

## What's the score?

### Stronger action needed on ethical governance

The latest Audit Commission self-assessment survey reveals that, although councils are generally managing the ethical agenda well, there are a number of areas that require stronger action.

#### Key findings

- Most councils actively encourage high standards.
- Members generally demonstrate high standards of behaviour.
- Leaders and chief executives are proving themselves positive role models in many councils.
- Roles, responsibilities, relationships and ethical frameworks are not always clearly understood.
- Standards committees make a difference, but they don't always explain widely what they do, the issues they are addressing and the progress they are making.
- Members and officers often hold divergent views on ethical governance issues.
- Communication, training, guidance and information are critical areas and often need more of a focus.

#### Survey background

The self-assessment survey was created by the Audit Commission in conjunction with the Standards Board for England and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). It is one element of the four-part Ethical Governance Diagnostic toolkit which also includes a full diagnostic, a light-touch health check (provided by the IDeA) and workshops.

#### The survey aims to:

- help councils assess and then drive up their ethical governance arrangements and procedures
- help councils better understand the key ethical governance issues they are now facing
- highlight areas to focus on in future

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## **Widespread response**

Up to the end of July 2007, the survey questionnaire was completed by 3,998 individual council members and senior officers from 44 councils across the country. In all, over 170 councils have used at least one part of the toolkit.

Although the survey findings are encouraging, they also pinpoint areas where further work and clarity is needed. In particular the findings suggest that some members and officers could be helped to develop a better understanding of ethical governance. For example, one in five senior officers replied 'don't know' when asked if their council has a standards committee.

There are also differences between members' and officers' perceptions. To take just one example, members are far more likely than officers to think that communication between them and officers is open.

## **Findings overview**

### **High standards and good behaviour**

The findings show there is a firm foundation on which to build, but there is clearly room to improve.

- Most members and officers (84% and 76% respectively) say their council's efforts to drive up ethical standards are encouraging appropriate behaviour.
- Around nine in ten members report that members 'always or usually':
  - show respect to and treat fairly all people who use council services (90%)
  - show respect to and treat all officers fairly and do not discriminate unlawfully (89%)
  - use public funds, council property and facilities responsibly (90%)
- Around eight in ten members and seven in ten officers consider the leader of the council a positive role model for ethical behaviour (78% and 73% respectively). Similar proportions say the same of their chief executive.

### **Roles, responsibilities and relationships**

The survey shows that greater communication about the ethical framework and a wider understanding of each other's roles would strengthen working relationships between officers and members.

- The vast majority of members (92%) believe that they understand their role and responsibilities under the ethical framework. However, fewer than three-quarters of officers (72%) say they understand their role in this area.
- One in five officers (21%) think the guidelines members have on their personal conduct are not clear, whereas almost all members (91%) are positive about the guidance they receive.
- While nearly all (96%) members are aware of the members' Code of Conduct, only just over three-quarters (79%) of senior officers are similarly aware.
- Officers and members differ in their perceptions of the degree of open communication and trust between them. Over three-quarters of members (78%) believe member/officer communication is open. That compares to just two-thirds of officers (64%).
- Members are also far more positive (70%) than officers (51%) about the levels of trust that exist between members and officers.
- More appropriate training, guidance and information could provide a solution. For example, less than seven in ten members (69%) and four in ten senior officers (39%) think members receive appropriate training on issues of conduct.
- Officers would also benefit from further clarity about their own ethical responsibilities. For example, over a third (36%) of the officers surveyed were not absolutely sure what to do if they became aware of conduct by a member that could result in failure to comply with the council's member Code of Conduct.

### **Communication, clarity and culture**

There is much work to be done in raising awareness of standards committees. Significant opportunities exist for improvement, particularly in explaining their role. The survey plainly illustrates that standards committees should raise their profile by communicating their work and their progress.

- While the majority (85%) of members are sure their organisation has a standards committee, only half of the senior officers surveyed (52%) are sure there is one in their organisation.
- Members are more likely to think their standards committee operates effectively (77%), than officers (47%). More members (68%) think their standards committee makes a positive difference to the ethical environment in the council than officers (45%).
- A large proportion (45%) of senior officers do not know if their standards committee operates effectively or whether it makes a positive difference to the ethical environment in their council.

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Other findings in the important area of communications include:

- more than eight in ten members (80%) say the importance of high ethical standards is communicated to them. Yet more than one-third of officers (35%) don't know if this is so
- well over half (57%) of members say the importance of high ethical standards is communicated to local communities, but nearly a third (29%) of officers do not know if this is so
- more than half of officers (53%) say they 'don't know' whether or not the public can easily access the register of members' interests
- nearly one third of members (29%) don't know if their council has a whistle blowing policy compared to just over a tenth (11%) of officers
- less than two-thirds (60%) of members have received training, guidance or information on equalities or human rights legislation

Yet encouragingly:

- the majority of members and officers (78% and 83% respectively) agree that their council's complaints system is clear

## **Moving forward**

The survey has highlighted key areas that councils actively need to address to improve ethical behaviour and meet fully the ethical agenda.

Councils that have used the toolkit have found that it helps to expose the ethical governance issues they are facing and that it provides clarity about what to do next.

Individual councils can use these results as a starting point for reflection, dialogue and action.

Among the most crucial questions for individuals in local government are:

- what do these survey results mean for our council?
- how do we compare with the overall picture?
- what are our strengths and weaknesses?
- what training and improvements can we make?
- how do we ensure effective communication about the importance of the ethical agenda?

Councils have the tools for success and must now ensure they use them.

## Further information

For further information on the Ethical Governance Toolkit, please contact:

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