

**WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY**

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 2007**

1. **STANDARDS COMMITTEES: A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT**

Joint report of the Clerk and of the Monitoring Officer.

RECOMMENDED

- (1) THAT Members consider the key findings of the research into standards committees and monitoring officers within local authorities and discuss their relevance to the Fire Authority.

2. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

This report is submitted to inform the Committee of the outcome of research into standards committees and monitoring officers within local authorities carried out by the Standards Board for England.

3. **BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 Key findings of research into standards committees and monitoring officers within local authorities have been published by the Standards Board for England. These are initial findings and analysis is ongoing.
- 3.2 The Standards Board for England, the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors and bmg research conducted research into standards committees and monitoring officers within local authorities during July and August 2006.
- 3.3 The questions related to:
- 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.

3.4 1,308 completed questionnaires were analysed.

### 3.5 **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.

#### 4. **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY**

In preparing this report, an initial Equality Impact Assessment is not required and has not been carried out, as the matters contained in this report will not lead to and do not relate to a policy change.

#### 5. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The shift towards local ownership of the ethical agenda will require

further legislation to be enacted.

6. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Standards Committees: A National Snapshot – report to 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Assembly of Standards Committees

**NEERAJ SHARMA**  
**MONITORING OFFICER**

**SUSAN PHELPS**  
**CLERK**