

Standards Committee - 18th October 2007

Report of the Monitoring Officer

Standards Board for England : 2006/7 Annual Review

Purpose of Report

1. To consider the 2006/7 Annual Review published by the Standards Board for England.

Background

2. A copy of the Annual Review has been placed in the Members' Room.
3. In their Annual Review the Standards Board for England set out the results of research that was carried out during 2006/7 from which a generally positive picture emerges of how local authorities are responding to the new ethical framework. Overall there is a wide consensus that standards of conduct have improved since the Standards Board was established with strong evidence that local authorities – from Chief Executives and political leaders to Standards Committees and Monitoring Officers – are embracing their new role as champions of high standards and gaining confidence in their ability to play it effectively.
4. The following facts and figures summarise the work of the Standards Board for England in 2006/7:-
 - 3,549 allegations received.
 - 62% of allegations from members of the public.
 - 19% of allegations referred for investigation.
 - 9 days to decide whether to receive a complaint for investigation.
 - Following investigations 4% were referred to a Monitoring Officer/local Standards Committee for local determination and 3% referred to the Adjudication Panel for England.
 - Of the 37 cases referred to the Adjudication Panel for England about 50% resulted in no sanction or no breach with the remainder producing disqualifications or suspensions.
 - Determinations by Standards Committees following a local hearing produced suspensions or partial suspensions in 54% of cases and a finding of no breach in 8%.

5. The Annual Review also summarises the results of a number of research projects commissioned in 2006/7. This suggests that there are 3 broad types of Standards Committees. A lapdog committee is ineffective, often due to lack of resources or political interference. A watchdog committee fulfils the statutory role, keeping an eye on member conduct and overseeing operation of the Code. However, a guide dog committee goes further seeing itself not just as a regulatory body, but as a champion of ethical conduct, responsible for helping and supporting members in raising standards.
6. The evidence in the research is that there is an increasing number of guide dog committees as more committees show a willingness to tackle the more demanding role. A key factor in achieving the highest standards of conduct is the creation of mature and constructive relationships in which elected and independent members genuinely work together to achieve the common goal of putting in place and monitoring a robust local ethical framework.
7. A theme emerging from the research is that there is very clearly a need for support and guidance from the Standards Board as the new ethical framework comes into operation. In particular from the spring of 2008 local Standards Committees will have the responsibility for processing complaints of alleged breaches of the Code which will increase the workload of Standards Committees and Monitoring Officers.
8. Some of the other key findings from the research studies are as follows:-
 - 80% of respondents (including members and officers) believe that high standards of behaviour for members is one of the most important issues facing local government.
 - 93% of respondents (members and officers) support the requirement for members to sign a Code of Conduct.
 - 44% of respondents (members and officers) believe standards of ethical conduct in local authorities have improved over the last few years, compared to 27% in 2004.
 - 81% of Monitoring Officers and 63% of Standards Committee members believe they have had a positive impact on the behaviour of members.
 - In authorities where a local hearing has taken place 89% of Standards Committee members report a positive impact of local hearings including raised awareness of the Standards Committee and Code of Conduct, a reinforcement of the Code and improved ethical behaviour.
 - 97% of Monitoring Officers reported a good working relationship with their Standards Committee and, likewise, 91% of Standards Committees believe they have a good relationship with their Monitoring Officer.

Finance

9. There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

Law

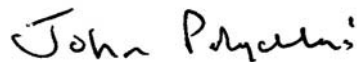
10. The relevant provisions regarding the Members' Code of Conduct are contained in Sections 49-52 of the Local Government Act 2000 and Regulations made by the Secretary of State.

Equality Impact

11. This report complies fully with the Council's policies on equality and diversity. It is a significant requirement of the Code of Conduct that members do not discriminate against people on the grounds of race, gender, disability, religion of belief, sexual orientation and age.
12. There are no particular issues arising from this report with regard to children and young persons.

Recommendation

13. It is recommended that this report be noted and that members comment upon the 2006/7 Annual Review.



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Monitoring Officer

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List of Background Papers

1. Standards Board for England : 2006/7 Annual Review.