

Slough Borough Council

Report to:	Standards Committee
Date:	10 th October 2023
Subject:	Member Survey
Chief Officer:	Stephen Taylor, Monitoring Officer
Contact Officer:	Alexander Polak, Head of Governance and Scrutiny
Ward(s):	All
Exempt:	No
Appendices:	<u>Appendix A</u> – survey responses Jan-Feb 2023

1. Summary and Recommendations

1.1 This report:

- is an update of the report published for an inquorate meeting of the Standards Committee in April 2023
- Introduces the Standards Committee to the idea of an annual survey of councillors;
- Reports the results of the first such survey which took place in the final quarter of the previous council; and
- invites councillors' views on the survey questions related to member conduct before the survey is updated and re-issued in October 2023.

Recommendations:

- 1. That the results of the previous Member Survey be noted; and**
- 2. That the committee provides feedback on the survey questions related to member conduct, to inform the October 2023 issue of the survey.**

Reason:

The Standards Committee's terms of reference include to 'monitor the operation of the council's ethical framework including the code of conduct' and to advise the council based on its findings. The member survey provides an important source of information about members' perceptions and opinions, including about the conduct of members and other aspects of the committee's terms of reference.

Commissioners Comments

Commissioners have noted this report.

Introduction

- 2.1 A report on this topic was published for the Standards Committee in April 2023. However, the April meeting was not quorate so it was not formally considered. The report has therefore been updated for today's meeting.
- 2.2 Although the committee did not meet formally in April, an informal member working group was convened later from Standards Committee members which did review the results. Among other things they used this information to provide input into the 2023 Member Development Programme.

Introduction

- 2.3 At the request of the Secretary of State, in the form of directions issued to Slough Borough Council, a series of 'improvement plans' have been created and published. Progress against these plans is being monitored by government-appointed commissioners.
- 2.4 A number of these plans will benefit from data about councillors' skills, attitudes, motivations and concerns. These include the Democratic Governance Action Plan and Scrutiny Action Plan, as well as a Culture Change Plan.
- 2.5 It is in any event good practice for local authorities to survey their councillors periodically and to use the results to ensure that services and support for councillors are designed to meet their specific needs. At a national level the Local Government Association carries out a 'census' of councillors for similar reasons.
- 2.6 An action to complete such a survey was included in the Democratic Governance Action Plan. A further action to embed this as annual practice is also included.

Method

- 2.7 An online survey was launched to councillors using Microsoft Forms during January-February 2023. Group leaders agreed the content and furthermore agreed to encourage their membership to complete the survey. It was:
 - Sent to each councillor individually on Microsoft Teams once.
 - Sent to each councillor individually by email twice.
 - Sent to all councillors in the Member Newsletter (multiple times)
 - Available via QR code on posters outside the meeting chamber at Observatory House
- 2.8 Results were recorded anonymously.
- 2.9 The survey was designed to include a number of questions from the National Councillor Census conducted by the Local Government Association, allowing a degree of national benchmarking.
- 2.10 The survey is a little bit longer than would be ideal. While completion time was estimated at 30 minutes, the average time to complete it was 47 minutes. However, this is the first survey of its type in recent years at Slough Borough Council, so its value is high and very few councillors dropped out before the end.

Response

- 2.11 24 out of 42 councillors responded, a response rate of 57%. This is considered good for a survey of this type, especially towards the end of an administration when some members may not be intending to stand for election again.
- 2.12 The results of the questions, including a full account of the free text responses - and comparisons, where available, with the LGA councillor survey - are presented at Appendix A.
- 2.13 Any potentially identifying personal comments have been redacted, otherwise the free text comments are presented in their original and full form)

Response to the Survey

- 2.14 These results should primarily be viewed as a baseline whose value will grow when we do repeat surveys. The intention was, and still is, to survey the new incoming cohort of Members in October 2023 using substantially the same questions, to provide a comparison with the old cohort and a baseline for the new four-year municipal cycle, and then annually thereafter.
- 2.15 Various statistics in this survey should provide the basis for measurement of the council's performance in terms of support provided to members (eg Members' satisfaction with Democratic Services, IT, officer responsiveness etc) and in terms of their perception of the council's performance at supporting residents (eg the figures about responsiveness to service requests and complaints). Crucially, a number of statistics will provide insights into the intended improvement of the leadership culture at Slough Borough Council, especially as it relates to the relationship between senior officers and members.
- 2.16 Members of the Standards Committee were to be invited, in April 2023, to provide officers with their views on the key results and a steer as to how they would like to see the council respond to the data. Although that meeting did not go ahead, officers used the data in a number of ways, including:
- The Corporate Governance Working Group (an officer board chaired by the Monitoring Officer which acts as the project board for the Democratic Governance Project and the Scrutiny Improvement Project) reviewed the data for actions to add to the Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Action Plans.
 - The Culture Change Programme Board (an officer board chaired by the Executive Director for Strategy and Improvement which is overseeing the council-wide culture change programme) reviewed the data for actions to add to the culture change action plans.
 - The plan for member development and induction (found elsewhere on today's agenda) took into account the wealth of feedback from councillors in the survey about their development needs, assisted by the contribution of an informal Member Development Working Group convened in April 2023 for that purpose.
 - Some survey data was shared with scrutiny members at the annual review workshop in early March 2023 and is included in the Scrutiny Annual Report 2022/23 which was agreed by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2023 and Full Council on 28 March 2023.

- The survey results relating to members' use of IT and their training needs informed work on refreshing the IT offer for all councillors in May 2023 in time for the new cohort of councillors.
- The full extended leadership team of the council discussed the survey results and how the organisation should respond, at an 'extended CLT' meeting.
- The full set of results were sent to the top 4 tiers of the organisation for review at Directorate Leadership Team meetings for potential lessons to learn in each service area.

Next Steps

- 2.17 In May 2023, twenty-two new councillors joined the council (out of forty-two) and the political administration changed. It is impossible to know how many of the 20 councillors who remain from the previous cohort were amongst the 24 who responded to the survey, and how radically their responses would differ now given the major changes since that time.
- 2.18 Therefore, the applicability of the results in Appendix A to the current council cannot be assumed. However, the exercise of comparing these survey results with future results will not be fruitless as long as it is done carefully in this informed context. Some subjects covered by the survey – such as councillors' perceptions of the quality of the member support offer and of officers' behaviours – may be easier to meaningfully compare than others.
- 2.19 The next survey will launch in October 2023 following review of the content by the Group Leaders.
- 2.20 The content of the October 2023 survey will be based on the previous survey. As far as possible, there is a benefit to keeping questions identical so as to allow direct comparison over time.
- 2.21 However, as noted above, there may be a benefit in shortening the survey. This will be attempted as far as possible while taking into account developments in the council's current situation, which may also lead to new questions being developed.
- 2.22 As before, the survey questions will be finalised with the input of political group leaders. However, the Standards Committee's views are welcomed first, particularly in regard to any member conduct-related questions, to help shape any changes to the survey before it is re-issued.
- 2.23 The results of some of the survey questions will provide this committee with some insights relating to part of its terms of reference, namely to 'monitor the operation of the council's ethical framework including the code of conduct' and to 'advise' the council based on its findings.
- 2.24 Data from the October survey will be reported to Members in informal and formal settings, giving an opportunity to develop productive actions which contribute to the council's continued improvement.

3.1 Financial implications

- 3.1.1 There are no specific financial implications.

3.2 Legal implications

3.2.1 There are no specific legal implications to be noted.

3.3 Risk management implications

3.3.1 Failure to take proper account of the information provided could hinder the council's improvement efforts and/or make it harder to demonstrate improvement to the government-appointed commissioners.

3.4 Environmental implications

3.4.1 There are no specific environmental implications.

3.5 Equality implications

3.5.1 This survey provides some insight into the demography and family circumstances of councillors, in addition to information about the degree to which members have experienced bullying and/or harassment. When reviewing this information the Council must take into account its equalities duties.

4. Background Papers

None.

5. Appendices

Appendix A – Survey responses (Jan-Feb 2023)