

Satisfaction with The Standards Board for England's Support and Guidance to Key Stakeholders

MORI

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Introduction

Background and objectives

This research was conducted by the MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of The Standards Board for England. The objective of the research was to identify the levels of awareness, satisfaction and demand for publications from The Standards Board among members and officers.

The research consisted of two modules: a quantitative survey of stakeholders, followed by a qualitative programme of depth interviews and focus groups.

Methods

Self-completion postal questionnaires were sent out on 18 September 2003 to 3,229 members and monitoring officers in local government in England. Questionnaires were sent out to those in principal authorities (district, unitary, London borough, metropolitan and county councils), town and parish councils, and “other” authorities covered by The Standards Board (e.g. national park and fire and police authorities). A total of 1,343 questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 42%.

The second module followed up the quantitative research. This involved 27 in-depth interviews and two mini-focus groups with respondents to the quantitative survey. Twenty-seven depth interviews allowed us to explore the topic fully with members and officers from a carefully selected range of authority types and regions.

We would like to thank everyone involved in this research.

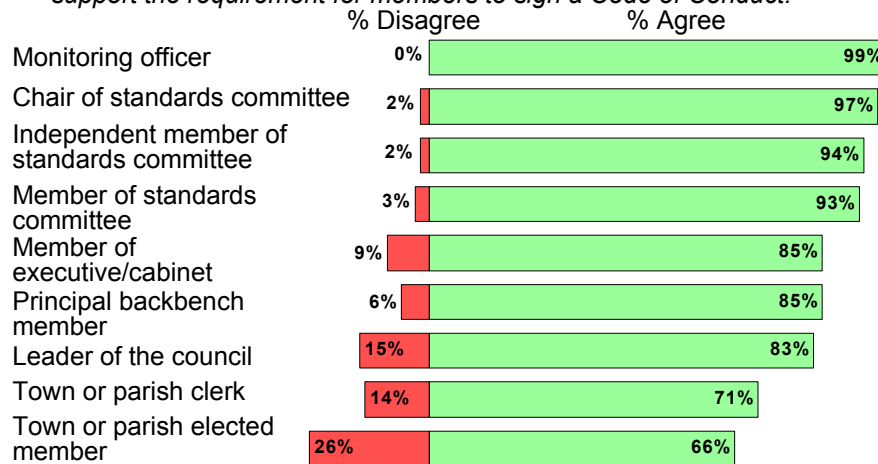
Summary and Implications

Overall attitudes to The Standards Board and the ethical environment

The Standards Board has made a generally positive start in developing its reputation in local government. Importantly, key stakeholders support the requirement for members to sign a Code of Conduct and the majority feel that standards are important.

Signing the Code of Conduct

Q Please indicate how far you agree or disagree with each of the following. I support the requirement for members to sign a Code of Conduct.



Base: All respondents (1,343) from survey of members and officers for the Standards Board for England 2003.

Source: MORI

At the same time, this level of support for the Code and on several other key indicators does vary somewhat across the local government community. Generally, those most closely associated with the workings of The Standards Board (principally monitoring officers and standards committee members) are most supportive. At the other end of the spectrum, those in parish and town councils tend to be much less so.

Many of the criticisms of The Standards Board and concerns more widely are not directly to do with The Standards Board itself, but the overall ethical framework developed by the Government in which The Standards Board operates. To this extent the criticism is around some stakeholders' view that The Standards Board is not necessary, rather than criticism of its performance. As well as demonstrating the need for the Code of Conduct and its role in ensuring this works effectively, The Standards Board may wish to **further promote the necessity for good ethical behaviour over and above signing the Code.**

A more directly relevant criticism of The Standards Board is the way with which complaints are dealt. Some of this is to do with the centralisation of the system. It is often seen that this increases bureaucracy and formality more than would be the case if monitoring officers were given more freedom to sort out (minor) issues locally first. The perceived “top-down” approach to dealing with complaints is often criticised by stakeholders. **Changes to the complaints procedure (which are eagerly anticipated) and improvements to communications could be useful here.** The latter, for example, should be **particularly aimed at public complainants, to explain to them why a local authority does not currently deal with allegations itself.**

Although not directly part of the remit of this study, several participants raised concerns about the length of time an investigation can take, and the way that investigations can be handled. This report is not based on a robust or representative customer handling/user type survey, but nevertheless it does give some indicative findings about what stakeholders think.

As The Standards Board progresses, **it will be important to ensure that confidence in the investigations system is maintained**, as for many stakeholders this is likely to be the main way in which they form a judgement about The Standards Board’s overall effectiveness.

Keeping stakeholders informed

The Standards Board’s published information and guidance are often cited as a positive aspect of The Standards Board’s work to date, and are not seen as the major causes of dissatisfaction.

The proportion of respondents from the key groups who had read or used each of the particular types of information for them, and found them useful are as follows:

- **Standard Committee Determinations:** 76% among standards committee members, and 79% among monitoring officers;
- **The Bulletin:** 86% among monitoring officers;
- **The Case Review: the Code Q&A:** 85% among monitoring officers;
- **The Code in Practice (video):** 66% among town/parish clerks and 61% among town/parish members;
- **The Code to Protect You (video):** 54% among town/parish clerks and 69% among town/parish members.

However, this does not mean that good communication is unimportant or that stakeholders do not identify areas for improvement. MORI’s studies consistently find that

the more informed people are about an organisation, the more favourably disposed they are towards that organisation. The Standards Board is no exception.

Improving communication will, therefore, pay wider dividends for The Standards Board. However, this is no easy task, particularly given that:

- standards issues are generally not high on the agenda of many stakeholders. This is not to say that people do not consider them important, but that most in local government have other pressing day-to-day concerns (this is reflected throughout the survey by the relatively high numbers who give “neither/nor” or “don’t know” answers);
- all stakeholders in local government face massive amounts of information both from within and from outside their authorities. Prioritisation and filtering is common-place; and
- for many, The Standards Board has a low profile and is mainly seen to be involved when allegations are made or “things go wrong”, and so there is often not seen as much need to contact The Standards Board in normal circumstances.

Dissemination and information – how best to reach key groups

In principal authorities, the relationship between the **monitoring officer** and other stakeholders is crucial. On the whole, members are happy that information should be directed to monitoring officers and that they then disseminate the information internally. Sometimes this will take the form of sending The Standards Board’s own communications to other people, and other times tailoring The Standards Board’s information for individual authorities.

More than other groups, monitoring officers want The Standards Board to demonstrate that it is listening and responding to their concerns. Many feel they have a great deal of experience in local government and feel The Standards Board could learn from this experience, and act as a catalyst for sharing good practice more widely.

Some monitoring officers are protective over the information produced by The Standards Board and they feel they should be responsible for distribution, or at least be copied in to any communication. This includes communication related to an investigation in their authority.

In most cases, it seems that using monitoring officers as a conduit seems to work well, but it is not foolproof. There is no straightforward option to remedy any problems in a small number of authorities. Options could include:

- **clear instructions for monitoring officers on which publications other stakeholders should receive.** This could be achieved through a checklist produced by The Standards Board periodically or a distribution-type list when individual pieces of information are sent out
- More direct communication between The Standards Board and individual members. Logistically this would be difficult and expensive if this applied to all the information provided by The Standards Board. However, if it was very basic information then this option would become more feasible.

To help support monitoring officers in the future, information which goes beyond the basics and provides them with case studies and actual outcomes of cases is desired. **Along with members of standards committees, these groups want more information that can be used to train members generally.** The latest video produced by The Standards Board was praised as being useful for training. In this sense, the desire is for communications which can be used for “support” rather than to “police” members. **Improvements to the website**, which are mainly accessed by monitoring officers, will also **help them to search out cases of relevance** to their local situation.

There is some demand for **independent standards committee members** to be treated as a separate group. **The importance of independents to the integrity of the local framework cannot be understated.** They help build confidence in the local apparatus and when properly running, feel able to ask detailed questions. However, **some feel isolated, especially when they do not come from a local government background**, and would welcome more support and guidance from The Standards Board, and opportunities to share information and experiences with peers. In some instance, regional networks of independents have already been established.

Town and Parish clerks have the least resources to deal with information and communications, and in some councils distribution of documents can take several weeks, particularly where they are handed out at council meetings rather than being posted to individual members. Clerks are most likely to say they receive too much information from The Standards Board. In some cases, monitoring officers are able to support clerks in disseminating information, but this is not always the case. A challenge for **The Standards Board is to consider how County Associations can be used to better support clerks.**

The majority of **members** (both in principal and town/parish councils) are content to be given basic information about the Code of Conduct, as long as they know where to find further information and support if needed. The monitoring officer or standards committee is the first point of call.

The survey found that **leaders** of authorities are often less engaged and informed about The Standards Board than other stakeholders.¹ Should they be treated as a special type of member? One view is that it is important that leaders are seen to engage in the standards debate and to uphold high standards of conduct as the ethical environment of an authority is often influenced heavily from the top. However, the majority view is that it is important that standards committees are not seen to be involved in anything party political, and **independence from party leadership is a strength**.

The qualitative research found **chief executives** content with the new ethical arrangements, though with the usual caveats of concern with the length of investigations and the powerlessness of standards committees to deal with relatively minor matters.

They tend to agree that they are best kept informed by monitoring officers on a “need to know” basis, which – like leaders – might be the well-regarded e-bulletin to monitoring officers. Few chief executives or leaders would argue with a short, succinct e-bulletin for them which keeps The Standards Board’s work in the front of their minds. And some would positively welcome it. There was no evidence of chief executives being out of the loop compared with their more proactive pre-Standards Board role. Rather, they welcomed the greater transparency and the discipline expected of members.

¹ However, note that the base size for leaders is small (52 respondents only) and quantitative results for this group should be viewed as indicative only

Conclusions

Below, are the key points identified in the research as well as ways in which The Standards Board will seek to address them.

- **Ensure that stakeholders (particularly those who are not monitoring officers or members of standards committees) understand what is meant by ethical behaviour and how The Standards Board is working to promote it.**

There are various ways in which we aim to increase the awareness and understanding of stakeholders of ethics. Some of these approaches will be more indirect than others. Indirectly, for example, we will be encouraging standards committees to adopt a proactive role in relation to ethics.

More directly, The Standards Board will be working with the Audit Commission and the IDeA over the coming year to develop two diagnostic tools. One diagnostic tool will focus on the extent to which authorities have complied with the Local Government Act 2000, and how the roles of monitoring officers and standards committees are developing. A second tool is likely to be a web-based questionnaire which will enable members to assess their own behaviour.

The Standards Board also contributed a chapter on ethics and standards to the IDeA's 'a councillor's guide 2003/4', published primarily for newly elected councillors in May 2003.

- **Review how complaints and investigations are handled, providing more opportunity for decisions to be taken locally. Guidance and best practice for standards committees will be needed.**

The Standards Board is very keen to reduce the time that investigations take. To this end we are refocusing our resources to ensure that the current backlog of complaints is cleared. We have contacted monitoring officers seeking applications for secondments. Furthermore, we will be recruiting a special team to be employed for six months in the first instance.

A pilot scheme is due to begin which will seek certain additional information from the local level before we consider embarking on an investigation. In this way, we aim to reduce the number of investigations that cannot reach a definitive conclusion. For those issues that do require investigation, we are committed to the principle that local issues should be dealt with at a local level wherever possible. In order for this to happen, we need the Section 66

regulations covering investigation of cases by monitoring officers to be in place and working.

Inevitably, in our early years the focus of our guidance has been on providing advice and information on interpreting the Code of Conduct and the operation of standards committees. The Standards Board will be seeking to identify and disseminate good practice in the coming year. This year, we will be commissioning a research project which will seek to identify the components of an ethical environment. One of the aims of the project will be to identify good practice, including the workings of standards committee hearings, which can then be disseminated via our various bulletins, good practice guidance and for use in the diagnostic tools referred to earlier. Over the next year the representatives of The Standards Board will be seeking to attend standards committee hearings and collect information on good practice.

There will be a session 'Shine Your Light' at the Third Annual Assembly of Standards Committees in Birmingham in September 2004, presented by the Audit Commission, which will include information on good practice at Standards Committee hearings.

- **Provide more information (especially for the public and complainants) on how the investigation system works, and what is expected of each party.**

The Standards Board's 'How to make a complaint' leaflet explains the process of making complaints. These are available from local authorities, our website and potential complainants can also telephone us to request a copy. We also have an advice line which is advertised on all of our publications and which the public, officers and members can ring for advice.

The focus of our activities in the last couple of years has been on raising the awareness of key stakeholders such as monitoring officers and standards committees and of local government generally. We will be commissioning some research in 2005 which will, among other things, aim to identify public perceptions of The Standards Board and how we can best raise awareness of the service we provide.

- **Continue to build positive relations with monitoring officers: these are key to the successful dissemination of information and guidance. For the most part, elected members are happy to receive basic information only (e.g. on the Code of Conduct) and to use the monitoring officer/standards committee as the first point of reference.**

The Standards Board has, so far, concentrated resources mainly on engaging with those stakeholders, such as monitoring officers and standards committee members, who are directly responsible for ensuring that the new ethical framework runs as efficiently as possible. Our aim is to support these groups to

become proactive in the provision of advice, assistance and training. We are therefore particularly pleased that we have received high satisfaction ratings from these groups. Various ways in which we will continue to work with monitoring officers are referred to in response to the various conclusions.

- **The Standards Board should consider ways in which to build a more interactive dialogue with monitoring officers, demonstrating that it is willing to learn from monitoring officers' local knowledge and experience.**

All guidance aimed at monitoring officers is developed with a reference group of monitoring officers.

We will also be seeking to benefit from the knowledge and experience of monitoring officers and others at our Third Annual Assembly of Standards Committees. For example, one of the sessions will be a review of the Code where we will seek the views of monitoring officers and others on the Code of Conduct. There will also be a member of staff from The Standards Board in each of the workshops who will be taking notes. Following the conference there will be a feedback session for staff enabling us to learn from the experiences of stakeholders.

We will also be undertaking another series of road shows in February 2005, which the MORI research indicates was a good means for The Standards Board to learn from stakeholders.

- **Continue to use monitoring officers for most communications with the wider local government community, and ensure that any targeted communication to specific groups are also copied into relevant monitoring officers. To help monitoring officers, The Standards Board may wish to provide a checklist of what publications they should have received and who they should have sent it to.**

Monitoring officers remain a key stakeholder in relation to the work of The Standards Board. Since many of our publications and work generally impacts on them directly it is likely that much of our work will continue to be sent directly to them. As and when we develop areas of our work that have more direct relevance to other stakeholders then we will seek to engage directly with these groups. All of our publications are listed on, and downloadable from, our website. When we send our publications to monitoring officers we will continue to include a covering letter informing them who they should send it to.

- **Monitoring officers and members of standards committees also favour information or guidance that can be used by them to train other members – the last video was widely praised as being useful in this regard.**

The Standards Board is working with the IDeA and the Audit Commission to develop two diagnostic tools which could be used by monitoring officers and standards committees to provide training to members.

- **There is some demand from independent members for more support, either directly from The Standards Board or through setting up networks of independent members. The qualitative work found that their 'separateness' from the Council machinery was important and they should not necessarily be reliant on it for receiving information about The Standards Board and their work.**

Over the next year staff from The Standards Board will be meeting with co-ordinators of regional networks to find out at what stage of development they are and to identify how they can best be supported by The Standards Board.

Independent members are invited to the Third Annual Assembly of Standards Committees and there is also a session specifically for independent members.

Furthermore, in February 2004 Standards Committee News was launched as a quarterly bulletin. All standards committee members, including independent members, can subscribe to this bulletin.

- **Communicating with town and parish elected members is perhaps the most difficult of all stakeholder groups. Using town and parish clerks is only partially effective, as many do not feel they have the resources to cope. The Standards Board should consider other routes, such as County Associations, to support the dissemination of its guidance.**

Parish and town councillors will be able to receive a three times a year bulletin via the NALC magazine and also on the website. The first issues was published in July 2004. The Board are continuing with their approach of speaking at meetings with County Associations throughout the country. Interim findings from our commissioned research on 'the Needs of County Associations' suggests that County Associations are a relatively effective mechanism for reaching parish and town councils. The research will identify how The Standards Board can best work with County Associations to reach parish and town councillors. This research is due to be completed in July 2004. A summary and key findings will be included on our website.

- **Leaders and chief executives are also difficult to engage on a continuous basis, because of the demands on their time. It is unlikely that any formal mechanism of communication (such as a newsletter) would be read regularly. Therefore, where it is appropriate, senior members of The Standards Board should make contact on a mainly ad hoc basis with these groups.**

An e-mail bulletin targeted at chief executives and leaders is planned for June 2004. The bulletin will be quarterly, succinct and provide information on key developments.

Senior managers at The Standards Board as well as Board members will be meeting with SOLACE on a more regular basis than hitherto, which will provide the opportunity to inform chief executives of developments and receive feedback.

The Standards Board is also working with the Audit Commission to ensure that ethics is given a higher profile in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The CPA is, obviously, a key concern for chief executives and leaders and the inclusion of ethics issues will help raise awareness of the importance of ethics issues.

- **The qualitative work found that respondents would like easier access to case studies, it suggested that The Standards Board's website could improve this access by listing cases alphabetically by type of case rather than by type of authority.**

The Standards Board are tendering a contract to make improvements to our website. This includes indexing case summaries.