

We received further evidence of our continuing improvement in performance last month when the Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published its report into our role and effectiveness. The findings back up what we already thought: that a central regulator of standards in local government is needed, that our work is proving to be increasingly effective, and we are becoming a more efficient organisation.

You are telling us the same thing in feedback, at meetings and presentations, and at our continuing programme of roadshows up and down the country. We are delivering on our promises to speed up our casework, provide more support and guidance, and work towards a more local focus in our work. Many of these themes are picked up in the review of the Code of Conduct, and the responses received so far suggest we are on the right tracks with that too.

There is still room for improvement but now we are heading in the right direction. And with the election behind us, I am looking forward to building relationships with the new government to continue our excellent work.

David Prince, chief executive

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. 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 our future role within the ethical framework. Evidence was taken from all sections of the local government community.

Improving performance

The committee congratulated the Board on its progress reducing the length of time of the average investigation, and put past delays down to the absence of regulations enabling 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 continue throughout the 2005–06 financial year, helping us to reach our target of completing 90% of investigations within six months.

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Select committee findings on Standards Board role.

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Support for central filter

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.

The committee recommended 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. But the committee does not support a policy of publicly naming 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 revealing complainants.

The report made several other recommendations too, on issues such as training and guidance, and commented on some of the key issues under consideration in the ongoing review of the Code of Conduct. We are considering the full implications of the report and will bring you details of any response made in future editions of the *Bulletin*. In the meantime, you can view the full report at:

www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cm04pm.htm

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.

Manchester was selected by the Board after careful consideration of several possible locations. As well as the cost savings that will arise from moving out of central London, Manchester offers many benefits to the Board, providing good transport links and putting a large number of the authorities we regulate in close proximity. This should help us continue to strengthen the local government experience of our staff through future recruitment, in line with one of the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

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 18 months or more 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 gathers pace

Over 200 people have already responded to our consultation on the review of the Code of Conduct. Those who haven't still have just over a month to get their comments to us.

Both the current level of response and interest shown in the review are very encouraging. We have sent out nearly 2,000 consultation papers — much more than expected — and the short leaflet summarising the key points has proved so popular that we have had to reprint it.

The comments received so far suggest that we have gauged the important issues well but we expect many more responses and won't be able to draw any final conclusions until consultation closes on 17 June.

There is still time for you to have your say on the future of the Code if you haven't already done so. There are several ways for you to respond:

- online, via a web form, at:
www.standardsboard.co.uk/codereview/
- by e-mail, with the subject 'Code consultation', to:
enquiries@standardsboard.co.uk
- by post, to Emma Ramano at:
The Standards Board for England
First floor, Cottons Centre
Cottons Lane
London SE1 2QG

If you require a copy of the consultation paper, call 020 7378 5110 or go to:

www.standardsboard.co.uk/codereview/

High Court considers prejudicial interest test

Ignorance is not bliss, according to the High Court, which last month confirmed that councillors who don't believe they have an interest in a matter may still be subject to the rules of the Code of Conduct.

The court considered an appeal by Councillor Scrivens of Farnham Town Council and Waverley Borough Council against The Adjudication Panel for England. The Adjudication Panel found that Councillor Scrivens had breached the Code of Conduct when he failed to withdraw from a meeting in which he had a prejudicial interest. The appeal focused on the correct test The Adjudication Panel should apply in relation to personal and prejudicial interests.

Councillor Scrivens argued that the prejudicial interest test is a subjective one and the decision is therefore based on what a councillor believes to be correct. He argued that this position had been established by Court of Appeal in the earlier Richardson case.

The High Court disagreed. Mr Justice Burnton found that the test was clearly intended to be objective and that the Richardson case had not made any judgement on the issue either way. It is therefore no defence to claim ignorance of an interest, regardless of how honest a mistake it may be.

Leadership chair will give conference something to digest

Kate Priestley, chair of the Local Government Leadership Centre, will give the after dinner speech at the Fourth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees in Birmingham this September. The Local Government Leadership Centre works with local authorities in England to develop the quality of leadership among their political leaders and officers.

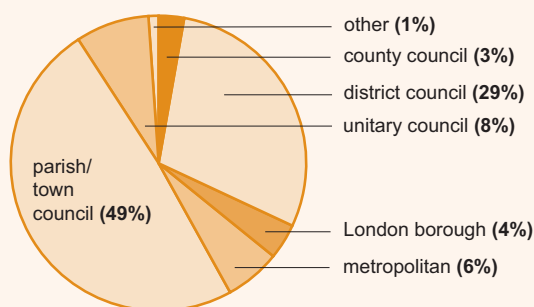
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Referral statistics

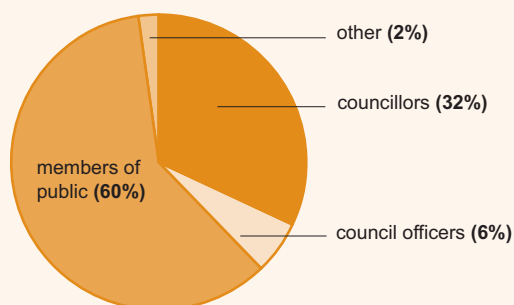
The Standards Board for England received 726 allegations in February and March 2005, bringing the total number of allegations for the 2004–05 financial year to 3752.

The following charts show The standards Board for England's referral statistics for that period.

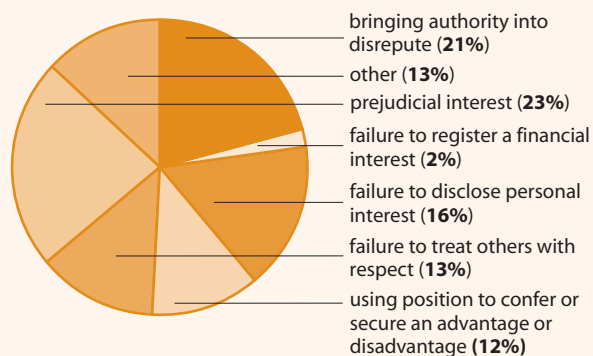
Authority of subject member in allegations referred for investigation



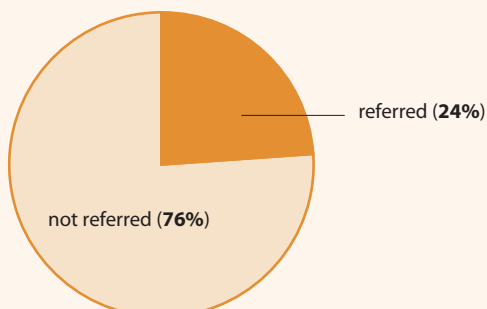
Source of allegations received



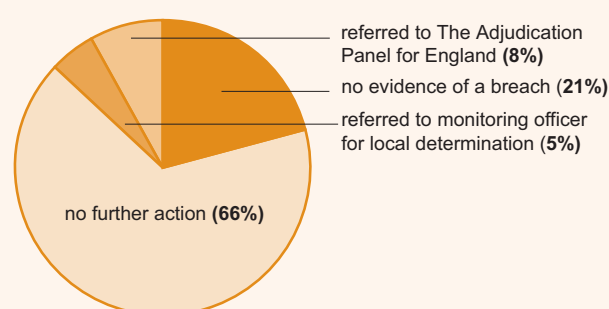
Nature of allegations referred for investigation



Allegations referred for investigation



Final findings



Kate's career spans the civil service, local government and healthcare. She has a reputation for making informed, tough decisions while bringing out the best in her teams, so will make an excellent end to the first day of the conference. She joins other confirmed speakers including:

- Gifty Edila, president of the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors;
- Oonagh Aitken, acting director of strategy information & development at the Improvement and Development Agency;
- Sheila Healy, regional director of local government practice at the Government Office of the West Midlands;
- Alison Kelly, senior performance specialist at the Audit Commission.

The theme of this year's conference is *In your hands* and will focus on local investigations, local hearings and the role of standards committees building the local ethical agenda. Over 440 bookings have been made already and it seems likely that the event will sell out. Anyone who has not yet booked is advised to do so as soon as possible.

For more information on the Annual Assembly, including an advance programme, booking instructions, and a link to the online booking form, go to:

www.standardsboard.co.uk/annualassembly/

Plans for training in DVD format

Does your authority have access to a DVD player? If so, we want to hear from you.

We are developing a training film for monitoring officers and members of standards committees on local

investigations, hearings, and the importance of public confidence in local democracy. In the past, our films have been produced on video cassette, but we think this technology is falling out of date. We would like the new film to be on DVD. This format is more convenient to distribute and store, and would enable a more interactive approach to the training. What do you think? Does your authority have a DVD player? Or should we just stick to video?

Please send any thoughts you might have on the subject to Rebecca Jones at:

rebecca.jones@standardsboard.co.uk

Back on the road

The Standards Board for England's programme of roadshows kicks off again this month, with events in Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, Birmingham, Plymouth, Bristol and London. Dates are listed below. The events update attendees on the latest news from the Board, progress made on promises given at last year's conference, and seek views on the review of the Code of Conduct.

For more details, contact our event partners Benedict Business Resources on 01483 205432.

Roadshow schedule

- Manchester, 24 May 2005 — the Thistle
- Newcastle, 26 May 2005 — the Marriott, Metrocentre
- Norwich, 7 June 2005 — the Marriott Sprowston Manor Hotel & Country Club
- Birmingham, 9 June 2005 — the Hyatt
- Bristol, 14 June 2005 — the Novotel
- Plymouth, 16 June 2005 — the Copthorne Hotel
- London, 21 June 2005 — the Barbican