

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

21 September 2009

SFE Paper re Public Perceptions of Ethics

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 0.1 To consider the findings on public perceptions of ethics recently published by Standards for England.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Every two years, Standards for England measures and monitors the public's perceptions of local councillors' ethical standards and their confidence in the redress mechanisms for dealing with shortcomings in individuals' behaviour.
- 2.2 The purpose of the report by the SFE is to monitor and identify any changes over time in:
- levels of public trust in Member behaviour and integrity;
 - levels of public confidence in the accountability mechanisms for dealing with instances where Member behaviour has not met the required standard; and
 - public expectations of the behaviour of Members.

The findings in the SFE report are the results of the June 2009 survey; comparisons are made with data collected in 2005 and 2007.

3.0 KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 The report published by Standards for England is attached at Appendix 1 for Members' information and discussion.
- 3.2 The field work for the report was undertaken in June and the MPs' expenses issue had an impact on public perceptions of MPs and of local councillors. The SFE report concludes that while there has been a negative impact on public perceptions of councillors, there has been a more marked effect on perceptions of MPs and government ministers.
- 3.3 The report highlights the fact that there are many factors which influence public perceptions of local government, many of which are outside of the control of local government. Key factors identified which influence public perceptions are:
- Media influence on public opinion;
 - the relationship between peoples' political values and the way they rate services;
 - the expectations of service users are rising;
 - the way in which people view their local area.

4.0 FINDINGS

- 3.1 The public believes that local councillors are more likely to tell the truth than local MPs. While 2% believe councillors "always" tell the truth, for MPs that figure drops below 1%. 18% believe that councillors "never or rarely" tell the truth, 40% stated that

councillors “sometimes” tell the truth and 28% believe that they “always or most of the time” tell the truth. 12% stated that they didn’t know.

- 3.2 There is a clear difference between the perception of the behaviour of local councillors and the actual amount of complaints made about local councillors.
- 3.3 The report states that other research indicates that the local standards framework has had a positive impact on local government and that the behaviour of Members has improved.
- 3.4 Those within local government have, when compared to the public, a far higher level of confidence in the ability of local government to uncover poor behaviour and deal with it properly.
- 3.5 Public attitudes towards local councillors seem to have changed less markedly than for local MPs, politicians generally and government ministers. This suggests the public are able to discern, to an extent, between local and national politicians.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 That Members note the contents of this report.

CAROLE DUNN

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Background Papers:

Standards for England Public Perception of Ethics report (July 2009)

County Hall
NORTHALLERTON

11 September 2009