

Standards update

Standards matter to local government

- The Code of Conduct is widely accepted within local government. 94% of members and officers support the requirement that members should sign up to the Code of Conduct*.
- 80% of local government officers and members believe that high standards of behaviour for members is one of the most important issues facing local government*.
- In 2007, 91% of town and parish members agreed with the requirement for their members to sign the Code of Conduct. This was an increase from 69% in 2004*.

A new, local system

- The Code of Conduct and the Standards Board were introduced in the 2000 Local Government Act, in response to the Nolan report and high profile standards failings in local government.
- The local standards system was introduced in 2002. Flaws in both legislation and administration attracted criticism, particularly from local government. The Standards Board agreed with the need for improvement and led the call for changes to the system, lobbying for a more proportionate balance between local self-regulation and national oversight.
- The 2007 Local Government Act brought in a remodelled local standards framework. The new devolved regime has been up and running since May 2008. The vast majority of complaints are now dealt with by local standards committees. Only the most serious are dealt with by the Standards Board.

Confidence in local democracy

Parishes and standards

- The Code and local standards framework are supported by the majority of parishes and by their national representatives, the National Association of Local Councils and the Society of Local Council Clerks.
- Complaints about parish councillors account for around 50% of all complaints. However, they make up around 80% of all elected members, and 90% of parish councils have never attracted an allegation. Therefore the impact of the Code on parish councils has been disproportionately light*.

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- Cases involving parishes have brought to light some serious abuses of power, such as harassment and bullying, and reveal authorities where there has been a complete breakdown of trust and working relationships. All political parties propose an enhanced future role for these local councils.

The local system so far

- The Standards Board's monitoring reports from England's 473 authorities shows that local experience of dealing with cases is growing and that the system is working effectively.
- There were 2,030 complaints received locally from 8 May to 31 December 2008, compared to 2,200 received by the Standards Board in the same period in 2007. 56% were made by members of the public. Just 4% were made by council officers, 34% were from elected members*.

More overleaf...

- The system allows tit-for-tat and vexatious complaints to be weeded out early on. 78% of the local cases received since May 2008 have been assessed as revealing no breach of the Code.

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- The most frequent breaches being investigated are failure to declare personal interests, failure to treat others with respect and bringing the authority into disrepute.
- We expect the number of most serious cases leading to suspensions or disqualifications will remain small. There were 19, around 6% of all cases investigated, in 2007-8. However the system offers a number of other remedies and sanctions aimed at highlighting behaviour and improving standards, including directions to take action to solve local problems, such as training and mediation.

The regulatory role of the Standards Board

- The Standards Board is a strategic regulator bringing an independent, national oversight to the locally-based standards framework. We will advise government of changes which might be necessary to ensure the framework is fair and proportionate.
- We identify and advise government on systemic and sectoral risks to standards in local government. For

example we are currently working on tools to ensure high standards in partnerships involving local government.

- We identify and mitigate risks to standards in individual authorities, offering advice, guidance and support where necessary. We can also intervene in authorities to protect local democratic arrangements and to restore appropriate standards.
- We support local standards committees in promoting high standards in their local authority. We identify and facilitate the sharing of good practice.
- We investigate misconduct allegations against individual elected members that are unsuitable for local resolution. These can be complex and politically sensitive.

80% of councils think the Standards Board keeps them well informed.*

- Standards Board advice is regularly sought and appreciated. We deal with more than 300 enquiries from members, officers and members of the public every month. 80% of councils think the Standards Board keeps them well informed. Our Annual Assembly is attended by more than 800 delegates and consistently achieves satisfaction ratings of 95% plus*.
- Our work has an international profile and we are approached to help developing democracies in their design and evaluation of the local standards elements of their respective governance models

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...local politicians and others need to be able to show not just that they are making the right decisions but that they have robust and transparent processes for reaching them. That they are not influenced by any considerations of personal gain. And that there is sufficient accountability for their decisions and scrutiny of them that the rest of us can have confidence that these conditions are met.

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**Sir Christopher Kelly, Chair,
Committee on Standards in Public Life, October 2008**

Confidence in local democracy

For more information visit
www.standardsboard.gov.uk