

Item 6

REPORT TO STANDARDS COMMITTEE

3RD JULY 2008

REPORT OF SOLICITOR TO THE COUNCIL AND MONITORING OFFICER

SATISFACTION WITH THE STANDARDS BOARD FOR ENGLAND AND ATTITUDES TO THE ETHICAL ENVIRONMENT: QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION FOLLOWING QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report summarises the results of qualitative research by the Standards Board for England. Six standard focus groups and one on-line focus group were held England-wide, which captured the views of Monitoring Officers, Standards Committee Chairs and Members, Councillors and Parish Councillors.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 That the Standards Committee notes the Report and findings.

3. DETAIL

3.1 **Link between Stakeholders' satisfaction and relationship with the Standards Board**

A key area of insight, which the focus groups brought, was a deeper understanding of the link between satisfaction with the Standards Board and stakeholders' perceptions of the closeness (or remoteness) of the relationship between themselves and the Standards Board. Stakeholders who expressed the most positive views of the Standards Board tended to work closely with the Standards Board and the Code of Conduct. They attended more Standards Board events and received more publications than those who had more negative views. Typically those with the most positive views were Monitoring Officers and Members of Standards Committees.

In contrast, those who had minimal direct contact with the Standards Board, or felt "remote" from it, were more likely to hold a neutral or more negative view.

3.2 **Criticisms of the Standards Board**

Criticisms of the Standards Board expressed by some respondents to the quantitative survey were also made in the focus groups. These included:

- a perception of been overly-bureaucratic
- too much time and money spent investigating allegations which were frivolous and unfounded
- not to investigate a complaint

Councillors who had had a complaint made against them were least satisfied with the performance of the Standards Board. Some Parish Councillors felt strongly that they were over-regulated by bodies such as the Standards Board and that it failed to understand that Parish Councils had a different way of working from other types of local authorities.

3.3 **Standards of Member Behaviour**

Many respondents felt that the behaviour of elected members had improved to some degree since the Standards Board had been in existence, some felt the improvement had been dramatic, whilst others felt less so, because they believed the behaviour of members in their authorities had always been exemplary. It was widely held that most elected members and parish councillors were honest and had considerable integrity; and that most of those who had an allegation made against them and upheld had unintentionally fallen foul of the Code by not being fully aware of the rules.

Respondents felt that member behaviour worsened at election time and during heated debates, such as those that were part of the budget setting process, meetings discussing possible disclosure of local facilities were mentioned as likely to produce inappropriate language by members.

The quantitative research highlighted that disappointment had been expressed that the general public had not noticed any improvement in the behaviour of local councillors, participants felt this was mainly due to press interest, particularly by local newspapers, when allegations of misbehaviour were highlighted but not necessarily drawing attention to decisions of “no case to answer” or where the accused had been found not to be in breach of the Code of Conduct.

3.4 **Ethical Framework Changes**

All groups said they had been fairly well prepared for the changes to the ethical framework, which had taken place in 2007. Most said they had received good or adequate training or induction in the revised Code of Conduct, from either:

- their Monitoring Officer,
- an external consultant
- a Standards Board event

The most useful preparation had been face-to-face training, usually conducted by the Monitoring Officer, consolidated with publications from the Standards Board, or written material based on these.

Monitoring Officers, however, said they would have liked more time to have prepared for its introduction; and valued most highly the opportunity to learn about the changes face-to-face at Standards Board Roadshows and the Annual Assembly.

3.5 **Code of Conduct 2007**

There was very little real dissatisfaction with the Code of Conduct 2007 among any of the stakeholder groups. Most respondents felt that although the changes were fairly minor, it was now clearer, more comprehensive and demonstrated more common sense than the original Code.

3.6 **Local Assessment**

Most stakeholders were aware to some extent of local assessment. Least aware of the implications of local assessment were those whose relationship with the Standards Board was weakest. The move to filtering cases and investigating most of them locally had been broadly welcomed. Respondents felt it was more sensible for local standards committees to handle all but the most complex cases, freeing up the Standards Board to move towards the role of strategic regulator. However, there was concern that local assessment would mean a vastly increased workload for Monitoring Officers and Standards Committees, especially those with large numbers of Parish Councils.

3.7 **Support and Guidance**

Monitoring Officers were very satisfied with communications with the Standards Board, and said that the standard and clarity of Standards Board publications had improved in recent years. Long-standing members of Standards Committees were most satisfied and received more Standards Board publications – all from their Monitoring Officers. Councillors received Standards Board publications through their Monitoring Officer, or Town Clerk in the case of Parish Councillors. Some were comfortable with this, since they trusted their Monitoring Officer or Town Clerk to provide them with all the information and guidance they needed. Some felt their understanding of the Code of Conduct was lacking and would like to see more of the publications produced by the Standards Board. Some respondents felt uneasy that the Standards Board seemed to rely solely upon Monitoring Officers to cascade all relevant information to members.

It was found that “The Code of Conduct 2007” guide for members was one of the most useful publications issued by the Standards Board. Monitoring Officers and members of Standards Committees said they liked the format and conciseness of “The Bulletin” and found this publication useful.

3.8 **Clarity**

Those who were most familiar with Standards Board publications felt that they were as clear and easy to read as they could be. Readers liked the use of plain English, occasional humour and the general formatting and layout. However, some stakeholders felt that the text could be a little “wordy”, the subject matter difficult and the layouts could be more “user-friendly”. All respondents concurred, however, that what they wanted from Standards Board publications was:

- clear guidance, illustrative examples and case studies.
- Documents which were well laid out, concise and easy to read, so that salient points could be extracted.

With a few exceptions, all types of respondents preferred to receive larger numbers of short fact-sheets dealing with one issue at a time rather than a small number of long detailed documents.

3.9 **Standards Board website, DVDs and Events**

Monitoring Officers who used the Standards Board's website regularly were satisfied with it. However, few members of the other groups had seen the website. Of those who had, they had mixed views on its usability in contrast with Monitoring Officers. Some had found it difficult to find what they were looking for, and this led to a sense of remoteness from the Standards Board.

There had been widespread praise, however, for the two Standards Board DVDs, which many respondents had seen. Standards Board Roadshows and the Annual Assembly were also extremely popular methods of disseminating information, and respondents had found the break-out sessions and written materials provided at these very useful.

3.10 **Suggestions for ways of improving support and guidance**

Some suggestions put forward for improvement were:

- Bespoke publications (with relevant examples and digests of case studies)
- Documents available from the Standards Board website to download to be in an easily printable format
- The website be made more easily searchable for case histories
- The Standards Board to provide information and guidance on major changes with improved timeliness
- Conferences could be shortened and some Roadshows tailored for Monitoring Officers
- More regional training events
- Visits from Standards Board staff to Standards Committees
- To improve accessibility and transparency of the Standards Board by publicising the names, photographs and contact details of key staff

4. **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 No specific financial implications have been identified.

5. **CONSULTATIONS**

5.1 No specific consultations.

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 apprised 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

“Satisfaction with the Standards Board for England and Attitudes to the Ethical Environment: Qualitative Investigation following Quantitative Survey?”
Standards Board for England

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 type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. The content has been examined by the Council's S.151 Officer or his representative	<input 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 type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

This page is intentionally left blank