

1. Receiving, assessing and reviewing complaints

Under the new regulations, local authorities have to inform members of the public about how to make complaints. This can be done in a variety of ways, the most common of which is via the authority's website. Standards for England think that this is neither as easy to find or as well presented as it could be in many cases.

Other popular publicity methods include:

- the local press
- council newsletters to all households
- posters and leaflets displayed in public buildings
- complaints leaflets

There remains lots of scope for further developing publicity about complaints. This could include:

- 1.1 Carrying out advertising jointly with other local authorities in the area;
- 1.2 Giving information about how to make a complaint to the Citizens Advice Bureau and other Voluntary and Community Sector organizations;
- 1.3 Having a dedicated website for standards issues;
- 1.4 Placing an advert detailing the complaints process on employee payslips;
- 1.5 Engaging in local press interviews;
- 1.6 Placing an article in a publication circulated to all households with council tax bills.
- 1.7 Distributing leaflets in post offices.

2. Local investigations

Informing members of the results of investigations

A range of methods can be used, the most common being:

- report to the standards committee
- standards committee minutes and meeting agendas
- report to the full council
- letter to the member concerned (with or without a copy of the report)
- authority's website
- press announcements.

Other methods of communication can include email, intranets and keeping hard copies of the documents available for inspection. It is important that we consider how best to communicate the findings in individual cases both to meet the goals of learning for members and transparency and having regard for natural justice.

Approaches to communicating results to members could include:

- 2.1 Communicating the information to full council, group leaders and parish councils;
- 2.2 Ensuring parish councils are kept informed via the Standards Committee Parish Council Newsletter (may not be appropriate given the number of Parish Councils within Redditch);
- 2.3 Using complaint outcomes in training sessions.
- 2.4 Sending copies of press releases to all members.

Informing the public of the results of investigations

Standards for England are disappointed that authorities aren't doing more to inform the public about standards hearings. This is important both to raise public trust that complaints are properly dealt with and to guard the framework against allegations that it lacks transparency.

The most common methods used by authorities are press notices (32%) and the authority's website (23%). But often the information on websites is hidden among records of standards committee meetings rather than being featured clearly as the outcome of a complaints process. Smaller numbers of authorities make documents available for public inspection, hold hearings in public, publish the findings in the council newsletter and/or have special arrangements for town and parish councils. The most common type of information to be provided to the public was papers associated with standards committee meetings (minutes, agendas and reports), followed by annual/regular update reports.

It is important to ensure that the work of the Standards Committee gets adequate publicity. Approaches could include:

- 2.5 Involving the Communications Team in the work of the Standards Committee .
- 2.6 Hold hearings in public;
- 2.7 Consider webcasting hearings;
- 2.8 Provide Media training and advice on how to handle media enquiries to Independent Members;
- 2.9 Produce a media protocol that sets out the publicity issued at the various stages of dealing with complaints;
- 2.10 For the outcome of hearings relating to Parish Councillors, send a copy to the clerk for them to arrange for the outcome to be published in the parish council's newsletter.

3. Promotion of standards of conduct in public life

An important part of a local standards committee's work is underlining the benefits of ethical standards in local government to create a sense of 'ethical well-being' in the authority. Standards committees and monitoring officers are at the heart of the standards framework and have a duty to promote, educate and support members in following the highest standards of conduct and ensuring that those standards are fully owned locally.

Training

A specific function of a standards committee is to train members on the Code of Conduct, or arrange for such training. A standards committee can also arrange training on the local standards framework. Some standards committees put together programmes of regular training, while others prefer to arrange training in response to specific requirements, such as information sessions explaining changes to the Code.

Examples of standards committee involvement in more specialised training include:

- 3.1 training on member roles, such as what the requirements of being a parish councillor or independent member are;
- 3.2 chairing skills;
- 3.3 understanding and preparing for interaction with the media;
- 3.4 equality and diversity;

3.5 utilising Standards for England's guidance materials

Examples of training methods and approaches used by local authorities include:

- 3.6 in-house training delivered by the standards committee or other people in the local authority
- 3.7 induction of new members
- 3.8 commissioning external training partners
- 3.9 attending conferences
- 3.10 group workshops using case study style materials
- 3.11 using Standards for England training materials and attending the Annual Assembly
- 3.12 approaching Standards for England to discuss inviting representatives to speak at meetings or contribute to seminars
- 3.13 general seminar and Q&A sessions with guest presenters
- 3.14 joint training events with other local authorities
- 3.15 online training
- 3.16 undertaking a skills audit designed to test knowledge and understanding of constitutional and ethical issues.
- 3.17 The Standards Committee be involved in agreeing the member training and development programme each year based on feedback from the previous year's programme, discussions with the party whips, and from responses to an annual members' survey. The programme is split into specific skills training, knowledge based events, 1:1 support and group support.

Meetings of the council

Standards committees can promote their role by ensuring there is an ethical standards presence or voice at council meetings. This could be by standards committee members taking an observer role at other council meetings, as happens here. This allows them to experience council business and member conduct first-hand, before reporting back to the Standards Committee.

Other approaches include:

- 3.18 Placing a standing item about standards on the agenda of other meetings. This ensures that standards issues are regularly discussed and remain at the forefront of council business;
- 3.19 The chair of the Standards Committee or the Monitoring Officer could bring regular updates on Code and standards issues to the full Council meeting;
- 3.20 Joint meetings of the Standards Committee with other Committees or groups. This includes the overview and scrutiny committee, and audit & governance committee. Many standards committees also hold regular meetings with their parish groups.

Publications

Almost a fifth of standards committees contribute articles to council newsletters. Many produce regular briefing documents that highlight key standards issues and outline recent activities.

Approaches include:

- 3.21 Use of an intranet site;
- 3.22 Standards committees having their own sections on the council website and intranet, where news items, training materials, minutes and reports could be published;

- 3.23 Production of an annual report on the Standards Committee's work, to promote standards issues both internally and externally (could include publication on the Council's website, the issue of a press release, sending to the Parish Council, putting copies in ,libraries etc.);
- 3.24 Conduct poster campaigns.

Informing and engaging the public

Getting the wider standards message across to the public is a challenge. The Council website is by far the most popular vehicle for promoting confidence in local democracy to the public. There is clearly scope for improved communication and higher profile. Approaches include:

- 3.25 Conducting a survey of public perceptions to gain awareness of current understanding before starting to build up the Standard's Committee's profile and, in turn, public confidence.

Promoting standards in partnerships

Local authorities and standards committees have been taking an interest in the governance arrangements of partnerships. Almost half of the local authorities in England have taken the time to consider how they monitor and ensure high standards of behaviour when working in partnership with other organizations. Standards Committees can play an important part in drawing up partnership arrangements, by offering advice, guidance, or training related to relevant ethical matters. Approaches can include:

- 3.26 Involving Standards Committees in risk assessments, reviews, or audits of partnership arrangements, paying close attention to ethical standards issues.
- 3.27 Organise a seminar on ethical governance, to include a focus on 'What is good ethical behaviour in partnership working?';
- 3.28 Invite partners to a 'standards in partnerships master class'.

Other ways of promoting standards

Some standards committees are engaged in specific ethical governance activities, such as :

- 3.29 self assessment and standards surveys;
- 3.30 Staging 'ethical awareness weeks', where standards issues are brought to the fore;
- 3.31 Contribute to inductions and training, and ensure that ethical standards are considered in relation to recruitment or performance appraisal procedures.
- 3.32 hold annual officer quizzes that include questions on standards.

4. Helping members to follow the Code of Conduct

The Standards Committee and your associated officers have carried out a range of activities to help Members to follow the Code of Conduct, including

- advice from officers, including the Guidance Notes
- providing members with Standards for England publications (such as the *Bulletin*, guidance and DVDs)
- giving regular reminders to declare interests
- having a legal adviser available at meetings

- providing members with their own copy of the Code
- providing information via email or the council intranet
- providing a flow chart that explains when to declare interests

Other initiatives could include:

- 4.1 supplying members with information about decisions from the Adjudication Panel for England;
- 4.2 Enlisting officers to proactively check the register of interests before meetings;
- 4.3 Periodically print messages from the Standards Committee on the reverse side of members' Declaration of Interest forms.

5. Reviews of the authority's constitution (or standing orders)

Standards for England think that reviewing the Council's Constitution is a good task for standards committees to engage in. Approaches could include:

- 5.1 Reviewing the constitution being a formal part of the Committee's Terms of reference and work programme in relation to:
 - the committee's own composition, procedures and terms of reference
 - the authority's codes and protocols
 - member-officer relations
 - licensing and planning codes
 - confidential reporting/whistle blowing
 - officers' code of conduct
 - corporate governance
 - use of resources (including IT equipment).
 - gifts and hospitality
 - the role of the monitoring officer
 - financial regulations
 - anti-fraud and
 - anti-corruption policies
 - members' allowances
 - members' websites
 - executive arrangements
 - audit arrangements.
- 5.2 Considering whether proposed amendments to the Constitution will promote high standards in public life.
- 5.3 Provide challenge to proposed changes from a probity viewpoint.
- 5.4 Having provision in the constitution that no changes to the constitution can be made without prior consideration by the standards committee with advice from the monitoring officer.

6. Standards committees and leadership

Standards for England believes that a key factor in creating a strong ethical framework in authorities is clear ethical leadership from leaders and chief executives, setting the tone for the rest of the organisation. Approaches include:

- 6.1 The standards committee (or standards committee chair) meeting with the chief executive to discuss ethical issues at least once during the year.
- 6.2 The chief executive officer, chair of the standards committee, and monitoring officer having a pre-meeting to discuss the agenda items before each standards committee meeting.
- 6.3 The chief executive attending a standards committee meeting once a year to discuss ethical issues.

Case Studies

Leeds City Council

Shortlisted in the Standards and Ethics category at the 2009 LGC Awards, Leeds City Council has a strong track record of making standards a central part of its culture.

Standards committee chair Mike Wilkinson explained how the committee has sought to get involved in various activities to promote ethical governance. These activities form a communications plan which covers awareness-raising work aimed at members, including parish councillors, and the general public. An annual standards committee report is made available to the local press and to the public via the council's website. This report not only outlines the past year's ethical successes but also sets out the standards committee's planned work for the months to come.

In terms of advertising the complaints process itself, Leeds City Council has placed notices in local press and council buildings. It also contacted the city's many Citizens Advice Bureaux with notices for them to display and letters explaining the new system, should they be asked to help a member of the public with a complaint about an elected member.

Training and development for members has been made easier with the provision of an e-learning course, Cracking the Code. It covers general obligations and members' interests. The benefits of e-learning materials are that they can be used by busy members at times that suit them. This is particularly useful in reaching parish councillors. By making sure that training on key aspects of the Code is readily and conveniently available to parish members, Leeds City Council has been able to help prevent potential problems before they occur.

Mansfield District Council

Mansfield District Council is an example of an authority with a commitment to standards from the highest level.

Monitoring officer Anita Bradley meets regularly with the executive mayor to discuss relevant issues and decide whether they fit the standards committee's remit. Discussions may also take place with the cabinet, and the managing director has a role in contributing to the forward work plan before it is run past the committee.

As well as putting standards at the heart of its own governance, Mansfield also tries to monitor and ensure high standards when it works with external partners. The council has a Partnership Protocol Toolkit which it uses to evaluate all the council's significant partnerships each year. This includes assessing risks against particular criteria – including governance risks and levels of conduct. This means that Mansfield District Council is also well-placed to talk to partnership organisations about ethical governance. The council's monitoring officer has visited a local Tenants and Residents Forum, for example, and talked to the Forum's members about standards

to encourage them to take an ethical approach, using the Ten Principles of Public Life as a starting point.

The authority's member-officer protocol is designed to run on 'mutual respect', and much is done to boost awareness of it. It is part of the council's constitution and is available on its website. It is also given to all new employees when they are appointed and to members on their election. To promote the protocol further, articles have also appeared in the council's internal newsletter, *Insider*. Training sessions for members also help to clarify things further.

When it comes to actual standards complaints and their outcomes, the authority has tried to balance openness and transparency with a positive and forward-looking approach. The monitoring officer produces briefing notes based on the issues raised in the complaint. This enables her to draw learning points from the process which can be looked at as part of the standards committee's agenda, and has also helped to make members more aware of how the Code of Conduct is applied and when a complaint is or is not appropriate.

Bromsgrove District Council

Bromsgrove District Council is proud of the improvements it has made in its approach to standards and ethics.

To coincide with the start of the new local assessment system, Bromsgrove published articles in its own publication, 'Together Bromsgrove', delivered to every household in the area. They also issued press releases to the local media.

The standards committee's annual report is circulated to the district's libraries and parish councils as well as the council's Customer Services Centre and Planning reception. Automatic updates on related matters are emailed to key internal and external contacts, including the local press, and the council's website is also used to promote the standards committee's work.

Much of Bromsgrove's publicity around standards has highlighted the positive role that members have in working to improve communities, while at the same time reminding the public what to do should their councillor appear to be falling short of the high ethical standards expected of them. Importantly, Bromsgrove District Council is also making sure that its successes in raising awareness are measurable. An annual performance indicator has been set based around responses in the council's annual survey, with a benchmark set for the percentage of respondents who know how to raise issues under the local standards framework.

With the emphasis on development, training has included small workshops on the Code of Conduct and informal one-to-one meetings with the monitoring officer and deputy monitoring officer, which have not only proved useful in reminding members of their obligations under the Code, but also in building good working relationships. Development needs for parish councils – Bromsgrove has 21 – were identified through face-to-face meetings. It is a preemptive approach which aims to prevent potential pitfalls rather than waiting for complaints to come in.

A demonstrable commitment to promoting and maintaining standards at Bromsgrove was made when a full-time officer was appointed to deal specifically with standards and ethics related work within the council.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

At Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, the standards committee's forward work plan is informed by comments from people across the council, both officers and members, and also meetings between the chief executive and monitoring officer David Bond, who initiates the plan's proposed content.

David also discusses the plan with the senior legal assistant, who administers the authority's local assessment arrangements, the cabinet member for standards ethics, and with the council's political group leaders.

It is an all-inclusive approach that enables the monitoring officer and the standards committee to get different perspectives on ethical issues. The plan is reviewed and revised on a monthly basis. And in keeping with this approach, the standards committee also has a role in reviewing the council's constitution.

Partnership working is an area to which Stockton-on-Tees has devoted considerable attention and made excellent progress. The council has developed a partnership toolkit to help all those involved set up proper structures to manage their partnerships. The governance arrangements for them are based on the six principles of good governance and the standards expected in public life. The internal audit service reviews these arrangements based on those principles and standards. Moreover, any partnership that the council is part of has a nominated link officer, whose role includes alerting the council to any potential issues, such as conduct and decisionmaking. The link officer also undertakes periodic self-assessment 'health checks', a sample of which is audited each year to ensure their reliability and which can also pick up any concerns quickly and allow them to be swiftly resolved. Ethically-sound partnerships are considered essential and the council's commitment in this area continues to grow.

Stockton-on-Tees is proud of its ethical standards and has taken lots of steps to promote the standards framework to its many different audiences, raising its profile as much as possible. Standards committee members have visited town and parish councils as well as full council, planning, licensing and scrutiny meetings in order to meet councillors at all levels. When it comes to the general public, the council has a dedicated set of standards committee pages on its website, highlights the standards committee's work through the *Stockton News*, the council's external newsletter, and displays posters and information in libraries, council buildings and community centres.

Suffolk Coastal District Council

The standards committee at Suffolk Coastal District Council plays an important role not just in overseeing issues involving the members' Code of Conduct but also in wider standards matters.

For instance, the standards committee periodically reviews a number of parts of the council's constitution, including the Officer Code of Conduct, the whistleblowing policy and the Codes of Good Guidance in Planning and Rights of Way.

Monitoring officer Hilary Slater finds their input very useful: as many of the standards committee members are not councillors and have a wide range of experience between them, their external viewpoints can be invaluable when it comes to practical, common sense suggestions. It also helps the independent standards committee members to get a feel for the wider council and how it works.

The authority works hard to raise the profile of standards and ethics internally, among both officers and members. Suffolk Coastal's intranet has its own standards page, and the monitoring officer makes sure officers and members are up to speed with their ethical obligations by periodically issuing reminders. These are sometimes prompted by questions members have asked, or are based on feedback from officers.

When it comes to the general public, Suffolk Coastal is keen to ensure that they are well informed about member conduct. As well as an article in *Coastline*, the council's newsletter, to coincide with the launch of the local assessment system, Suffolk Coastal District Council's monitoring officer also worked with her counterparts across the county to produce a leaflet on how to complain. This was widely circulated to the county's libraries and council reception areas.

Working with neighbouring authorities has proved useful in other ways, too. Suffolk's monitoring officers meet regularly to share information and good practice, and discuss recent developments in case law or new Standards for England guidance. This contributes to regular updates to the standards committee at their meetings, and in turn, the standards committee chair presents the minutes to the full council. This means that the standards committee and its chair have a profile among members, and that Councillors also get to hear about the standards committee's work and recent case decisions from elsewhere.