

Item 6

REPORT TO STANDARDS COMMITTEE

7TH FEBRUARY 2008

REPORT OF SOLICITOR TO THE COUNCIL AND MONITORING OFFICER

NATIONAL AUDIT COMMISSION SURVEY – WHAT’S THE SCORE?

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report outlines the findings of a national self-assessment survey carried out by the Audit Commission. It was created by the Audit Commission in conjunction with the Standards Board for England and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), and is one element of a four-part Ethical Governance Diagnostic toolkit

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Standards Committee considers the Report and notes the findings.

3. DETAIL

3.1 Up to July 2007, 3,998 individual Council members and senior officers from 44 Councils across the country had completed the self-assessment survey. In all, over 170 Councils had used at least one part of the toolkit.

3.2 The survey aimed to:

- help Councils assess and then drive up their ethical governance arrangements and procedures.
- help Councils better understand the key ethical governance issues they are now facing.
- highlight areas to focus on in future.

3.3 *Key findings:*

- most Councils actively encouraged high standards.
- Members generally demonstrated high standards of behaviour.
- Leaders and Chief Executives were proving themselves positive role models in many Councils.
- Roles, responsibilities, relationships and ethical frameworks were not always clearly understood.

- Standards Committees made a difference but they didn't always explain widely what they did, the issues they were addressing and the progress they were making.
- Members and officers often held divergent views on ethical governance issues.
- Communication, training, guidance and information were critical areas and often needed more of a focus.

Findings Overview

3.4 *High standards and good behaviour* - the survey findings showed there was a firm foundation on which to build, although there was clearly room for improvement:

- Most members and officers (84% and 76% respectively) said their Council's efforts to drive up ethical standards was encouraging appropriate behaviour.
- Around nine in ten members reported that members "always or usually":
 - showed respect to and treat fairly all people who used Council services (90%)
 - showed respect to and treat all officers fairly and did not discriminate unlawfully (89%)
 - used public funds, Council property and facilities responsibly (90%)
- Around eight in ten members and seven in ten officers considered the Leader of the Council a positive role model for ethical behaviour (78% and 73% respectively). Similar proportions said the same of their Chief Executive.

3.5 *Roles, responsibilities and relationships* - the survey highlighted the need for greater communication about the ethical framework and a wider understanding of roles, which would strengthen working relationships between officers and members:

- 92% of members believed they understood their role and responsibilities under the ethical framework, compared to 72% of officers.
- One in five officers (21%) thought the guidelines members had on their personal conduct were unclear, whereas most members (91%) were positive about the guidance they received.
- 96% of members were aware of the Members' Code of Conduct, compared to only 79% of senior officers.

- Officers and members differed in their perceptions of the degree of open communication and trust between them. 78% of members believed member/officer communication was open, compared to 64% of officers.
- 70% of members were also far more positive about the levels of trust that existed between members and officers, compared to 51% of officers.
- 69% (less than seven in ten) members think members receive appropriate training on issues on conduct, compared to 39% of senior officers.
- Over a third of officers surveyed (36%) were not absolutely sure what to do if they became aware of conduct by a member that could result in failure to comply with the Council's Member Code of Conduct.

3.6 *Communication, clarity and culture* - there is much work to be done in raising awareness of Standards Committees. The survey illustrated that Standards Committees should raise their profile by communicating their work and their progress.

- 85% of members were sure their organisation had a Standards Committee, compared to only half of senior officers surveyed (52%).
- 77% of members thought their Standards Committee operated effectively compared to 47% of officers. 68% of Members also believed their Standards Committee made a positive difference to the ethical environment in the Council, compared to 45% of officers.
- 45% of senior officers did not know if their Standards Committee operated effectively or whether it made a positive difference to the ethical environment in their Council.
- 80% of members said the importance of high ethical standards was communicated to them, 35% of officers didn't know if this was so.
- 57% of members said the importance of high ethical standards was communicated to local communities, 29% of officers did not know if this was so.
- 53% of officers said they "didn't know" whether or not the public could easily access the register of members' interests.
- 29% of members didn't know if their Council had a whistle blowing policy compared to 11% of officers.

- Less than two-thirds (60%) of members had received training, guidance or information on equalities or human rights legislation.

Yet encouragingly:

- The majority of members and officers (78% and 83% respectively) agreed that their Council's complaint system was clear.

3.7 *Moving forward* – the survey has highlighted key areas that Councils actively need to address to improve ethical behaviour and fully meet the ethical agenda. Councils that have used the toolkit have found it helped to expose ethical governance issues and provided clarity on the next steps. Among the most crucial questions for individuals in local government are:

- what do these survey results mean for their Council?
- how do they compare with the overall picture?
- what are their strengths and weaknesses?
- what training and improvements could be made?
- how do they ensure effective communication about the importance of the ethical agenda?

Councils have the tools for success and must now ensure they use them.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

4.1 No specific financial implications have been identified.

5. CONSULTATIONS

5.1 The Council's Management Team has considered this Report.

6. OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 All material considerations have been taken into account in the contents of this Report. In particular, risks may arise unless Members of Council are fully appraised on standards matters.

7. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 None apply.

8. LIST OF APPENDICES

8.1 None apply.

Contact Officer: Dennis A. Hall
Telephone Number: 01388 816166, Ext. 4268
E-mail address: dahall@sedgefield.gov.uk

Wards: N/A

Key Decision Validation: N/A

Background Papers

“Down to Detail – What’s the Score?”
Audit Commission Survey

Examination by Statutory Officers

	Yes	Not Applicable
1. The report has been examined by the Council’s Head of the Paid Service or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The content has been examined by the Council’s S.151 Officer or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The content has been examined by the Council’s Monitoring Officer or his representative	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The report has been approved by Management Team	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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