

Assessing the Impact and Effectiveness of the Ethical Framework for Local Government in England

Project outline

The Centre for Local & Regional Government Research (CLRGR) at Cardiff University has been commissioned by the Standards Board for England to assess the impact of the ethical framework for local government. This is a five-year study to address the following three questions:

- What has been the impact of the ethical framework on the processes, systems and values of local government?
- Has the framework, and its implementation, had any effect on the conduct of local councillors?
- Has the ethical framework, and any resulting change to the way in which councils are run, or in the conduct of councillors, had any effect on public confidence in local government?

The research will inform the Standards Board in its new role as a 'light touch' regulator. It provides opportunities for guiding local authorities in improving their ethical governance and public attitudes. It is also the first occasion in which systematic research has been carried out to connect the impacts of the ethical framework, and the way in which it has impacted upon different councils, to the outcomes for conduct and public perceptions.

Methodology

The research will involve case study work in nine, carefully-chosen local authorities. Data will be gathered at two-yearly intervals, in the summers of 2008, 2010 and 2012, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods:

- **Interviews**, which will be conducted with officers and elected members from the chosen councils, partner bodies and a sample of parish councils, where relevant. We envisage that interviewees will include the monitoring officer, chair of standards committee and leaders of party groups. Each interview will last approximately 45

minutes, and explore the way in which the ethical framework is operated, issues that have arisen, and the wider effects.

- **Documents**, relevant to the operation of the ethical framework in the chosen councils.
- **Media analysis**, involving the assessment of a sample of local press coverage of standards issues, and council activities more widely.
- **Public survey**, involving a questionnaire completed by a 200-resident sample, covering attitudes towards the council and conduct issues. The survey will run in 2008 and 2012, and two focus groups per council will be run in 2010.

The data collection will be conducted by two researchers from the CLRGR, and we envisage that each case study will require no more than three days on site.

Project principles

The research will be conducted according to the following principles, which will govern our relationship with the chosen case study councils.

- *Anonymity*. All the data we collect will be anonymised - data will not be passed in identifiable form to the Standards Board, and neither the councils nor any individuals involved will be named in any reports from the project.
- *Non-judgemental*. This research is designed to assess the effects of the *ethical framework* for local government. It is not in any sense a goal of this research to re-open or re-appraise individual cases or complaints under the Code of Conduct.
- *Benefits to the council*. We are alive to the excessive demands for information made of local authorities by government bodies and researchers, but we hope that the chosen authorities will benefit from participating in the research.

By participating in the study, the case study councils will be able to feed back your experiences of what does and does not work to the Standards Board, and influence the future development of Standards Board guidance, advice and ethical policy for local government. In return for co-operation and assistance, we will provide each selected council with a short report on our findings, and a headline results summary from the public survey, at the end of each case study visit. Should our research identify examples of good practice then we can, with council approval, disseminate these to a wider audience. This can be a source of good publicity for participating authorities.

Contact details

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For more information about the Centre for Local & Regional
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