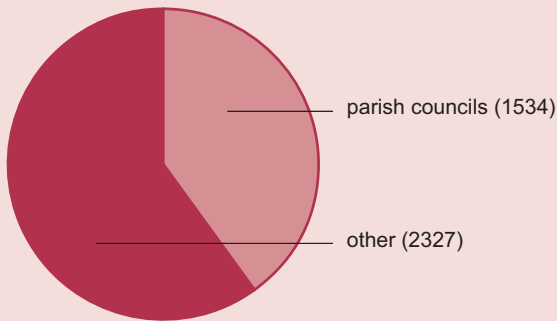
The bid will be submitted later in the year and we will keep you informed about progress.

Parish and town council referral and investigation statistics

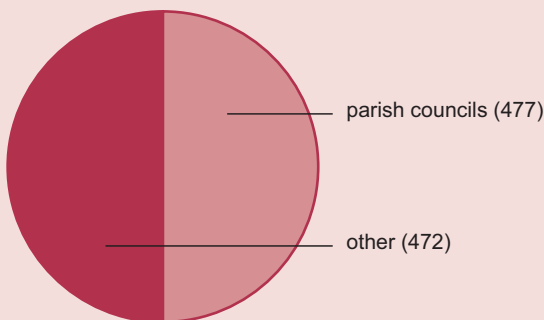
The following charts compare the parish experience with that of local government as a whole. Charts are for the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005.

Key parish councils other

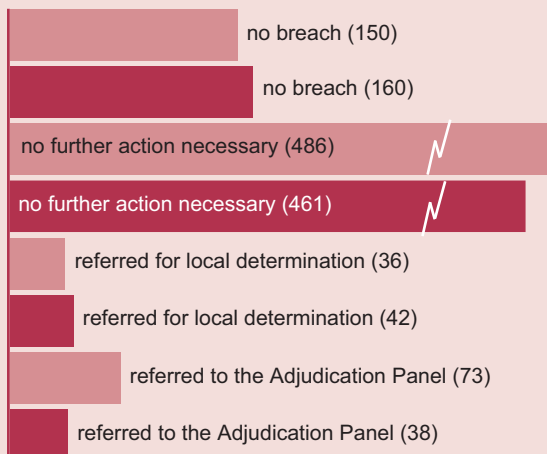
Number of allegations received (total: 3861)



Number of allegations referred for investigation (total: 949)



Ethical standards officers' final findings



Directions can tackle problems at the root

A parish council with evidence of longstanding personal conflict and communication problems is to get mediation and training support from its principal authority as a result of directions issued by The Standards Board for England.

This is the first time The Standards Board has issued a direction, using powers which came into force as part of the local government and governance (miscellaneous provisions) regulations. The regulations enable ethical standards officers to direct monitoring officers to take action other than investigation to resolve local problems, such as reviewing procedures to make them more robust or, as in this case, getting councillors to sit down and work out their problems together.

Some allegations reveal longstanding problems or more deeply ingrained issues within an authority which investigations alone are not able to address. The directions power is an important tool because it allows the Board to tackle these problems at the root and make a lasting difference to the way an authority is run.

In this instance, 76 allegations had been received about council members since April 2002, suggesting a history of conflict and communication problems. A number of these allegations were investigated, but it became apparent that the investigations were unable to resolve the underlying problems. Therefore, due to the overriding need to improve the functioning of the council, both in the public interest and in the interest of members themselves, the direction was issued.

The monitoring officer was directed to arrange mediation between the members and organise training and guidance on conflict resolution and parish council procedure. The monitoring officer has to report back to The Standards Board for England within three months, setting out progress on both aspects of the direction. The ethical standards officer may then decide to issue a statement on the matter in a local newspaper.

Standards Board plots a new course up north

The Standards Board for England has begun plans to relocate its offices to Manchester.

We were just one of the public sector organisations identified for relocation by Sir Michael Lyons in an independent review into the distribution of government offices. The review was in response to the Government's stated commitment to move as many central government posts as possible into the regions to encourage economic regeneration.

The Board selected the city of Manchester after careful consideration of several possible locations. As well as the cost savings involved, Manchester offers a range of benefits, including good transport links and close proximity to many of the authorities we regulate.

We hope to establish the new office later this year and will begin moving staff straight away. The move will be conducted in several phases over a period of some 18 months to minimise the impact of relocation on our performance. We should be fully in place by early 2007.

We believe that we have made good progress over the past year in speeding up investigations, handling new complaints and filtering out tit-for-tat and other inappropriate complaints. Our priority during the relocation period is to continue improving, ensuring that any disruption the relocation causes has no impact on our stakeholders and especially those people involved in investigations.

Code consultation update

Our consultation on possible revisions to the Code of Conduct formally closed last month. At the time of going to press we had received over 600 responses so far, with a large proportion of responses from the parish sector. We have been very pleased with the warm welcome the review has received.

We believe it is important that any revisions to the Code reflect people's real experiences so far and the constructive comments we have received will help us make recommendations to Government for change which reflect the views of local government as a whole.

Whilst the consultation on the Code formally closed on 17 June, we would still be interested in considering any last-minute submissions. Please visit www.standardsboard.co.uk/codereview/ for further details.

Early findings

Responses received so far indicate a general agreement with the principles behind many areas of the Code of Conduct, but highlight a number of provisions which respondents suggest could be added, amended or dropped altogether. The vast majority of respondents, for example, believe the ten general principles of public life should be added as a preamble to the Code. A majority of respondents would also welcome a specific provision on bullying.

The contentious question of whether or not aspects of a member's private life should continue to be subject to the Code of Conduct has attracted a

varied response. Those in favour of the status quo generally argue that those in public life have a position of trust and responsibility that should be met with high standards of behaviour at all times. Those in favour of relaxing the provisions covering a member's private behaviour generally comment that private lives should not be brought into the political arena. A number of respondents have observed that private conduct should not be regulated unless it has an impact on a member's ability to perform their official duties.

A majority of respondents are so far in favour of retaining the requirement for members to report suspected breaches of the Code of Conduct by fellow members. But a significant minority believe that the provision prompts petty and malicious complaints. A number of respondents commented on how the requirement to report fellow members to The Standards Board for England can cause ill feeling, especially in small communities.

Not surprisingly, the issue of declaring interests has prompted a lot of comment. The majority of respondents so far believe that the personal interest test should be narrowed, so that members do not need to declare interests shared by a substantial number of other inhabitants in an authority's area. A majority of respondents so far also thought that less stringent rules should apply to prejudicial interests which arise through public service and membership of charities and lobby groups.

We are currently analysing all the responses and hope to make recommendations to Government in the early autumn. We will provide a final report on the consultation in our next issue.

Your feedback

We welcome ideas and suggestions for future newsletters, and questions or feedback on this edition. Please send comments to Michael Toft, policy advisor:

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- by post, to:
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You can get more information on The Standards Board for England and the Code of Conduct, including our recently-updated FAQs, from our website at:

www.standardsboard.co.uk