



Report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Corporate Governance)

Standards Committee

Date: 17th February 2010

Subject: Public Perceptions of Ethics

Electoral Wards Affected:

Ward Members consulted
(referred to in report)

Specific Implications For:

Equality and Diversity

Community Cohesion

Narrowing the Gap

Executive Summary

1. The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the Committee of the findings of the research report recently published by Standards for England, which is the third in a series tracking public perceptions of ethics in local government.
2. Members of the Committee are asked to note the contents of this report.

1.0 Purpose Of This Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the Committee of the findings of the research report recently published by Standards for England (attached at Appendix 1), which is the third in a series tracking public perceptions of ethics in local government.

2.0 Background Information

2.1 Every two years, Standards for England measures and monitors the public's perceptions of local councillors' ethical standards and their confidence in the redress mechanisms for dealing with shortcomings in individuals' behaviour.

2.2 The research findings presented in this report relate to measures of perceptions taken in June 2009, following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (which resulted in local government being given greater responsibility for its own local standards arrangements). Comparisons are made with data from 2005 and 2007. In particular, the research focuses on identifying any changes in:

- Levels of public trust in member behaviour and integrity;
- Levels of public confidence in the accountability mechanisms for dealing with instances where member behaviour has not met the required standard; and
- Public expectation of the behaviour of members.

3.0 Main Issues

3.1 The research concentrated on five themes:

- 1) Trust;
- 2) Rating standards;
- 3) Behaviours exhibited by councillors;
- 4) Confidence in accountability mechanisms; and
- 5) Public interest in what councillors do.

Summary of findings

3.2 It was considered likely that the impact of the MPs' expenses scandal would have an impact on public perceptions of local councillors as well as MPs. The research suggests that while there has been a negative impact on public perceptions of councillors, there has been a more marked effect on perceptions of MPs and government ministers.

3.3 Although the perception that local MPs, government ministers and politicians generally tell the truth either 'always' or 'some' of the time has fallen since 2007, and perceptions that these groups 'rarely' or 'never' tell the truth have increased significantly, the extent to which it is perceived that local councillors tell the truth 'always' or 'most of the time' has not changed significantly since 2007.

3.4 Local councillors' behaviour is more likely to be rated by the public as 'low' in 2009, and is more likely to be said to have 'got worse' since 2007. However, the proportions of the public saying that local councillors' behaviour is 'high' overall or has 'improved' recently are the same in 2009 as in 2007.

- 3.5 Similar proportions of the general public report ever having made a complaint about a local councillor in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (3%, 4% and 3% respectively).
- 3.6 Those in local government have, when compared to the public, a far higher level of confidence in the ability of local government to uncover poor behaviour and to deal with it appropriately.
- 3.7 Other research indicates that the local standards framework has had a positive impact on local government. There is a view from within local government that the behaviour of members has improved.

4.0 Implications For Council Policy And Governance

- 4.1 Considering the results of this research supplements the Council's understanding of the perceptions of the behaviour of Councillors nationally.

5.0 Legal And Resource Implications

- 5.1 There are no legal or resource implications.

6.0 Conclusions

- 6.1 Although there has been a negative impact on public perceptions of councillors since 2007, this is thought to be due to the MPs' expenses scandal which has had a more marked effect on perceptions of MPs and government ministers. This suggests that the public are able to discern, to an extent, between local and national politicians.

7.0 Recommendations

- 7.1 Members of the Committee are asked to note the contents of this report.

Background Documents

None.