



Standards committees: a national snapshot

Key findings to be presented at the Fifth Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

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ICC, Birmingham

This document includes key findings of research into standards committees and monitoring officers within local authorities, further details of which will be presented at the conference session *Standards committees: a national snapshot*. It should be noted that these are initial findings and analysis is ongoing.

This research has been undertaken against a background of the shift in local ownership of the ethical agenda, and will provide valuable information on current activities of standards committees and future support needs.

Two surveys were administered: one targeted at monitoring officers within local authorities and the other at members of standards committees. The focus of the research incorporates several strands, including:

- profile of standards committee members and monitoring officers;
- training received and future training requirements;
- role of monitoring officers and members of standards committees;
- experiences of recruiting independent members;
- experiences of local investigations and hearings, and the level of confidence with which they are approached by authorities.

Key findings

- Most standards committee members serve on the committee for between one and five years, with just under a quarter serving for five years or more.
- When standards committees meet, (nearly all had met at least once since January 2005) the majority of monitoring officers surveyed said they attend these meetings.
- Key functions of standards committees include monitoring the effectiveness of the Code of Conduct, arranging training or seminars on the Code and being involved in local hearings.
- Recruitment of independent members is generally seen as neither easy nor difficult. Advertisements in newspapers are the most common method for recruiting independent members and are also seen to be the most effective.
- Half of all authorities surveyed have undertaken a local investigation in the past, most of who feel it was undertaken to an acceptable standard. However, four in five monitoring officers report experiencing problems in the investigation process.
- Raising awareness of standards committees within the authority is seen to be the key benefit of investigations. However, one third of monitoring officers who responded said that investigations can have a negative impact on the relationship between them and members.
- Most monitoring officers and standards committee members have received training in how to undertake a local investigation. However, almost two-thirds would like more training. Monitoring officers who responded to the survey reported that training on ethics and the Code of Conduct has been delivered in their authority, and that attendance by standards committee members has been fairly or very good.
- Most standards committee members have received training on how to undertake a local hearing, and training in relation to other aspects of their role. Whilst three-quarters of standards committee members say they feel well prepared for their involvement in local hearings, two-thirds would like additional training relevant to their role.

- Standards committee members view their role positively, having good working relationships with their monitoring officer and receiving sufficient support from them.
- Three-quarters of standards committee members expect their workload to increase in the future and over two-thirds believe they will be able to cope with the changes.
- Monitoring officers are positive regarding: their working relationships; their role in the authority; resourcing; training; and support from their chief executive and the chief finance officer.
- Expectations are that workloads will increase following the proposed changes set out in the local government white paper *Standards of Conduct in English Local Government*. Less than half of monitoring officers surveyed feel confident they are fully prepared for these changes.
- Most monitoring officers are aware of the Ethical Governance Toolkit. Over a quarter have used some of the materials and over half plan to use the toolkit in the future.

Please note: this document summarises only some of the key findings of this piece of research. The Standards Board for England is currently considering the full implications of the findings, its response and any possible future courses of action.

A full report will be available on the Standards Board for England's website – www.standardsboard.co.uk – by the end of November 2006.