
STANDARDS COMMITTEE

25 JANUARY 2008

Report of the Interim Head of Civic, Democratic and Legal Services

ETHICAL GOVERNANCE AUDIT

Summary

1. This report advises members of further progress on the Ethical Governance Audit including the outcome of Stage 2.

Background

2. The Audit Commission was commissioned to carry out an Ethical Governance Audit of the Council. The audit is undertaken as a three stage process:-
 - Stage 1 – this consists of an assessment of policies, procedures and practices against statutory requirements and best practice. Effectively, it is a review of the documentation in place to support the governance framework
 - Stage 2 – this is an assessment of the level of awareness of ethical governance issues by way of a questionnaire completed by Members and the first three tiers of officers
 - Stage 3 – this stage involves the delivery of workshops with members and officers to deal with issues arising out of the Stage 1 and 2 process.
3. The final Stage 1 report was published in August. A report on Stage 1 including an action plan to tackle the issues identified was submitted to the last meeting of the Standards Committee.
4. The final Stage 2 report was published by the Audit Commission in November 2007. A copy of that report is attached as an Annex to this report.
5. Questionnaires were sent out to all Council members and to a group of officers. 115 replies were received; 22 from councillors and 93 from officers, of whom 17 are part of the Corporate Leadership Group.
6. The main conclusions of the survey are generally very positive. They demonstrate a high level of understanding of the Council's ethical governance arrangements and a strong indication of compliance with the policies and procedures. In particular members were found to have a strong

level of awareness and understanding of the code of conduct and its impact on their behaviour and actions. There was strong support for the work and effectiveness of the Committee. Members were also found to be very clear on the issue of conflicts of interest and what the differences are between personal and prejudicial interest.

7. The responses from officers were less clear around the codes of conduct for members and officers. There was less awareness of the Members' code and of more concern a number of officers claimed either not to be aware of the officer code or not to have agreed to abide by it. Not surprisingly there was less awareness of the existence of the Standards Committee and understanding of its work amongst officers.
8. The audit concluded that the most significant issues for the Council to address are:
 - Equality legislation awareness: a large proportion of officers and members report that they have not had training, advice or a briefing on relevant equalities legislation.
 - Member/Officer culture: there is a significant minority of respondents who indicated that members interfered in operational issues, and that members involved officers inappropriately in party political issues. A significant proportion of officers consider that they cannot challenge member decisions without fear of reprisal.
 - Member/Officer relationships: a significant minority of officers report that only sometimes can they carry out their roles without the fear of bullying or harassment by members.
9. The issue around equality legislation awareness has been drawn to the attention of the Equalities Officer so that it can be taken into account in future training. Workshops of officers and members are being organised to further explore the issues raised in the replies to the survey particularly around Member/Officer relationships. The workshops will be conducted by the audit Commission. The officer workshop is being planned for March and a date is being sought for one for members.

Consultation

10. The outcome of the Ethical Governance Audit will also be reported to the Audit and Governance Committee.

Options

11. This report is for the information of the Committee. An action plan to implement the findings of the first part of the Ethical Governance Audit has already been agreed.

Analysis

12. The report is for information to keep the Standards Committee advised of progress on the Ethical Governance Audit..

Corporate Priorities

13. Implementation of the recommendations arising from the Ethical Governance Audit will contribute to the corporate priority of providing strong leadership for the city.

Implications

14. There are no specific financial, HR, equalities, crime and disorder, IT, property implications arising out of this report. The legal implications are dealt with in the report.

Risk Management

15. There is a risk to the standing and reputation of the Council if it does not ensure high ethical standards within the organisation.

Recommendations

16. The Standards Committee are recommended to note the outcome of stage 2 of the Ethical Governance Audit.

Reason: To ensure the maintenance of high standards of ethical conduct in the Council.

Contact Details

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Report Approved

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Specialist Implications Officer(s) List information for all
None

Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Ethical Governance Audit Report Stage 2

Annexes

Annex 1 – Ethical Governance Audit Report Stage 2