



STANDARDS COMMITTEE
3 September 2010

Audit Commission Ethical Governance Survey

Purpose of the report: To receive feedback from the recent Audit Commission Ethical Governance Survey in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the Council's approach to standards of conduct.

Introduction

1. In 2009 the Standards Committee commissioned a Standards of Conduct Survey. At its meeting on 15 February 2010, the Committee agreed to repeat the survey to see if any further action needed to be taken to increase awareness of the Code.
2. Following this decision, the Council was informed that the Audit Commission wanted to undertake a similar survey. This raised concerns that carrying out both surveys would duplicate work and potentially lead to a lower response rate. To resolve this, the Chairman of Standards Committee negotiated with the Audit Commission to include questions within its survey to cover all areas from the proposed Standards of Conduct Survey, and obtained agreement that the Committee would have access to the results when they were known.
3. The Audit Commission has now released the results of the survey for the Committee to consider and use in relation to its work.

Composition of those participating

4. The following groups were surveyed 'online' and responses were recorded as follows:

| Total surveyed | Response rate (%) |
|---|--------------------------|
| 197 Senior Officers | 124 (62.9%) |
| 80 Elected Members | 42 (52.5%) |
| 9 Co-opted Members | 3 (33%) |
| The overall response rate was 59.1% (Compared to 51.6% in 2009) | |

Of these, 26 had been a Member or an officer for less than one year.

5. The Standards Committee has been working hard to promote the work and raise the profile of ethical standards, so the response rate for elected Members (52.5%) is a little disappointing although it does represent an increase from 2009 (49%) and is considered acceptable in survey terms.
6. The Audit Commission were surprised about the number of papers copies requested and whether this reflected a lack of use of IT by Members. All 80 Members use email and a wide range of training opportunities have been offered to Members developing their IT skills in the last year which have been well received. There were reports of technical issues when some Members tried to access the online survey which, while resolved, may have led to an increase in the number of paper copies requested.

Comparing the results

7. Following the last survey, a number of key themes were identified and presented to the committee on 13 March 2009. The themes were:
 - What do people think about the ethical environment at Surrey County Council?
 - How do the Executive, Members and Senior Officers see each other – do they agree that each is behaving well?
 - Understanding the Ethical Standards Agenda
 - Can we act on poor conduct in others?
 - The role of the Standards Committee
8. The same themes were also covered by the questions in the Audit Commission's survey although with some changes in the phrasing and different ratings being made available to respondents. For example, in 2009 respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with various statements (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or don't know.) In the Audit Commission survey, respondents were asked to what extent a statement was true (always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never, don't know.)
9. Given these changes, it is not possible to directly compare the two surveys but the general themes are the same and it is possible to draw some conclusions about the direction of travel.
10. Attached at **Appendix A** is a slide presentation of the key results, using the same headings as 2009 to allow comparison where appropriate. This report and the findings focus specifically on the areas from the survey that relate to the remit of the Standards Committee, the Audit Commission will share the full results of the Review of Governance with the Council shortly.

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| Conclusions |
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11. Compared to 2009, showing respect has improved and there is more agreement between the various groups' perceptions of how they treat each other. However, some non-Cabinet Members (8.8%) still felt Cabinet Members rarely or never treated them with respect and 14.8% of respondents felt that officers always or usually gave preferential treatment to Member they believe are influential. This feeling was especially strong with non-Cabinet Members (35.3%.)
12. The majority of respondents agree that advice and guidance on this and standards is available to Members with nearly all Members acknowledging that training is available to new Members. Members also agree that the importance of high ethical standards is communicated to them.
13. Officers were less aware of the advice and guidance available to Members (41.9% answered "don't know") or about the training available to new Members (46.8% didn't know.)
14. In line with the last survey, it is still felt that Members have differing views on what should be included in the Register of Interests and that they do not regularly review their entries in the Register.
15. Compared to 2009, there is an increased understanding of the processes for reporting inappropriate officer and member behaviour. 60% of Members felt they were always or usually able to challenge other Members' inappropriate behaviour (compared to just under 50% agreeing in 2009.) 44.4% of officers felt they were always or usually able to challenge Members' inappropriate behaviour (compared to 15.4% agreeing in 2009.)
16. The vast majority of Members understand the role of the Standards Committee with 64.5% of them also stating the Standards Committee always or usually adds value to the Council. While the majority of officers understand the role of the Standards Committee and feel it adds value, a significant number answered that they didn't know (19.4% and 30.6% respectively.)

Financial and value for money implications

17. None.

Equalities Implications

18. The Members' Code of Conduct requires Members not to do anything that may cause the Council to breach any of the equality enactments and the Standards Committee is committed to upholding high ethical standards. Ensuring good governance would further support the Council in its duties under equalities and diversity.

Risk Management Implications

19. A lack of clarity in the interpretation of the Code of Conduct may lead to complaints and other action being taken.

Implications for the Council's Priorities or Community Strategy/Local Area Agreement Targets

20. None.

Recommendations:

That the Committee consider the results of the Audit Commission Ethical Governance Survey and identify:

- (1) any areas for further consideration; and
- (2) recommendations for further attention by the Committee.

Next steps:

The information gathered by the Survey will be used to inform a programme of work through which the Standards Committee can proactively drive forward the ethical standards agenda.

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Sources/background papers:

Minutes of the Standards Committee, 13 March 2009
The Audit Commission - Ethical Governance Diagnostic