

Committee: STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Agenda Item

Date: November 12 2007

6

**Title: ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS
OF STANDARDS COMMITTEES IN ENGLAND**

Author: Sean Brady Standards Committee Chairman Item for decision

Summary

1. At the meeting on 12 September 2007 Members deferred consideration of a report of the Assistant Chief Executive on the Association of Independent Members of Standards Committees in England (AIMSce) and requested that I obtain further information regarding the organisation at the Annual Assembly of Standards Committees. This report is to inform Members of my findings.

Recommendations

2. Members determine whether or not it would be appropriate to have representation on AIMSce and if so nominate members for that purpose.

Background Papers

3. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author.
 - Website www.aimsce.org.uk

Impact

- 4.

Communication/Consultation	None
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Finance	There is currently no budget for the Standards Committee and hence no budget for membership. However, the fees are very modest and should members determine that representation is appropriate it is unlikely that those costs would prove a barrier. The costs of meetings and travelling however may be an

	issue in the current financial climate.
Human Rights	None
Legal implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	None

Situation

5. I attended the Fringe Event organised by the AIMSce which was led by Bruce Claxton (Chairman, Treasurer & Website Manager) and Peter Rowland (Vice-Chairman).
6. Mr Claxton apologised for not arranging the AGM (scheduled for June 2007) but explained that it was difficult to find a venue in central London. He promised to hold the event before Christmas and would announce details on the website at www.aimsce.org.uk (nothing had appeared at the time of writing this report).
7. It may be helpful if I insert an extract from Mr Claxton's inaugural address given at a meeting during the Standards Assembly of 2006.

"So Why do we need the Association?"

To provide a collective voice in government and other consultative processes. To provide the same level of inputs to the local government ethical cultures as those of other stakeholders. To have the role of Independents recognised as an equal alongside elected members, chief executives, monitoring officers and representatives from the Towns and Parishes. To provide a fertile platform to develop ideas not necessarily coming from other stakeholders. To recruit members from geographical areas still showing reluctance to form forums. To be representative of our members' views. To be responsive to our members' 'professional' needs."

8. The 2007 meeting discussed the difficulties in obtaining and retaining suitable Independent Members and Mr Claxton suggested that perhaps the aspect of allowances/remuneration was a factor. On a show of hands about 90% of those present indicated that they received some (unspecified) payment.
9. Herefordshire Council (www.herefordshire.gov.uk) was stated as a good example of a public reporting arrangement which, it was implied, demonstrated the effectiveness of Independent Members (IMs) in promoting good practice within the Authority.

10. There was considerable but inconclusive discussion about the terms “Standards” and “Independent Members”. The description Independent Representatives was suggested but met with little enthusiasm.
11. Name badges and visits to Council and Parish meetings were supported as was the concept that Independent Members/Representatives should be used to promote prevention of a breach of the Code of Conduct in preference to only being seen when there was a Hearing. A broader look at the statutory obligations and developing the role of IMs might help with recruitment and retention. IMs could also be involved in staff relationship arrangements – although this aspect was not expanded or explained.
12. Not everyone at the meeting supported AIMSce and there were some terse comments about its usefulness. It presently estimates that about 10% of IMs are members and is conducting a survey to find out how many IMs there are and to obtain more members.
13. I spoke afterwards to Peter Rowlands and he said that AIMSce was a self-help group for IMs. It enabled them to share experiences; obtain a fair deal for IMs in different Authorities; help new IMs and assist with recruitment and retention. The Association has never presumed to speak for IMs and has no thought of becoming a national body but rather a loose association of people. By becoming better able to perform as an IM, the individual will help to maintain and improve the healthy ethics and standards of councillors etc. and hence the overall audit of the council. The main benefit of membership is that by sharing experiences and thoughts, all IMs will become better able to do their job.
14. The annual subscription is £10 with a joining fee of £15.
15. Despite Peter Rowland’s statements, the first Object of AIMSce is
“To be a professional organisation for Independent Members of Standards Committees; to provide support for them and champion their interests and to empower them in their role and function.”
16. Organisationally there is some disarray in that an AGM must be held within 15 months of the inauguration date of 16 October 2006 and 14 clear days must be given by the Secretary. However, the Secretary’s position is vacant and all attempts to hold the AGM have so far failed.
17. IM Networks and Forums also exist with aims very similar to those stated by Peter Rowlands but much less ambitious objectives than those of AIMSce. These usually comprise the IMs from a number of adjacent authorities and informal meetings are held once or twice a year. Of course, these gatherings will have much less influence, if any, than AIMSce.
18. The cost per member is negligible but the cost of meetings (and travel?) is expected to be met by the Authorities in rotation.
19. The website is at www.aimsce.org.uk where further information is available.