

Future of the Standards Regime

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DRAFT LETTER TO DCLG MINISTER

Members will be aware that the Government is currently drawing up proposals for the future of the Standards regime including the closure of Standards For England, and alternatives to the current complaints mechanisms. Below is a draft letter to the Secretary of State from the London based independent Chairmen of Standards Committees which the Chairman has asked to be placed on this agenda for consideration:

Dear Minister,

Local Authority Standards Regime

We are all independent non-political Chairs of Standards Committees of London Boroughs. This letter is to express concerns about what we have heard about some of your proposals for reforming the local authority standards regime, and to ask if we can call on your Bill Team to discuss these concerns. The following represents our personal views, not necessarily those of our committees.

Code of Conduct

First, we understand that the present Code of Conduct will go. Many of us feel that the present Code has lost credibility because of its over-complicated provisions and the fact it has been constantly tinkered with. We are not sure whether the Bill will propose a new and simpler Code. But we believe that it would make local government better respected if there were at least a statement of basic principles, perhaps based on the General Principles of Conduct in Local Government that form the preamble to the current Code. Local authorities would then be free to develop more detailed codes if they wished.

Standards Committees

Second, we understand that the intention is that Councils would no longer be required to set up standards committees, and that matters dealt with by the committees might be dealt with in other ways. We nevertheless believe that there is a strong case for maintaining a slimmed-down regime of standards committees. In our experience, the committees have been extremely useful for dealing with complainants in a way that gives an assurance of fair treatment on matters that are outside the purview of the Local Government Ombudsman and are not serious enough to warrant criminal sanctions.

We are well aware of problems the current system, with particular individuals making large number of complaints and Councils having to spend exorbitant sums on dealing with them. But this is, in our view, in large measure due to the prescriptive nature of the present regime, which makes it difficult to filter out complaints at an early stage or to deal with them informally. We believe that, if Councils are left to make their own arrangements within a minimal statutory framework, these difficulties could be avoided.

We hope, therefore, that at the very least, where a Council wishes to have a standards committee, the Bill will give them discretion to set one up. In cases where Councils do decide to set up a standards committee, the latter must have powers to impose sanctions if a complaint is upheld. Finally, we would stress that the presence of independent members who stand outside the ballot box is very important in strengthening and giving credibility to standards committees.