

**“STANDARDS STATISTICS”**  
**Report by the Head of Legal, Property and Governance**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The local standards framework arising from the Standards Committee (England) Regulations 2008 has been operating now since May 2009. During that time the Standards Board has continued to monitor the performance of local authorities and the District Council has contributed to this process by completing quarterly and annual monitoring returns. With this information in hand, the Board has been able to release data collated on complaints under the Members Code of Conduct and this is presented in paragraphs 2.1 – 2.5.
- 1.2 The Board also has commissioned two independent surveys to measure “support for the Code of Conduct” and the “impact and effectiveness of the ethical framework in local government”. A summary of the findings are set out below in paragraphs 3.1 - 3.7 and 4.1 - 4.5.

**2. STATISTICS**

- 2.1 The following information has been drawn from the quarterly returns in the first year –

**2.2 Standards Committees**

A typical standards committee has **10** members. In an authority without parishes it has **9** members, including **4** independent members. In an authority with parishes it is slightly larger with **11** members, including **4** independent members and **3** parish representatives.

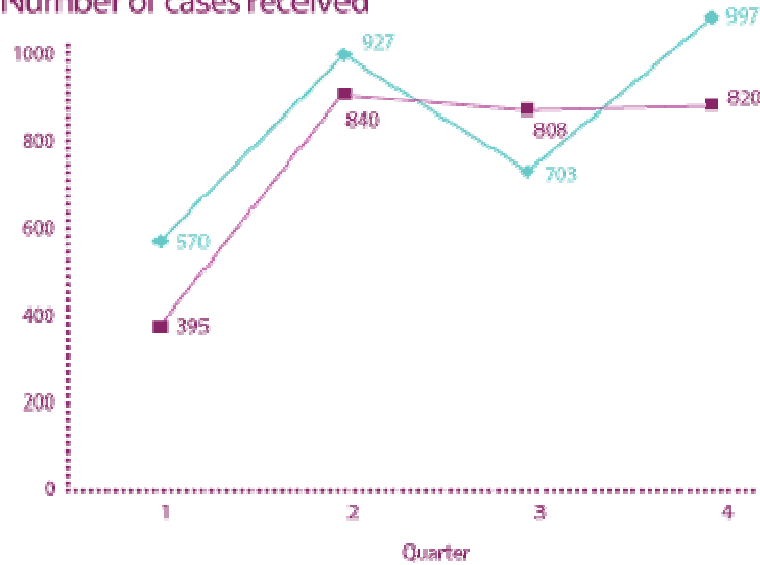
On average, district and metropolitan councils have the largest standards committees and police authorities have the smallest. Standards committee composition has remained constant through all quarters.

**2.3 Case handling**

A total of **2,863** cases have been recorded on quarterly returns so far. This covers the time period 8 May 2008 to 31 March 2008. **345** authorities have dealt with at least one case during the first year. Of all the authorities with cases, the average recorded is **2** per quarter, a total of **8**.

It is still perhaps too early to identify trends and make generalisations, but it is interesting to note that in quarter 4, the number of cases received under the new framework is very similar to the previous two quarters (see chart below). This may indicate that the case load is levelling out, now that potential complainants are aware of the new system.

### Number of cases received

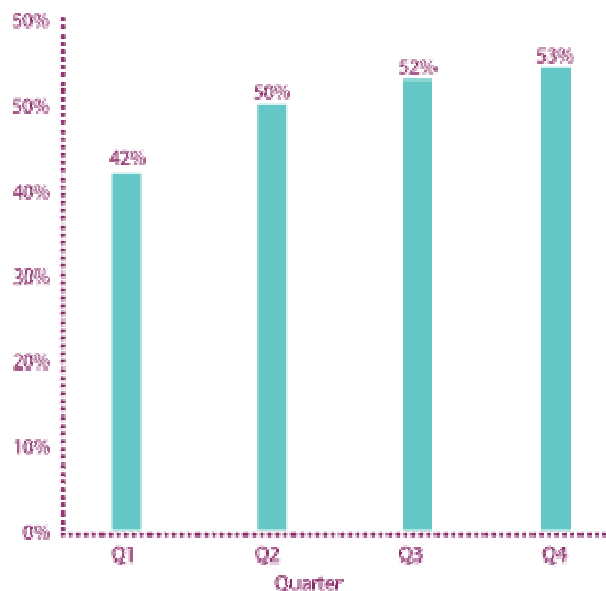


The majority of complaints, **54%**, are made by the public and **36%** are from council members. The remaining **10%** are from a combination of officers, parish or town clerks, MPs, monitoring officers, and those that fall into the category of 'other'. Again, these percentages have seen little change during the year.

#### 2.4 Initial assessment

The percentage of cases where no further action is taken is increasing each quarter.

### Percentage of no further action decisions



There have been 526 review requests through the year and 384 of these have been assessed. **94%** have remained 'no further action' and the other 25 (**6%**) were either referred for investigation or referred to the Board.

There are 224 cases with investigation outcomes recorded on quarterly returns. In **71%** of cases, no breach of the Code was found. In **25%** of cases, a breach was found and a penalty was imposed, and in **4%** of cases a breach was found but no further action was taken.

## **2.5 Good response for annual returns**

There has been a good response to the annual return questionnaire, which was launched on 20 April 2009.

As of 29 May, 95% of authorities had completed a return. This figure includes the new unitary authorities, which completed a shortened version.

The Board is now entering the analysis phase and first impressions are that there is a good range of notable practice to share with standards committees. More information about the findings will be reported to a future meeting.

## **3. SUPPORT FOR CODE OF CONDUCT 'REMAINS HIGH'**

3.1 Newly-published research suggests that member behaviour is improving and that support for the Code of Conduct remains high.

3.2 The Standards Board has surveyed the level of satisfaction in local government with performance, and attitudes to the ethical environment, every two years. This year they commissioned BMG Research to carry out this survey on their behalf. The survey was first undertaken in 2004 and was repeated in 2007.

3.3 The report's key findings are:

62% consider the Board successful in keeping local government, in general, informed about what they are doing (52% in 2007 and 46% in 2004).

Support for the Code of Conduct remains high - 94% support the requirement for members to sign a Code of Conduct (93% in 2007 and 84% in 2004)

47% of respondents stated that they think members standards of behaviour have improved (44% in 2007, 27% in 2003).

75% of stakeholders have confidence in the way their local standards committee deals with complaints about members.

3.4 This year the Board asked respondents if they support the requirements for an officer's code - 88% of members expressed support for a requirement for an officer's code compared with 70% of monitoring officers and 78% of town/parish clerks. This information will be conveyed to the department for Communities and Local Government.

- 3.5 Questions asked in the survey covered a number of areas including:
- attitudes to the Standards Board and ethical environment;
  - perceptions of the Standards Board;
  - views on the Board's publication and website; and
  - suggestions for ways in which the Board can improve our communication.
- 3.6 In total, BMG received 1,973 completed questionnaires; this represents a response rate of 44% among town and parish councils, and 32% among principal and other authorities.
- 3.7 The research findings allow the Board to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as demand for services. In this way the Board can tailor their communications and advice and guidance to the needs of stakeholders. Since the research also collects data on attitudes to the ethical environment, the Board can also use it to help assess the impact of the standards framework

#### **4. "STUDYING THE IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT"**

- 4.1 In 2006, the Board commissioned Cardiff University to carry out a five-year project to identify the impact of the standards framework within nine local authorities. Year one of this study is now complete.
- 4.2 This project also involved a survey of the public within the nine areas to identify any link between the activities of a local authority and public perceptions. This research is being led by Dr Richard Cowell from the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research.
- 4.3 The research aims to address three main questions:
- Has the ethical framework caused any changes in local government processes and systems, and culture and values?
  - Has the ethical framework had any effect on the conduct of councillors?
  - Has the ethical framework had any effect on public attitudes to local government either directly, or through any changes in council processes and/or councillor conduct?

#### **4.4 What has the research found so far?**

**Changes in processes, systems, culture, and values:** The research identifies that, in most councils, the ethical framework and standards have become established and accepted as part of corporate life. The majority of respondents are positive about the move towards local regulation (apart from a concern about costs). The formal components of the ethical framework are being implemented successfully and there is some desire among those interviewed for committees to take a more pro-active role in promoting good conduct.

**The conduct of councillors:** The research reveals many feel that the conduct of councillors has improved in recent years, and that ethical issues are being treated seriously. There also seems to be widespread support for the view that the ethical framework has been beneficial. Councils with better conduct tend to make more effort to continually train and remind councillors of their responsibilities, and to make involvement in training mandatory. The ethical framework has helped improve conduct by acting as a regulatory mechanism, being used to support the sanctioning, demotion or resignation of councillors who have caused serious ethical problems.

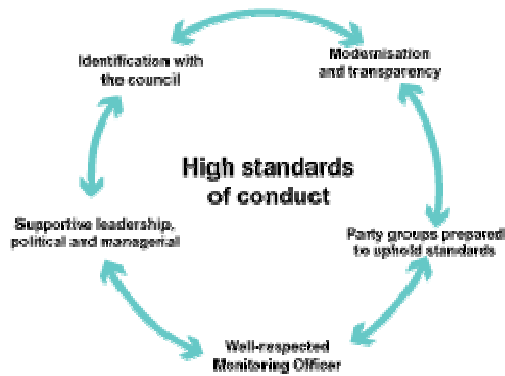
**Effect on public attitudes:** The research found that more positive public survey responses for trust are achieved in councils displaying good standards of conduct. In addition, councils with high levels of trust tend to be well managed. Nearly half of the public survey respondents were confident that their local authority would uncover breaches in standards of behaviour by a councillor. Furthermore, a similar proportion believe that those breaching the Code would be dealt with effectively.

4.5 The research has also highlighted two very useful typologies, “Virtuous circles”, and ‘Spirals of despair’.

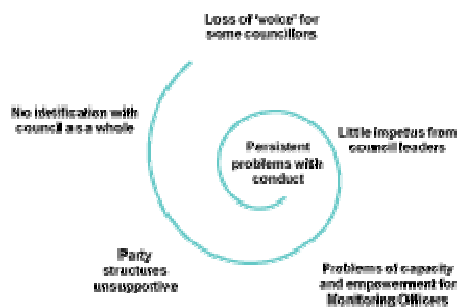
“**Virtuous circles**” - refer to those organisational and cultural factors that lead to effective use of the ethical framework and good conduct

“**Spirals of despair**” - are factors that result in poor conduct

**Virtuous Circles**



**Spirals of despair**




## **5. CONCLUSION**

5.1 The Committee is request to note the information presented.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Bulletin No. 44 – Standards Board for England

**Contact Officer:** Christine Deller, Democratic Services Manager  
 01480 388007