



Report of Assistant Chief Executive (Corporate Governance)

Standards Committee

Date: 12th July 2007

Subject: Study into the operation and role of standards committees within Local Authorities: Results

Electoral Wards Affected:

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

1. This report provides a brief summary of the main conclusions of the study into the operation and role of standards committees carried out by BMG Research and the Standards Board for England (Appendix 1).
2. Several Members of the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer were approached to take part in this survey, which incorporated several research themes including:
 - Training delivered and future training demand;
 - Role of monitoring officers and members of standards committees, and how these are perceived by other people within their authorities;
 - Local investigations and hearings, and the level of confidence that authorities approach these with.
3. Members of the Committee are asked to note the contents of this report and Appendix 1.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

1.1 This report provides a brief summary of the main conclusions of the study into the operation and role of standards committees carried out by BMG and the Standards Board for England (Appendix 1).

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Six Members of the Standards Committee along with the Monitoring Officer were approached to complete the research questionnaire. The six questionnaires were sent to elected and independent members of the Committee, according to certain criteria.

2.2 The response rate was 68% amongst monitoring officers and 46% amongst members of the standards committees, with 76% of all authorities represented in the results.

2.3 The research incorporated several research themes including:

- Training delivered and future training demand;
- Role of monitoring officers and members of standards committees, and how these are perceived by other people within their authorities;
- Local investigations and hearings, and the level of confidence that authorities approach these with.

2.4 Members of the Committee may wish to note that there are some parallels between the types of questions asked by the research paper and those posed in the ethical audit. In particular the questions regarding the profile and effectiveness of the Standards Committee and the Monitoring Officer.

2.5 The final report (Appendix 1) was published on the Standards Board for England earlier this year.

3.0 Main Issues

Monitoring Officers: results

3.1 Monitoring Officers were asked about various aspects of their role including their working relationships, the resources available to them to undertake their duties, and sufficiency of training they have received. Monitoring Officers were generally positive in their responses. In particular they generally felt that they were supported by people in the authority at a senior level, for example, the Standards Committee, the Chief Executive, the Chief Finance Officer and other Members. However only 57% agreed that they had sufficient support staff and 26% disagreed.

3.2 Further to this, 90% of Monitoring Officers felt that their workload would increase as a result of the changes outlined in the Government's White Paper Strong and Prosperous Communities, yet only 45% agreed that they were fully prepared for these changes.

3.3 When asked about local investigations, 69% of Monitoring officers were able to highlight positive impacts arising from the investigation. These positive impacts were:

- raised awareness of the standards committee (57%);

- reinforcement of the Code of Conduct (52%);
- raised awareness of the Code of Conduct (51%);
- raised awareness of the monitoring officer (42%);
- raised public awareness of the Code of Conduct (28%);
- improvements in ethical behaviour (17%); and
- making the authority more transparent and open (12%).

3.4 However, 30% of monitoring officers also highlighted negative impacts of local investigations. Namely, the impact on the relationship between the Monitoring Officer and Members (18%), and the impact on the public image of the authority (10%).

Members of standards committees: results

- 3.5 Members of standards committees were also asked about various aspects of their role including their working relationships, the resources available to them to undertake their duties, and sufficiency of training they have received. Members of standards committees were also generally positive about these aspects, 91% agreeing that they had a good working relationship with the monitoring officer, 89% agreeing that they received sufficient support from the monitoring officer, and 89% agreeing that their main function is to promote ethical behaviour within the authority.
- 3.6 As a result of the publication of the White Paper Strong and Prosperous Communities, 75% of standards committee members expect their workload to increase, and 68% feel that they will be able to cope with the changes.
- 3.7 When asked about training provision, 79% of standards committee members indicated that they had received training on how to conduct a local hearing. A similar amount had received training on other aspects of their role including holding and chairing meetings (26%), their role within standards committees (8%), the Code of Conduct (7%), and role play and case studies (7%). Overall 75% of members feel well prepared for a local hearing, whilst 86% feel well prepared for other aspects of their role.
- 3.8 Almost three in five members indicated that they would like to receive training or additional training in future. The key training themes identified were:
- Holding and chairing meetings (12%);
 - The role of members on standards committees (12%);
 - Refresher courses on standards issues (12%); and
 - Role plays and case studies (11%).
- 3.9 When asked about local hearings, 89% of standards committee members were able to highlight positive impacts arising from the hearing. These positive impacts were:
- Raised awareness of the standards committee (78%);
 - Raised awareness of the Code of Conduct (77%);
 - Reinforcement of the importance of the Code of Conduct (72%); and
 - Improved ethical behaviour across the authority (16%).
- 3.10 Standards committee members also noted negative impacts resulting from local hearings, including the relationship between the standards committee and members (14%) and the impact on the image of the authority to the public (11%).

Comparison and conclusions

- 3.11 The results show that members of standards committees have a less positive perception than monitoring officers about how they are viewed within their authority, and the overall levels of influence that they have. Their interaction with officers (particularly in terms of the provision of ethical advice) is very limited, and they are less likely to feel valued than monitoring officers by higher ranks of the authority, particularly the Chief Executive.
- 3.12 Standards committee members are more likely to perceive positive impacts from any local hearings they have conducted, when compared to monitoring officers' perceptions of the impacts of their local investigations. In particular it seems that the hearings, as oppose to investigations, are more successful in raising the profile of the standards committee and the Code of Conduct.
- 3.13 An area of concern identified in the research was the move to more local hearings and determinations. Many monitoring officers are unclear what impact these changes will have at a day-to-day level to their workload and resources.
- 3.14 These changes will also place greater emphasis on the role of independent members, in that independent members will have to chair standards committees and committees should contain independent members with a balance of experience. However given that some monitoring officers reported that the recruitment of independent members was difficult this move could be problematic. The possible increase in the number of local investigations may also have a negative impact on the relationships between monitoring officers, standards committees and the wider elected member base.

4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance

- 4.1 Consideration of this research may assist the Committee in assessing the possible impact of the increase in local investigations and hearings, and whether any of the possible negative impacts outlined above, could be avoided.
- 4.2 Ensuring that the standards committee members and the monitoring officer have an effective working relationship and are sufficiently trained and resourced will support the Council's governance arrangements.
- 4.3 Considering the types of training received by other standards committees may assist the Committee with the review and development of their own training plan (also on this agenda).

5.0 Legal And Resource Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal implications to this report.
- 5.2 There may be resource implications to the new arrangements as proposed in the White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities", but as yet the specific impacts on the standards committee members and monitoring officers are unclear.
- 5.3 There may also be resource implications to extending the training provision offered to Standards Committee Members but it is considered that these costs can be met from within existing resources.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 This research incorporated several research themes including:
- Training delivered and future training demand;
 - Role of monitoring officers and members of standards committees, and how these are perceived by other people within their authorities;
 - Local investigations and hearings, and the level of confidence that authorities approach these with.
- 6.2 The results of the survey are summarised in the main body of the report and the final research report is attached as Appendix 1.

7.0 Recommendations

- 7.1 Members of the Standards Committee are asked to:
- note this report and Appendix 1; and
 - consider whether any of the training needs mentioned in the report should be addressed in the Committee's own training and development plan (also on this agenda).