

**BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**FROM: MONITORING OFFICER**

**REPORT NUMBER    **G 62****

**TO: STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**DATE OF MEETING: 27 July 2007**

**JOINT WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR STANDARDS COMMITTEES – STANDARDS BOARD CONSULTATION**

**1.    PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.1 This report summarises the discussions at a meeting of Monitoring Officers, the Suffolk Association of Local Councils and a representative of the Standards Board for England held on 18 June 2007 and seeks the Committee's views on the potential for implementing a joint working pilot for Standards matters.

**2.    RECOMMENDATION**

2.1 That the Committee indicate its views on the possibility of participating in joint working arrangements for Standards matters and the Monitoring Officer be authorised to respond accordingly to the consultation by the Standards Board for England.

The Committee is able to resolve this matter

**3.    FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

3.1 There are no identifiable financial implications in this report.

**4.    RISK MANAGEMENT**

<b>Risk Description</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Seriousness or Impact</b>	<b>Mitigation Measures</b>
The Council fails to prepare adequately to cope with the additional demands of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill	Low	Critical	The Council continues to explore measures, with the Monitoring Officer assuming a lead role, to ensure the delivery of the Council's responsibilities

**5.    KEY INFORMATION**

5.1 At the meeting on 20 April 2007, the Committee agreed, in principle, to support and participate in a pilot project involving the joint working of Standards Committees. A meeting of the Monitoring Officers of the Suffolk authorities with the Suffolk Association of Local Authorities took place on 18 June 2007 at which the Standards Board for England was also represented and further information was provided on joint working.

- 5.2 The Standards Board is encouraging consideration of joint arrangements and Suffolk is one of five areas considering a joint working pilot. Responses to its consultation on setting up such a pilot are required by 17 August with a view to an official launch in the autumn. A further meeting of the Suffolk monitoring officers is scheduled for 6 August at which time it is hoped that it will be possible to agree a joint response.
- 5.3 The Standards Board envisages that joint working arrangements could –
- Address the issue of Members being “conflicted out” of hearings by virtue of having previously been involved in a case at either the initial referral or review stage
  - Provide a countywide pool of experienced Members
  - Assist with the recruitment of independent Members
  - Provide improved officer support arrangements
  - Remove the politics from major localised complaints
- 5.4 There are different models that can be considered for a pilot scheme. These are –
- The abolition of individual District Council Standards Committees and their amalgamation into a countywide joint committee exercising all the powers of the participating Councils. The Chairmanship of the countywide Committee could be rotated annually between each participating authority, or
  - Separate, local Standards Committees would be retained but joint committees would be established between partner Councils to carry out specific functions.
- 5.5 Within these alternatives, there are variations that would be possible in relation to the detailed working arrangements. In the first model, for example, a joint Standards Committee could establish a standing Referrals Subcommittee and a standing Referrals Review Subcommittee, or it could establish more than two standing subcommittees each with the power to undertake referrals, reviews and determinations. A further option would be to have no standing subcommittees but for a subcommittee to be called on an *ad hoc* basis. It is also possible for subcommittees to be established for each participating authority’s area comprising Members from the relevant constituent authority only. However, the Standards Board believes that Members facing complaint would prefer to have their cases considered by Members from outside their own authority and it was likely therefore that a tension would exist between the feelings of the individual Member complained of and individual Members of Standards Committees who had an interest in the happenings and the standards of conduct in their own areas.
- 5.6 Consideration also needs to be given to how such arrangements might be supported at officer level. It was noted at the meeting of monitoring officers that, in one county, it had been suggested that each Monitoring Officer take a lead on a particular aspect such as training, the filtering of complaints or undertaking investigations. The Standards Board report, however, mentions the possibility of a system for joint working under which support would be given by the Monitoring Officer of the lead authority and that the lead role would rotate annually. There was little enthusiasm expressed at the meeting that this was a practicable solution for Suffolk authorities.
- 5.7 The local situation in Suffolk is that the County Council’s Standards Committee has little or no casework. It is therefore a potential resource for undertaking the first sieve of referrals under joint committee arrangements. Such a limited role for the County Council’s Standards Committee would not entail significant additional costs.

5.8 It is fair to say that there was little other agreement at the meeting over the proposals on account of the cost of running the comprehensive joint arrangements of the kind envisaged by the Standards Board. There was a concern that the additional tier represented by the establishment of a joint countywide committee would inevitably lead to an increase in costs relating to the servicing of such a body. However, the amount of additional bureaucracy is debatable since a full joint standards committee would probably find it unnecessary to meet in plenary session on more than one or two occasions in any year and the purpose of those meetings would be to appoint subcommittees and/or agree training programmes. The alternative to the establishment of the joint, countywide committee may be to establish smaller joint reciprocal arrangements with two or three partner authorities that may or may not include Suffolk County Council.

6. **BACKGROUND PAPERS REFERRED TO:**

Notes of Meeting of Monitoring Officers with SALC, 18 June 2007;  
Joint Working Pilot: Report to monitoring officers of participating authorities

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