

Standards Committee - 18th December 2006

Report of the Monitoring Officer

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life; 2006 National Survey

Purpose of Report

1. To consider the outcome of the National Survey on Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life commissioned by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2006.

Background

2. During this year the Graham Committee on Standards in Public Life (formerly known as the Nolan Committee) commissioned a survey on public attitudes towards conduct in public life. The report on the national survey was published in September 2006 and a copy of the report was placed in the Members' Room
3. The Executive Summary of the report is attached at Appendix 1. Members may find the following aspects of the report to be of particular interest:-
 - Only 45% considered that the standard of conduct of public office-holders in the United Kingdom was very/quite high, as opposed to 46% in the 2004 survey.
 - Only 23% would generally trust Government Ministers to tell the truth, with estate agents faring slightly better at 24%. The figures for senior managers in local councils and local councillors are 36% and 43% respectively with local MPs reaching 48%. At a local level the professional groups with the highest credibility ratings are local police officers (77%), head teachers in schools (84%) and family doctors 93%.
 - 58% felt that authorities in the United Kingdom are committed to improving standards in public life. Whilst this is disappointing it is higher than the 2004 survey of 53%.
 - 44% felt that authorities would generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office – an increase of 3% on the 2004 survey.
 - 40% thought that when people in public office are caught doing wrong the authorities would punish them.
 - 52% stated that it is extremely or very important for senior public officials to set a good example in their private lives.

- 35% felt that local councillors and senior public officials should have the right to keep their private lives private. However, 54% considered that local councillors should accept a certain level of media interest in their private lives and 51% held the same view for senior public officials. 10% stated that local councillors should accept that the media examine every aspect of their private lives because it comes with the job and 13% took the same view with regard to senior public officials.
4. Arising from the survey the Graham Committee draws the following conclusions:-
- The integrity of those who hold public office matters to the public.
 - Truthfulness is highly-prized.
 - The public's confidence that office-holders will be held accountable for their conduct is limited.
 - The majority believe that UK authorities are committed to improving standards in public life.
 - However, only a minority (a little over 2 in 5) are confident that the authorities will generally uncover wrongdoing or that they will punish those in public office who are caught wrongdoing.
 - 4 in 5 say they have confidence in the ability of the media to uncover wrongdoing by people in public office, which may explain why a majority also consider that local councillors and senior public officials must expect at least some media scrutiny in their private as well as public lives.
5. It is important to stress that this survey is about public perception as opposed to reality. In addition it is a national survey and it is difficult to say whether it paints an accurate picture locally. However, in the absence of any local analysis, it would be safe to assume that the survey reflects local views. On that basis there is undeniably a reasonably high level of public scepticism about standards in public life, trustworthiness and accountability. The survey demonstrates that there is much to do to improve the public's perception of the overall standards of conduct of public office holders.
6. The Committee is asked to discuss the outcome of the national survey and to consider whether this report should be included in a member training seminar as part of our commitment to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. Does the Committee have any other proposals for improving the public perception of public office holders?
7. This report will also be considered by the Corporate Board and the Assistant Directors Group in view of the implications for senior managers.

Finance

8. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Law

9. Part III of the Local Government Act 2000 deals with standards of conduct in local government including the requirement to appoint a Standards Committee and to adopt a Members' Code of Conduct.

Equality Impact

10. This report takes into account the Council's policy on equality and diversity.
11. In promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct the Committee may, from time to time, wish to canvass the views of various community groups including young people through the Youth Parliament.

Recommendation

12. It is recommended that the Committee consider the outcome of the national survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life.



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List of Background Papers

1. Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on Survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life 2006.