NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

2 June 2008

Communications Strategy

1.0	**PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**
1.1	This report informs Members of further action taken in relation to the results of the Citizens' Panel survey on standards issues, in light of the Standards Committee's Communications Strategy.

2.0   BACKGROUND

1.1   At the Committee's meeting on 14 January 2008, it considered the full report of the results of the Citizens' Panel survey regarding standards issues. Members requested that consultation take place with the Communications Unit regarding the results and how they might inform the future work of the Committee in light of its Communications Strategy. Members requested a report be brought back to this meeting.

3.0   PRESENT POSITION

2.1   A copy of the Committee's Communications Strategy is attached as Appendix 1. At the Committee's last meeting on 2 March 2008, Members requested that future reports on the Strategy include a column in the Action Plan, identifying where action had been taken. The Action Plan has been annotated to indicate where action has been undertaken and an amended version is included at Appendix 1.

2.2   The full report of the Citizens' Panel survey and the amended Communications Strategy were forwarded to the Communications Unit for their views. A member of the Unit will be in attendance at the Committee's meeting, to speak about these issues.

4.0	**RECOMMENDATIONS**
4.1	That Members note this report.

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Background Papers:
None

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21 May 2008

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Standards Committee Communications Strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Strategy

The purpose of the Communications Strategy is to promote the work of the Standards Committee in order to gain public confidence in North Yorkshire County Council, its Members and Officers.

1.2 Key Message of the strategy

North Yorkshire County Council works to ensure high standards of conduct from its Members and Officers.

2. NATIONAL CONTEXT

2.1 Public trust is a pillar of public life. It is concerned with perceptions of honesty but is also about confidence and satisfaction with the outcomes of service delivery. Bridging the gap between values held by the public and their perception of official behaviour is a major challenge facing public bodies in the UK.

2.2 The tenth report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life highlights difficulties in engaging public trust. Evidence from national surveys also reveals low levels of trust in public officials particularly those operating in local government.

2.3 The Government has set a number of national objectives for the ethical regime:

a) to maintain high standards of conduct for local authority Members and employees,

b) to define effectively what standards of conduct are expected of Members and Officers, and for such rules to be fair and clear,

c) for an effective means of taking action when breaches of the rules occur, and for such means to be fair, clear, proportionate, rigorous and thorough, and

d) to ensure measures are in place to guarantee public confidence in the appropriateness of the ethical regime.

2.4 There is increasing emphasis on the importance of trust in the relationship between the public and public services. Absence of trust critically undermines the legitimacy of public office-holders to act on the public's behalf. Recent work by the Audit Commission and MORI indicates that levels of trust impact on the extent to which members of the public engage with and use public services. The Committee on Standards in Public Life recently published the first national survey of public attitudes to standards of conduct which showed only 41% would generally trust local councillors to tell the truth and 35% senior managers in local councils.

2.5   The relationship between ethical organisational culture, public trust and excellent service delivery is a strong and mutually reinforcing one. A strong ethical organisational culture is a driver of both increased public trust and improved performance and service delivery. A healthy culture is more likely to produce individual and organisational behaviours that increase public trust in the organisation. This in turn makes it more likely that the public will engage with the organisation and utilise its services. Excellent service delivery will then itself increase public trust in the organisation.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

2.6   The Standards Committee has a responsibility to ensure that its own communications adhere to clear principles which encourage public trust, and the Committee also has a role in seeking to influence the wider Communication Strategy for the Council so that it adheres to the following principles:

PUBLIC TRUST

PERFORMANCE

a)   A clear line is drawn between the Council and party group Communications.

b)   Communications which are misleading or contrary to the long term credibility of the Council should be challenged

c)   In line with the FOI Act there should be a presumption in favour of disclosure and a culture of proactive publication and disclosure with a view to challenging the public's perception of a closed and secretive world.

d)   The Council should be open and confident about potential pitfalls in policies they are pursuing. Communications need to acknowledge difficulties and competing pressures.

e)   When things do go wrong, both the Committee and the wider Council needs to develop the skill of admitting mistakes and, critically, explaining how we are going to learn from them in the future.

3.   THE COUNCIL'S POSITION

3.1   The Council has begun to establish a clear cultural message in relation to ethical standards. It is essential to present to the public an unequivocal statement of the Council's position that is owned by the Authority's leaders. A defined role for the Leader and Chief Executive Officer in setting high ethical standards has therefore been developed. A clear statement of intent for all staff and Members will assist the Committee in its internal and external communication.

4.   PUBLIC AWARENESS

4.1 Research conducted by the Council in relation to levels of public awareness in 2003 shows that the public continue to struggle to understand which core services the Council provides, e.g. 34% of people surveyed believed that housing is the responsibility of the County Council. There are no specific statistics for awareness in relation to the ethical agenda or public trust of the Council specifically related to North Yorkshire. It is anticipated that the position will reflect the national picture.

5. SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths	Opportunities
• Focus on the part of the Committee in improving awareness as part of an agreed work programme • Standards Committee has clear objectives • Support from experienced staff • Awareness on the part of most members of the ethical framework	• To use the Council's publications and external media to raise awareness • To work efficiently on the ethical agenda with other authorities and partner organisations • To use training opportunities
Weaknesses	**Threats**
• Officer awareness of ethical issues is less prevalent • Public awareness of the ethical framework is also low	• Lack of awareness can result in incidents of breaches of the Codes • Lack of confidence on the part of the public • Media interest in malpractice

6. OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

6.1 The aim of the Standards Committee Communications Strategy is:

6.2 In communicating externally:

a) to raise awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct
b) to raise public awareness of the work of the Committee
c) to engage with the public
d) to gain public trust in the authority

6.3 In communicating internally:

a) to raise awareness of the work of the Committee
b) to communicate the role of Council's Leader and Chief Executive Officer in the ethical agenda
c) raise awareness amongst the staff and councillors of the standards expected of them
d) to gain commitment to those standards from all those representing the Council

7.   KEY AREAS FOR THE STRATEGY

7.1   Key areas to be addressed by the Communications Strategy are as follows

a)   engaging with the Public

b)   promoting the work of the Committee in order to enhance public confidence in North Yorkshire County Council, its Members and Officers.

c)   raising awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct and of the work of the Committee.

d)   raising awareness of the work of the Committee within North Yorkshire County Council.

e)   communicating the role of the Council's Leader and Chief Executive Officer in the ethical agenda.

f)   raising awareness amongst the staff and Members of the standards expected of them.

g)   gaining commitment to the standards from all those representing the Council.

7.2   The Strategy will also contribute to providing information on the following issues, together with information on the overall role of the Standards Committee :-

- Members' Register of Interests.
- Officers' Register of Interests.
- Defined roles of Leader and Chief Executive Officer in ethical agenda.
- Members' Code of Conduct.
- Officers' Code of Conduct.
- publication of Members' Interests on the Council's website.
- ethical training.
- development of clear guidance on ethical issues.
- review of induction processes for County Council.
- the monitoring of performance indicators.
- the ethical framework of the County Council.
- performance of the Standards Committee
- the Standards Committee Annual Report
- update on cases determined by the Standards Board for England

8. TARGET AUDIENCES

8.1⎯⎯It is important to be clear in setting the strategy as to who the target audiences will be.⎯⎯

8.2 External audiences:

- Residents
- Partner Agencies
- Local Strategic Partnerships
- Those involved with the Local Area Agreement
- The Business Community
- Voluntary Sector and Community Groups
- Tenderers and potential contractors
- Planning Applicants and Objectors
- Inspectorates
- Other authorities
- Central Government
- The Media
- The Audit Commission

8.3 Internal audiences will include:

- Employees
- Trade Unions
- Council Members
- Co-optees
- Contractors

9. MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

9.1 Options to be considered for **external communications** include the following:

a) NY Times**:** the Council's own newspaper which is directly distributed to all residents of North Yorkshire through their letter boxes.

b) The Local Press: the Council issues press releases about important events or information that it wants to communicate through the press. It is up to the editors of the paper how they use those press releases.

c) Television and Radio**:** the Council has limited access to local television, other than in response to questions when a particular news story attracts press interest. The Radio has a more general approach allowing some discussion forums and interview programs.

d) Press Notices: these are information boxes in the local papers paid for by the Council. The cost of these notices is relatively high and this method is usually restricted to statutory notices and other notices required by law.

e) Website: the Council's website is a means of communicating with all members of the public who chose to access it. The information is always available, but to be effective must be kept up to date. It is a very economic means of communication, although it has yet to reach a wide audience for all areas.

f) Area Committees**:** the Council's seven Area Committees potentially provide a forum accessible to the public to present information in relation to the activities of the Committee and standards issues generally.

g)   Council offices: council offices themselves provide an ideal opportunity for promotion of the ethical agenda and publication of standards documentation and the Standards Committee's work.

h)   County Libraries: again, libraries in the area potentially provide a publicly accessible forum through which the activities of the Committee and standards issues generally could be promoted.

9.2   Evaluation of the most effective means of external communication with the public has shown that the Council's own communications through its newspaper, newsletters and leaflets is most effective, although information gleaned from local newspapers is also significant.

9.3   Options to be considered for **internal communications** include the following:

a)   Key Messages: Key Messages distributed by email every Friday from the Chief Executive's Office. These brief statements update all staff who have access to email, on key services available, how staff can assist and key changes proposed to take place within the organisation.

b)   County Talk: the Council's internal newsletter is distributed monthly with pay slips and has proved to be an effective means of communicating with staff in the internal communications surveys that have been conducted.

c)   Induction: the Council is developing an e-induction and training service which will be made available to all staff, even those who do not have access to a PC. The induction will be restricted to a need to know basis so that staff will be given information to enable them to carry out their roles. The e-induction is in the process of being prepared.

d)   Email: to get a message to all staff or a group of staff about an issue it is possible to use the Council email system which is a very effective method of providing direct access to all staff who have access to a PC. A large number of staff providing direct services do not have ready access to a PC.

e)   Intranet: a means of making information available to staff at all times. It has the same difficulties in reaching staff as other PC based information.

f)   Posters/Notice Boards: there are a number of notice boards and poster information around County Hall and other establishments. It is a more expensive method of communication and is quickly out of date.

g)   Face to Face Meetings: information can be distributed through the usual management channels but this is not appropriate for wider communication as a complex message is very difficult to communicate in this way.

h)   Standards Bulletin: A bulletin periodically produced by the Council relating to standards issues.

10.   INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS BY THE COMMITTEE

10.1   Internally the Committee produces a regular Bulletin for Members and Senior Officers. The information on the County Council Website and Standards Committee Reports are available to all staff.

10.2   The Committee has involvement in the induction for new Members but information about the work of the Committee and ethical issues needs also to be included in staff induction. There also is scope to expand information on the Intranet to include details about the role of the Monitoring Officer and the Committee. There

have been presentations to senior managers and Management Board, and some training has been provided on Fraud and Corruption.

11. THE SELF ASSESSMENT SURVEY

11.1 A self assessment survey was undertaken in 2006. The survey showed 94.3 % of Members knew that they are required to observe the requirements of the Member Code. On the other hand only 65% of staff knew that they had agreed to abide by the Code of Conduct for Officers.

11.2 Over 97% of Members were aware of the Standards Committee, but 21.8% of officers at PO6 or above did not know that the authority has a Standards Committee. 66% of officers did not know that the Committee had a forward work programme (compared with 28.6% of Members). The vast majority of Members considered that the Committee added value, but a significant proportion of Officers were less clear. Given that the survey was conducted at the end of an election year and approximately one third of Members were new to the authority the difference is striking.

11.3 The Committee needs to further develop internal communications particularly in relation to staff. The self assessment survey has highlighted key areas where greater awareness is required. This will need to form part of the Committee's forthcoming work programme.

11.4 The Ethical Audit last year has gone some way towards raising awareness of the senior staff within the authority about the role of the committee. There is a limit to the extent that *all* staff in the organisation need to understand that role in detail, although there should at least be some awareness of the Whistleblowing Policy, the role of the Monitoring Officer and some of the policies and procedures which are relevant to particular areas of work.

12. SUMMARY

12.1 The role of the Committee in relation to Communications is two fold. Firstly, it has a role in influencing the internal and external communications of the Authority as a whole to build trust between the leadership of the organisation and other officers and members in the organisation. It also contributes to building trust between the public and the organisation in relation to both its elected Members and its senior managers.

12.2 Secondly, the Committee has a role in communicating the work it does to the staff and Members of the organisation so that they understand the Council's stance. The Committee needs to extend those communications to the public and to publicise information about the ethical health of the organisation to raise awareness and to help build public trust.

Action Plan

Objective	Action	Time scale	Responsible	Outcomes	Evaluation
1. To raise awareness amongst the public of the Council's stance in relation to standards of conduct and thereby to gain public trust in the authority	1. Statement of the Council's stance to be agreed. - **DONE** 2. The statement to be posted on the Council's web site **– IN PROCESS OF BEING PUBLISHED** 3. Publish article in North Yorkshire Times on the Council's ethical framework - **DONE** 4. The Register of Members' interests be included on the Council's web site - **DONE**	January 2007 March 2007 June 2007 March 2007	Standards Committee Monitoring Officer (MO) MO and Council's Communications Unit MO	The public will have a clearer understanding of the Council's ethical standards, and trust will be increased	Measured by means of responses from the Citizen's Panel.
2. Promoting awareness among the public of the work of the Committee	1. Details of the role of the Committee and key players to be included on the Council's web site including information as to how to make a complaint or raise an issue. - **DONE** 2. Details of the work of the Committee to be included in the article at 3. above - **DONE** 3. To provide key partners with a statement to ensure their awareness of the Council's ethical standards – **STATEMENT AGREED. PROGRESS ON USE TO BE MONITORED** 4. Work with other authorities in the promotion of ethical standards – **ONGOING. Other authorities recently invited to and attended training and vice versa.** 7. The Communications strategy be incorporated as an integral part of the County Council Communications Strategy. **– TO CHECK WITH COMMUNICATIONS UNIT.**	End March 2007 End June 2007 December 2007 On going September 2007	MO MO and Council's Communications Unit MO MO MO and Communications Unit	The public and partners will have greater understanding of the role of the Committee in relation to the ethical framework.	As above

Objective	Action	Time Scale	Responsible	Outcome	Evaluation
	3. Review Details of the Committee included on the intranet. **The intranet is being revised and the review will be undertaken once that process is complete**	March 2007 On going June 2007	MO MO MO and Standards Committee		
	4. Communications to include profiles and photographs to assist in engaging the public interest. **START MADE eg Standards Committee webpage.**				
	5. An item be included in the staff newsletter annually in relation to the work of the committee. **To be included at the time of the Annual Report**				
4. To communicate the role of Council's Leader and Chief Executive in the ethical agenda	1. Role of Leader and Chief Executive to be agreed - **DONE** 2. Role description to be included on web site and intranet	November 2006 End March 2007	Standards Committee and Council MO	Staff and members will have an understanding of the role of the Leader and Chief Executive in relation to the ethical framework	Further self assessment survey
5. To raise awareness amongst the staff and councillors of the standards expected of them	1.Requirements in relation to officer register of interests to be rolled out to officers in Directorates - **ONGOING** 2. Specific training on the amendments to the Member Code of Conduct be delivered to officers and members following implementation – **Member training and refresher undertaken** 3. Standards Bulletin to be agreed and published periodically to members and staff. - **Ongoing**	End December 2007 June 2007 On going	MO MO team and members of Standards Committee Standards Committee and MO	Register of interests complete Members and officers aware of the provisions of the revised Code	Further self assessment survey

| 6. To gain commitment to those standards from all those representing the Council | 1. Review member induction to ensure all new members receive training and information about their obligations under the ethical Code. | On going | MO | Member induction will provide clear advice to new members about the ethical framework | |
| | 2. Ensuring members receive appropriate reminders to update the register of interests | On going | MO | Register complete and members aware of obligations in relation to interests Continued low levels of complaint for alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct | |