



DERBY CITY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE 22 January 2007

Report of Philip Sunderland, Independent Member

Independent Members Association

RECOMMENDATION

1. To note the Report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 2.1 As Committee members may be aware it has been proposed to set up a national association of independent members on Standards Committees. The proposed name is "The Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England" (AIMSce). The association is to be financed by a combination of member's subscriptions and grants (they are currently negotiating for a start up grant from the DCLG).
- 2.2 A meeting was held at the Standards Assembly in Birmingham to 'launch' the organisation. The meeting was concerned with the format of the Association and there was a detailed discussion on the constitution, a copy of which had been circulated to members present.
- 2.3 Subsequently on 22 November 2006 a meeting was held at County Hall of the Derbyshire Independent members. It was an informal meeting at which there were 9 Independent members present, from 9 different committees (some members are on more than 1 Standard Committee) across the County area.
- 2.4 The initial discussion was on the "launch meeting". It was felt by those who had attended that the Assembly meeting that it had been badly handled and left more questions unanswered than answered.
- 2.5 The Derbyshire meeting felt that as Independent Members we were looking for liaison but not necessarily a 'collective' body as we are independent and should continue to be seen as such. A "looser structure" based on regions/counties sending representatives to a forum was more to our liking. Those present were not convinced that another representative body was required. Questions were asked about its 'real' aims. The constitution and the 'flyer' advertising the Birmingham meeting implied a much wider role than many were comfortable with. The question was also asked about finance and the different grades of membership proposed in the constitution. Was the desire to create AIMSce driven by a few or was it really representative?

- 2.6 The Derbyshire meeting felt that we wanted a body to share information and 'best practice'. This was not necessarily always universally available from individual local authorities. It was considered, by those present, important to stress that we were not a 'group', we are independent members and that status should not be compromised. The general view was that the meeting in Birmingham had been an opportunity lost; the conduct of the meeting had been ill-conceived and was awful. Michael Blake (the county convenor of the Meeting) agreed to make our view known to AIMScE.
- 2.7 Raising the 'profile. A discussion took place about the need to raise our profile both within Councils and with the wider public. Some present felt that the public were unaware of our existence or the role we were expected to play. The question was asked, "How do we let the public know?"
- 2.8 There was a discussion on whether as independent members we should be attending local forums? Should we be included on the Authority's web-site? Should there be press coverage of our activities? It was felt that there was an opportunity for some basic information disseminating which could be done, but was not in all cases
- 2.9 It was considered that the initiative lay with the independent members to get the message out. Other matters discussed were:
- With the intention that there should be more local investigations it would be an opportunity to raise our profile. Should we be using the regional press more?
 - Many questions were raised within the overall framework of 'raising our profile'. Were we getting adequate training? Should we give publicity to our training? Should we have access to Committee meetings to make our presence more high profile?
 - We were reminded that the overall objective of having independent members and standards committees was to "restore public confidence in local government". While we remain a 'hidden' resource it was felt that we are in danger of missing an opportunity
 - Do Standards Committees get told about complaints that are not worthy of investigation? Do Standards Committees get mentioned in Council Annual Reports?
 - One consideration which varied across the County (and the country) is whether the Chair of Standards should be a 'political' appointment?
 - Are Standards Committees a remedy for improper conduct or should they be more pro-active and be preventative?
- 2.10 It was agreed that everyone would go back to their authority and seek to create a debate about raising the profile of the Standards Committees.

- 2.11 Whilst this is a laudable aim it is very apparent from the discussions held that the Derby City Council position is in a different to many others within the County area (and more widely). There are already a variety of additional task taken on by some committees whereas others do relatively little in addition to the “standard” functions. The City Council have an Independent chair of the Committee. In addition to the prescribed functions, the Committee determines final stage complaints under the Corporate Complaints Procedure and the Independent Members also serve on panels reviewing Social Services Complaints.
- 2.12 There may well be some scope for widening the remit of our committee (such as linking with the Audit Committee as happens at one Council in Derbyshire) and/or working with other committees. This would ensure the full governance procedures are in place without the need for additional administrative procedures being required.

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Background papers: None
List of appendices:

Appendix 1

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. None.

Legal

2. None.

Personnel

3. None.

Equalities impact

4. None.

Corporate Values

5. The effective working of the Standards Committee contributes to the Council's Value: “We will be open, transparent and honest in everything we do”