



Casey interview: monitoring officers have been 'emasculated'

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Sir Eric Pickles "threw the baby out with the bathwater" when he abolished the Standards Board for England, leaving monitoring officers "emasculated", Dame Louise Casey has said.

Speaking to LGC following the publication of her high profile review into integration and opportunity, Dame Louise said she has long held concerns over the reform of councils' monitoring processes by former communities secretary Sir Eric, who abolished Standards Boards in 2010.

"Part of my concerns for a while have been that government threw out the baby with the bath water in terms of standards in local authorities," she said.

Dame Louise said the previous system was "litigious and challenging" and she understood why Sir Eric had made changes.

She added: "[The system] was not working in the right way but we seem to have gone from one extreme to another.

"I think the role of the monitoring officer has been a tad emasculated."

The Casey review found evidence that some political leaders allowed the development of "separatism and segregation" through fear of being accused of racism or losing voter support.

The review concludes that current processes for formal intervention were not sophisticated enough to deal with these problems, with "little recourse" to address damaging or divisive behaviour by councillors.

Dame Louise was keen to stress that there are many "brilliant" councillors, but she said she had received support from within local government for her review.

She said: "Some of the officers I have met in the past 12 to 18 months are frankly heroes.

"They walk this tightrope day in day out of dealing with members."

The review recommended councils be required to collect information that could indicate a breakdown in social cohesion, such as incidents of hate crime. It also called for all children outside mainstream schools to be registered with councils and for councils to be given a new duty to know where children are being educated.

Dame Louise told LGC councils' current responsibilities for children were not conducive with current regulations on home schooling.

She said: "We tell [councils] they are responsible for children then allow people to take children out of the school system without telling the local authority – we are so hands off at the moment."

Communities secretary Sajid Javid welcomed the report and said he would be "studying her findings closely" before responding fully. However, the report has been criticised by some, including councillors, for its focus on the Muslim community.

Dame Louise said she was determined not to "shy away" from difficult issues.

She added that people in public office, including council officers, elected members, civil servants and the government, had empowered extremist groups such as the English Defence League by "being awkward and skirting around the issue" of ideologies in some communities which oppress women and create division.

Dame Louise said "I have received messages from people who said thank you for making us talk about [these issues].

"Every chamber in every local authority around the country needs to talk about this.

"I have received messages from people saying 'we completely agree' and they have been liberated by me saying this is what you have experienced."