

# Qualitative Assessment of Advice and Guidance

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## 1. Issue

- 1.1.1 To present the findings of the qualitative part of the 2009 Stakeholder Tracker research undertaken by BMG Research.

## 2. Recommendation

- 2.1.1 The Board is asked to note the content of the report and paper.

## 3. Consideration

- 3.1.1 Every two years SfE conducts a 'stakeholder tracker' consisting of two parts: a quantitative survey, and a qualitative investigation. The 2009 quantitative survey was completed in the summer and the report is available on our website. The research being considered in this paper is the qualitative investigation. This qualitative research provides a more in-depth analysis of some of the issues that emerged from the quantitative research.
- 3.1.2 The research was conducted with Standards for England's key stakeholders, and looked at their levels of satisfaction with the performance of Standards for England (SfE), and their attitudes to the ethical environment more widely.
- 3.1.3 The findings of the qualitative research complement, and in many ways reflect, the quantitative data gathered earlier in the year. The topic areas covered in the focus groups with stakeholders stem from issues that emerged from the quantitative survey as requiring further exploration. Other than the key areas of satisfaction with SfE and attitudes to the ethical environment, topics for further exploration included: the process

for making complaints in the current framework; whether there is demand for case law examples; the benefits of developing peer and local/regional networks; the merits of a low/high local profile of standards committees; and attitudes towards SfE's Annual Assembly. There were also some additional questions for the parish sector, to ascertain why they consistently give lower satisfaction ratings in the quantitative surveys.

3.1.4 The findings are divided into two sections below: 'things we are doing well', and 'areas for SfE to address'

## **3.2 Things we are doing well**

3.2.1 **Monitoring officers and standards committee members are very positive about the local standards framework.** They feel it has 'bedded in' well, and welcome the chance to take ownership of the process of investigating complaints. Most respondents find it difficult to judge whether member behaviour has improved over recent years. However, where they do decide behaviour has changed, they point to an awareness of the code and the presence of standards committee members at internal meetings as potential drivers.

3.2.2 **The majority of stakeholders receive 'the Bulletin', and most feel that it is short, snappy and interesting.** The credit card sized pocket version of the code of conduct is also popular, and it is suggested that all councillors be issued with a hard copy of this pocket guide.

3.2.3 **Stakeholders who attended the SfE annual assembly found it a useful experience.** Some also felt that the event could be made more accessible by holding a series of regional events instead of a single national event.

3.2.4 **The monitoring officer helpline received positive feedback.** Some stakeholders also suggested that the service callers receive has improved over the past 12 months.

3.2.5 **Monitoring officers welcome the development of peer and local/regional networks.** However, there is some suggestion that a number of authorities may already have some form of networking in place. There is a request that SfE provides content for delivery at any such networking event.

## **3.3 Areas for SfE to consider**

3.3.1 The following points, 3.3.2 to 3.3.7, are being addressed by the Guidance Improvement Group, as well as the Guidance and Liaison and External Affairs teams. Point 3.3.8 has been taken into consideration as part of the review of the standards framework.

3.3.2 **Topics for further guidance.** Many stakeholders would like to see more advice and guidance relating to the prejudicial interest issue, particularly (but not exclusively) those aimed at the parish council level. Standards committee members would also like to receive: more information on other standards committee practices; more guidance on sanctions and proportionality; and more guidance for dual-hatted members. Monitoring officers also request: more guidance specifically for parish councillors; more guidance on mediation; more advice on the overlap with Freedom of Information and Data Protection legislation; and on disclosure generally in the context of local assessment.

- 3.3.3 **Format of our guidance.** Whilst the Bulletin and credit card sized code were praised, stakeholders do not perceive these as ‘typical’ SfE communications – they commonly perceive SfE communication to consist of lengthy, verbose documents. Stakeholders suggested that in future, they would like more concise information, such as a larger number of short fact sheets, rather than fewer, lengthier documents. The research also suggests there is a clear need to promote the existing online fact sheets better.
- 3.3.4 **Who we send communications to.** It is important to remember that, regardless of the format of communications, most standards committee members, elected members and parish councillors would like communications to be filtered by their monitoring officer or town clerk. They do not want to be communicated with *per se*, though they are open to receiving information that is of specific relevance to them.
- 3.3.5 **How we send communications to stakeholders.** Stakeholders request that really important information (by which most mean updates on the code and any illuminating case studies) be provided as a hard copy. If a hard copy is provided, perhaps attached to the council meeting agenda, there is a view that all attendees will formally read the documentation and consider it ‘important’.
- 3.3.6 **The relevance of the annual assembly to councillors and parish councillors who are not on standards committees.** Despite positive perceptions of the annual assembly from those who attend it, councillors do not perceive the event as relevant to them, and are unsure why SfE would want to make it relevant for them.
- 3.3.7 **Addressing the needs of parish councillors**
- **Whilst parish councillors and councillors have an awareness of our role, they do feel remote from SfE.** Most parish councillors appreciate that it is very important that they have a full understanding of the legislation as it applies to them, but they do not feel that it is so important to have a full understanding of SfE.
  - **Lower levels of satisfaction with SfE from parish councillors is due to a combination of the following factors** – a lack of contact with SfE; resentment that their behaviour can be monitored by an outside agency; a sense of indifference towards the code; and a frustration with the elements of the code that they perceive as unclear (although it should be remembered that they still have relatively high satisfaction levels as a sector).
  - **The research suggests that a higher level of engagement with parish councillors may help us address the needs of these councillors.** It is crucial this engagement focuses upon issues that are of interest and relevance to parish councillors themselves. Communication should avoid talking about SfE as an organisation and focus upon the implementation of the code as it applies to parish councillors (for example, via relevant case studies in a bulletin-style document).
- 3.3.8 **Making the standards framework more cost effective.** There are some concerns over the overall cost of resourcing local investigations. Although stakeholders are somewhat reluctant to suggest streamlining local investigations (for fear of ‘cutting corners’), there is a strong feeling that the framework should be improved to

differentiate between minor and major breaches at an early stage. This would allow minor breaches to be dealt with swiftly, and therefore more cost effectively.

- 3.3.9 **Previous qualitative stakeholder tracker research reports have been made available on the SfE website.** This ensures that we are perceived as open and transparent in the reporting of our research findings. Therefore, as per the 2007 stakeholder tracker report, we have asked BMG Research to produce a summary report for external dissemination.

## 4. Risk and financial considerations

- 4.1.1 There is a risk that SfE will not appear to be a transparent organisation if the research is not made available on the website.
- 4.1.2 There is a risk that satisfaction with the organisation will decline if we do not respond positively to this feedback.
- 4.1.3 The appetite for different, and more tailored, materials will have financial implications but provision for much of the issues raised has been made in next year's draft budget.

## 5. Appendices and attachments

- 5.1.1 Appendix A: Research Summary
- 5.1.2 Appendix B: Research Report