

Annual Return 2010 - Guidance notes

INTRODUCTION

These guidance notes have been produced to assist you in preparing your answers to the questions in our annual return for 2010.

All of the questions are included in these notes, and we have provided additional information where we think there may be an element of a question that is not entirely straightforward. For example, we have provided further explanation where a question uses a term or phrase that is specific to the standards community but may not be universally understood by everyone who comes into contact with the annual return.

Our additional information also includes more detail about the questions and about the types of answers we expect, and reasoning behind the inclusion of particular questions.

PART 1: COMMUNICATION

Annual Report

1) Does the standards committee produce an annual report?

Last year's annual return showed that 59% of standards committees produced an annual report. We are interested in finding out if this figure has changed.

2) What does the report contain?

You will not need to answer this question if you have indicated that the standards committee does not produce a report.

For those that answer "yes" to question 1, we have provided a list of some of the common elements we found when reviewing a number of standards committee annual reports from last year. You can select as few or as many of these elements as are applicable. If the annual report contains elements that are not included in our list, select "other" and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

An item in the list is "*forward work plan*" – by this we mean a detailed programme of standards committee objectives and proposed activities, rather than simply a timetable of future meetings.

3) How is the standards committee annual report circulated?

If your return is not on the website please forward a copy to us. See guidance notes for details.

You will not need to answer this question if you have indicated that the standards committee does not produce a report.

For those that answer "yes" to question 1, we have provided a list of some of the common ways that standards committee annual reports could be circulated. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If your standards committee annual report is circulated in a different way, select "other" and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

If you indicate that the report is available on the authority website, you will be asked to provide a URL (web address).

Standards committee annual reports provide us with valuable detail and context about the work of the standards community. If yours is not available on the authority website, but you would like to share it with Standards for England, you can email a copy (preferably in PDF or Microsoft Word format) to our monitoring team at authorityreturns@standardsforengland.gov.uk. If sending by post, the address is:

The Monitoring Team
Standards for England
4th Floor, Griffin House
40 Lever Street
Manchester
M21 9LB

Publicising Complaints

4) How can the public access information about how to make a complaint against a member?

We have provided a list of some of the common ways that the public might access information about how to make a complaint against a member. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If your authority uses a different method, select “other” and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

If you indicate that the authority website is a way that the public can access information you will be asked to provide a URL (web address) that links to the relevant section of the website.

5) How can the public access information about the outcome of initial assessment decisions?

We have provided a list of some of the common ways that the public might access information about the outcome of initial assessment decisions. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If your authority uses a different method, select “other” and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

6) How can the public access information about the outcome of investigations?

We have provided a list of some of the common ways that the public might access information about the outcome of investigations. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If your authority uses a different method, select “other” and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

If you indicate that the authority website is a way that the public can access information you will be asked to provide a URL (web address) that links to the relevant section of the website.

7) Do you have a mechanism in place for measuring the satisfaction of all those involved in allegations of misconduct? For example the member, complainant, and witnesses.

This question attempts to ascertain whether you routinely gather any kind of feedback from those involved in allegations about their experience of the complaints process. This is not about whether they believe the outcome of an initial assessment, investigation, or hearing was correct, but whether they feel the whole process was conducted professionally, fairly, and in a timely manner (appropriate to the complexity of the particular allegation). The feedback could be in the form of a survey, for example.

8) If yes, please can you describe the process?

See details under question 7. You might want to include some commentary about whether you believe the mechanism has been a success. If so, describe a particular example of where it worked well. A good description here will enable us to identify and share notable practice with the rest of the standards community.

Communicating the role and work of the standards committee and standards generally

9) What does the authority do to promote the work of the standards committee and standards generally to the rest of the authority (i.e. internally)?

We have provided a list of some of the common ways that authorities promote internally the work of the standards committee and standards generally. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If you indicate that your independent members contribute to authority meetings, a box will appear to ask for further details about their contribution. If your authority uses a different method, select "other" and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

10) How can the public access information about your standards committee?

We have provided a list of some of the common ways that the public might access information about standards committees. You can select as few or as many of these as are applicable. If your authority uses a different method, select "other" and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

If you indicate that the authority website is a way that the public can access information you will be asked to provide a URL (web address) that links to the relevant section of the website.

11) What else does the authority do to promote the work of the standards committee and standards generally to the public and other partners?

This is an open question for you to inform us of anything extra your authority does to promote the standards committee to a wider audience, not already covered by the preceding questions.

We will be looking to identify notable practice here to share with the rest of the standards community.

PART 2: INFLUENCE

12) How does the standards committee communicate ethical issues to the senior figures within your authority (for example the Chief Executive and Leader of the Authority, Party Leaders)?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select “other” and you will be asked to provide extra details.

By using the term “senior figures” this question can relate to all forms of leadership within authorities. So, for example, with a police authority this could mean the Chair and the Chief Executive or for a fire authority it could be the Chair and the Chief Fire Officer.

The answers to this will help us gain a wider understanding of the level of importance a standards committee has within its authority. The focus here is on how well the standards committee and the senior figures communicate.

13) How do the senior figures in your authority demonstrate strong ethical values?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select “other” and you will be asked to provide extra details.

This question is different to question 12 as the focus is on what responsibility the senior figures personally have for standards rather than just attending meetings they are invited to. From the responses we will be able to take a view on how well supported the work of standards committees are by senior figures.

14) Does your authority have a protocol for partnership working that outlines the standards of behaviour expected of all those working in partnership?

A partnership protocol should enable partners to agree what behaviour they can expect from each other. It can be used as a means by which they can challenge each other and hold each other to account. Having a clear and transparent behaviour protocol can help promote trust amongst the partnership and the general public, demonstrating commitment to behaviour of a certain standard.

Please answer “yes” if your authority has developed or is currently working towards a protocol which matches, or has elements of, what is described above.

15) What mechanisms does the authority use for dealing with member/officer and/or member/member disputes?

We are keen to understand how the relationships between members and between members and officers are managed other than employing the complaints process. This kind of pro-active work is very important for building and maintaining a healthy culture of standards within an authority.

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select "other" and you will be asked to provide extra details.

PART 3: TRAINING AND SUPPORT

16) Between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010, has the authority assessed the training and development needs of authority members and standards committee members in relation to their responsibilities on standards of conduct?

Last year 75% of authorities indicated that they had assessed the training and development needs of members. We are interested to know if this figure has changed.

17) If no, please give your reasons why?

There may be good reasons why training and development needs were not assessed. We are interested in finding out about these circumstances.

18) If yes, what needs were identified?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select "other" and you will be asked to provide extra details.

19) What training/support was provided during the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select "other" and you will be asked to provide extra details.

20) Who received training/support?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select 'other' and you will be asked to provide extra details.

21) What methods were employed to give training/support?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select 'other' and you will be asked to provide extra details.

An item in the list is "*ethical governance toolkit*" – this is a group of materials designed to help local authorities assess how well they are meeting the ethical agenda and to improve further their arrangements. The toolkit consists of four main elements. Each of these is administered by either the Audit Commission or the IDeA. You can find out

more about this at

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelId=1115850#contents-4>

22) In which areas of the Code of Conduct has training/support been provided?

This question will only appear if the option “*elements of the Code of Conduct*” is selected at question 19.

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select “other” and you will be asked to provide extra details.

23) What other training/support has been provided on areas of an authority member’s role or activities they may engage in?

We have provided a list of activities and topic areas that members may be involved in. You can select as few or as many of these depending on what training or support has been provided. If training or support has been provided about different, but relevant topics, select “other” and a box will appear for you to type in a description.

24) In general, how well attending was the training provided?

Please select one of the options which best describes the overall attendance of the training provided during the year.

25) Please give a brief overview of how standards issues are covered in your induction process for new members of the authority?

Please give a brief indication of the level of training new members receive about the local standards framework and other relevant standards issues. Please include the topics covered and the methods used. The options in the above training questions should help guide you.

26) In which areas of the role and responsibilities of the standards committee has training/support been provided for standards committee members?

This question will only appear if “*role and responsibilities of the standards committee*” is selected at question 19. Please answer for training provided to standards committee members only.

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select ‘other’ and you will be asked to provide extra details.

PART 4: INVESTIGATIONS

27) How many investigations have been conducted during the period 1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010?

This question only requires a number for an answer. In the interests of avoiding duplication of work, we would prefer to get this information from the quarterly return. However, both the annual return and the quarterly return are to be completed at around about the same time near the year end. This means that we are unlikely to have the information from the quarterly return early enough. The purpose of this question is so that the online form knows whether to display or suppress questions 28 to 31 inclusive. For example, if you have not conducted any investigations, the next question you will be presented with is number 32.

28) Of the investigations completed during the period, for how many have investigators been used?

This will only appear if the answer to question 27 is more than “0”. If the answer is “0” the next question will be number 32.

This question only requires a number for an answer. This should be the number of completed investigations which have been to consideration and/or hearing and where the investigation was undertaken by someone outside of the authority. This includes employees of other authorities as well as those commercially sourced.

If you have not had any then please answer 0.

29) Overall, what was your principle reason for out-sourcing the investigation(s)?

This question will not appear if you have not completed any out-sourced investigations. Instead the next question will be number 32.

This question asks for only one reason to be selected. We understand that there may be multiple reasons for out-sourcing and they may be different from case to case. However we would like you to select what you consider to be the main reason overall, taking into account all out-sourced investigations. If your reason is not in the list please select “other” to open a text box for you to type a description of it.

30) What type of external investigator(s) did you use?

When responding to this question you can tick all the relevant answers on the list provided. Please remember to only consider the cases where an external investigator was employed.

31) For the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010, what was the approximate total cost of fees paid to the external investigator(s)?

Standards for England would like to understand the costs incurred with out-sourced investigators. This is difficult to calculate so we are asking for the total amount invoiced to you for the external investigator's work.

32) Please provide a brief overview of the methods you use to guarantee the quality of local investigations.

An example of this could be similar to the mechanisms you described in your response to question 7. A feedback survey of people involved in an investigation might be one method. Please provide as much detail as possible, as this is another area in which we would like to identify notable practice to share with the rest of the standards community.

PART 5: RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARISH AND TOWN COUNCILS

This section is only for authorities with parish/town councils. For those without, you have reached the end of the annual return questions.

33) Has your authority provided training for parish councillors during the period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010?

This question is about parish councillors only; please do not take parish clerks or any other member/officer into account. You will be asked about training for parish clerks in a later section.

34) If yes, what topics did the training cover?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select “other” and you will be asked to provide extra details.

35) What methods were employed to give training/support?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select “other” and you will be asked to provide extra details.

36) In general, how well attended was the training for parish councillors?

This question is designed to find out about the level of “take-up” of parish councillor training. Our general understanding is that attendance levels at such events can vary significantly. We would like more concrete evidence as to whether this is true or not. Please take all parish councillor training into account, if there have been multiple events, and come to an aggregate conclusion.

37) Has your authority provided training for parish clerks during the period 1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010?

Only select “yes” if there has been training specifically for parish clerks during the specified period.

38) What topics did the training for parish clerks cover?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select "other" and you will be asked to provide extra details.

39) If yes, what methods were employed to give training/support to parish clerks?

There is a list of possible answers which you can select from and you can select all the ones which apply to your authority. If you would like to inform us of an answer not in the list, select "other" and you will be asked to provide extra details.

40) In general, how well attended was the training for parish clerks?

Please select the option that best describes the overall attendance of the training provided during the year.

41) Does your council have a Compact (a formal agreement with your County Association of Local Councils about supporting standards for parish and town councils in the area)?

A Compact is a formal document between an authority and their County Association of Local Councils. A potential outcome of the compact could be delivering joint training, for example.

42) Describe the relationship between your authority and your County Association of Local Councils in relation to standards. For example, how regularly do you interact with them? Are you involved in delivering joint training?

This question has been left open so that you have the opportunity to tell us about how you work with your County Association of Local Councils. You may also wish to refer to or expand on your answer to question 41.

43) Standards for England and Teesside University are currently researching the role of the Parish Liaison Officer. Teesside University have created a brief questionnaire to assess the organisational background, functions and skills needed to carry out the Parish Liaison role. Does your authority have a Parish Liaison Officer?

A Parish Liaison Officer acts as a point of contact between the principle authority and the parishes/town councils. They provide advice and support and will often attend parish/town council meetings. If you do not specifically have a Parish Liaison Officer

but there is someone within the authority who carries out the role described, please answer “*no, but there is someone who fulfils the same functions*”

44) Does the Parish Liaison Officer (or the person who fulfils the same functions) consent for the University of Teesside to contact them to complete a brief questionnaire about their role?

This question will only appear if you answer yes or “*no but there is someone who fulfils the same functions*” to question 43. If you have the contact details of the Parish Liaison Officer (or person with the same functions) and they consent to taking part in the research described above, please answer yes and then a box will appear for you to fill in their contact details.

45) What steps have you taken when dealing with parishes which have had problems with standards issues? For example, what preventative or capacity building work have you done with parishes?

We will use the responses to this question to identify notable practice and share it with other authorities that have parishes. Please indicate how successful the methods you used were and why you think this was the case.

46) Which of the following areas would you like Standards for England to produce additional guidance on to support your work with parishes?

We are always looking to enhance the range of guidance we produce and the parish sector is one of the key areas that we could focus on. Responses to this question will help us to identify specific areas in which guidance may prove useful.