

Dear Mr Tandoh,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above consultation. Comments have been made in response to the specific questions raised in the consultation paper.

Q1. We are fully in agreement that a member who has been involved in a decision on the initial assessment should be prohibited from reviewing any subsequent request to review the decision to take no action. We feel that there should always be a separation of these roles. Although our Standards Committee is set up for each stage of the process to be dealt with by different individuals, we acknowledge the flexibility that would allow members involved in the initial assessment or any subsequent review to be involved in any hearing. A requirement to perform the functions of initial assessment, review and hearing by sub committee is certainly workable and is something that we intend to develop however, we are not sure that this would suit everyone and therefore feel it should be left to local choice, rather than be imposed as a requirement.

Q2 As we understand it, the current situation does not allow one Standards Committee to deal with allegations relating to a member of another Authority. There is a possible basic unfairness about this, as a member who is "twin hatted" may be the subject of an identical complaint just because they are a member of more than one Authority. As things stand, our Standards Committee would want to deal with any allegation made to it itself.

Q3 Yes, quite happy that the timescale for making initial decisions should be a matter for guidance by the Standards Board.

Q4 Unless there are exceptional circumstances, on which guidance should be given, we feel that a summary of the allegation should always be supplied to the subject of the allegation.

Q 5 We agree that there should be some circumstances where a Monitoring Officer can refer a case back to the Standards Board. However, these circumstances should be clearly defined and applied consistently.

Q6 We agree that the maximum sanction a Standards Committee could impose should increase to six months suspension or partial suspension.

Q7 Our view is that the chairs of all sub committees dealing with initial assessment, review and hearings should be independent.

Q8 Again, we agree that the initial assessment and any review of the Committees decision should be exempt from the Access to Information rules.

Q9 We have nothing to add to the suggested criteria to be used when making decisions to suspend the Standards Committee's powers

Q10 The introduction of a charging regime to cover costs would be effective. It would also discourage repetitious, improper or capricious allegations. We agree that, in the interests of consistency, the level of fees should be prescribed by the Secretary of State.

Q11 We are always happy to undertake joint working and training but would not be interested in pursuing any kind of joint arrangements with other authorities. This is a matter we have considered carefully and we are confident that the best people to deal with local allegations is the local Standards Committee. The make up of our own Standards Committee is such that we would be able to deal effectively and efficiently with all allegations without having to resort to any kind of joint committee.

Q12 We are content that the range of sanctions available to case tribunals of the Adjudication Panel should be expanded in accordance with the proposals set out in the consultation paper.

Q13 We do not necessarily support the proposal for an ethical standards officer to be able to withdraw references to the Adjudication Panel. Any such references would have been made after only the most exhaustive investigation and would not be made lightly.

Q14 Taunton Deane have not made any decision under the existing dispensation regulations. The proposals in the consultation paper to amend the regulations are supported.

Q15 We feel it would be unnecessary to make regulations as suggested in the consultation paper

Q16 We certainly feel that the reformed conduct regime should be in place as soon as possible. However, we also feel that the necessary guidance which has been promised should be available to Standards Committee in plenty of time before the introduction of the new regime to allow Standards Committee's time to prepare fully. If this means that the introduction of the new proposals should be delayed slightly then we would have no objection. We want to be as well prepared as possible.