

**Norwich City Council**  
**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

Item

8

**REPORT for meeting to be held on 17 December 2010**

**The future of Standards for England and the Standards framework**

**Purpose**

This report updates the standards committee on the coalition government's proposals in relation to the future abolition of standards for England and the standards framework.

**Recommendations**

For the standards committee to note the current situation and to think about what guidance to offer at a future point, towards the possible formation of a local code of conduct and standards framework for the council.

**Financial Consequences**

None

**Strategic Priority and Outcome/Service Priorities**

Contributes to maintaining and improving the council's reputation.

**Background Documents**

Letter and communication from Bob Neill MP – Department for Communities and Local Government (attached).

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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Coalition Government's "Programme for Government" of 20 May 2010 contained the commitment to abolish the standards board regime. Primary legislation is needed to abolish standards for England and it is now known that the provisions are to be included in the planned "Decentralisation and Localism Bill" which is due to be presented sometime this month. Royal assent for this is anticipated to take place between July and October 2011. If successful, this will lead to the final closure of standards for England sometime between December 2011 and March 2012.

## **2. Currently & looking forward**

- 2.1 Standards board for England continues to carry out a number of obligations for themselves and monitoring officers. The local standards framework still exists and standards committees and monitoring officers continue to have regard and an obligation to keep to the standards framework in operation.
- 2.2 Attached to this report is a letter from the local government minister, Bob Neill MP and a Department for Communities and Local Government communication regarding the government proposals for the future of standards in local government. This information is published on both the standards for England and Department for Communities & Local Government website's. Since the coalition government announced its intention to abolish the standards board regime, there has been little detail available about what this would mean in practice. The letter from the Minister now sets out the proposition in greater detail.
- 2.3 The current framework will remain until the bill receives royal assent and the relevant provisions are enacted. It is understood by standards for England that this is likely to be some time in the summer or autumn next year. Exact timing will depend on Parliamentary progress of the bill as a whole. Consequently, in the meantime, standards committees will continue to have a legal requirement to operate as now and, in particular, to continue to consider any allegations.
- 2.4 The Minister's letter sets out, the transition arrangements that the government intend to apply to any cases which will be in the pipeline at the end of the framework. These proposals now depend on Parliamentary approval. However, standards for England would cease to handle cases from an appointed day. At that stage, all cases still open would be passed back to the relevant local authority to complete. Any case with the Tribunal at that stage would be completed but no further references could be made to it. Any cases being handled locally would need to be completed locally after that date by the standards committee, with no power to pass them to standards for England or the Tribunal, but no new allegations could be made after the appointed day.

**3. What does this mean for the future of the council's standards committee?**

- 3.1 In brief the proposal is that, alongside the abolition of standards for England, the First Tier Tribunal (Local Government Standards in England) would lose jurisdiction over member conduct.
- 3.2 The government also intends to remove the national Code of Conduct for councillors and the requirement to have a standards committee. Instead **it would be for councils themselves to choose whether or not they wish to have a local code or a standards committee**, which would be an 'ordinary committee' of the authority and therefore not need to have independent representation. In addition, council's may decide to continue to co-opt outside members to their standards committee for consideration of complaints about the conduct of elected and co-opted members. But such committees will only be able to censure and not suspend or disqualify members from council membership. There would also be a new criminal offence created relating to failure to register or declare interests.



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Neill".

15 OCT 2010

### **Conduct of local authority members**

Recently Andrew Stunell announced the broad package of changes that we intend to put in place to abolish the Standards Board regime. A press notice relating to this announcement is available on the Department's web-site at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/157558411>

When we met on Wednesday 15 September, I undertook to let you have the details of what we are proposing once the package of changes was announced, and accordingly I enclose a short paper setting out the changes we intend to make.

I would of course be very happy to discuss these with you and your Committee. If you would like a meeting, please don't hesitate to get in touch with my office.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Neill".  
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**BOB NEILL MP**



## Abolition of the Standards Board regime

### **The Standards Board regime**

The Coalition Agreement *Our Programme for Government* included the commitment to “abolish the Standards Board regime”.

The Government considers that the Standards Board regime, consisting of a centrally prescribed model code of conduct, standards committees with the power to suspend a local authority member and regulated by a central quango was inconsistent with the principles of localism. In addition there is a concern that the regime is a vehicle for vexatious or politically motivated complaints.

The Government considers that it is the right and the responsibility of the electorate to determine who represents them and that the abolition of the regime will restore power to local people.

Accordingly, given the interdependencies of the bodies, requirements and guidance that constitute the Standards Board regime, the Government is proposing to abolish the regime in its entirety.

Subject to Parliament approving the necessary legislation, the changes are as follows:

- The Relevant Authorities (General Principles) Order 2001, which sets out the principles which govern the conduct of members and co-opted members of relevant authorities in England and police authorities in Wales, will be revoked.
- The Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) Order 2007 (S.I 2007/1159) which prescribes the model code of conduct to apply to members of relevant authorities, will be revoked.
- The requirement for local authorities to have standards committees will be abolished.
- Standards for England (formally known as the Standards Board for England) will be abolished. Established by the Local Government Act 2000 and the regulator for local authority standards committees, the Standards Board requires primary legislation to abolish it and its legislative functions. None of the Standards Boards functions will be transferred to other bodies.

- The First-tier Tribunal (Local Government Standards in England), the independent judicial tribunal established as a disciplinary body to hear and determine references and appeals concerning the conduct of local authority councillors, will lose its jurisdiction over the conduct of local authority members.

It is intended to effect the abolition of the Standards Board regime through the Localism Bill. It is anticipated that the Bill will be laid before Parliament in December and will receive Royal Assent late-2011.

The present conduct regime (a model code governing local authority members' conduct and enforced through local authority standards committees, regulated in turn by the Standards Board for England), will continue to function in a normal manner, considering, investigating and determining allegations of misconduct, until a fixed date ("the appointed day"), probably two months after the Bill receives Royal Assent,.

This means that until the appointed day, an allegation of misconduct can be made; after the appointed day, no further allegations of misconduct can be made under the standards board regime. It also means that at the appointed day, allegations will be in the process of investigation and, further, that appeals against sanctions will be pending. Transitional measures will be put in place to address this.

### **Proposed transitional measures**

Any cases in the system at the appointed day will make their way through a transitional regime. This would meet the expectation of those who had made allegations that their allegations would be properly dealt with. It also enables that if a member has an allegation made against them, they should have the opportunity to clear their name.

The Government propose that any investigations being undertaken by Standards for England transfer, on the appointed day, to the local authority that referred the investigation. It will be for that local authority to arrange for the conclusion of the investigation. The local authority's standards committee will remain established until the last complaint it is considering, referred either internally or from Standards for England, has been dealt with.

Any cases with which the First-tier Tribunal (Local Government Standards in England) is dealing on the appointed day will be concluded by that tribunal. It will not receive any appeals against standards committee rulings after that date.

The right of appeal will not exist for those cases standards committees deal with as they work their way through the transitional system. The Government considers that the risk of protracted proceedings justifies this approach. The sanctions available to standards committees are significantly less severe than the sanctions available to the First-tier Tribunal (Local Government Standards in England).

Further, the Government propose that the suspension sanction is removed from standards committees for the transitional period. Hence the most a standards

committee could do is, for instance, to issue a councillor with a censure or a request that they undergo training.

### **The conduct regime in a post-Standards Board world**

The Government is committed to maintaining high standards of conduct in office and will ensure that, in the absence of a statutory code of conduct, councillors do not abuse their office for personal gain by putting their personal interests before those of the general community or local area that they represent. Members will be required to continue to register and declare personal interests and will not be allowed to use their position improperly for personal gain. The Government intend that wilful failure to comply with these requirements will constitute a criminal offence.

The requirement for local authorities to adopt a model code of conduct and for local authority members to abide by that code will be abolished. However, local authorities will be free to adopt their own, voluntary code of conduct should they so wish.

The requirement to maintain a standards committee will be abolished. However, local authorities will be free, should they choose, to establish voluntary standards committees to consider complaints about the conduct of elected and co-opted members. Such committees will, according to councils' local constitutions, be able to censure but will not be able to suspend or disqualify members from council membership.

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