

1. I am the Independent Chairman of Northampton Borough Council Standards Committee. I refer to the proposed Localism Bill before Parliament, which includes proposals to abolish the Standards Board regime, the National Code of Conduct and Standards Committees in their present form.
2. Northampton Borough Council's Standards Committee agrees it is essential that a framework of local accountability continues to be in place in which the public can have confidence. The Committee therefore fully supports the recent press statement by Sir Christopher Kelly on behalf of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.
3. To rely on the courts or elections to deal with unacceptable behaviour will not increase public confidence in local government as much bad behaviour will not constitute a criminal offence and could only affect one or two of the electorate.
4. We would request that the Committee would take the following into account when considering this portion of the bill;
5. Criminalisation of certain types of behaviour will not, alone act as a deterrent to breaches of code of conduct and general poor standards of behaviour which undermine the growing disenchantment with local politicians and the system. The history of dependence solely upon the introduction of statute to determine honesty is one of failure and ridicule made worse by the lack of availability of competent investigative resource, the stringent demands of proof required to commence criminal proceedings and huge cost to the public purse when the occasional investigation does take place and result in criminal proceedings.
6. It is not apparent that past and present standards of behaviour pertaining to many members of either the Commons or Lords have been based upon the seven principles of public life or the listed model code of conduct relating to councillors. Clearly, public opinion and confidence in the credibility, honesty and integrity of members of both houses, has been seriously undermined and this has been acknowledged by the leaders of all political parties.
7. Government criticisms of the current standards regime take no account of the preventative nature of local independence in the establishment and monitoring of agreed standards of behaviour. For almost 200 years society has recognised that prevention of criminal behaviour as an alternative to the sole threat of severe legal punishment is more effective, efficient and less costly. Reference to the Standards for England 2009 Annual Review demonstrates the growing acceptance of the standards scenario within Local Authorities, together with the advantages that have emerged.

8. The “Model Code of Conduct” expected of local councillors is to be abolished and with it, seemingly, the abandonment of certain current expectations of councillors. Research published by Standards for England has shown that where standard committees have proved to be successful and guided routine behaviour the positive preventive outcomes have been found, including;
- Established Virtuous Circles:
  - Well respected Monitoring Officers
  - The ethical tone set by leadership
  - Everyone disposed to be proactive and pre-emptive toward possible misconduct and ethical risks
  - A culture of respectfulness in which being virtuous is embraced as part of the organisations identity
9. The Coalition Government have issued their programme for Government which is based upon three key elements – Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility – in which the devolvement of power to communities and local government is a key factor. To date there are 438 Standard Committees in England comprising of 4507 elected members and 1658 independent members from the local public. This last group have no other link to the authority than that of their overseeing role on the standards committee. Independent members are important in helping to increase or sustain public confidence in the local standards framework and provide a clear signal that the standards committee is acting fairly and impartially. Put simply their role is:
- Not to serve any political party, solely the democratic process;
  - The promotion, education and support of members;
  - The promotion of ethical well being within Councils;
  - To establish positive relationships with the public;
  - To establish and maintain political impartiality.

It is contended that this form of public involvement squarely meets the key elements of “The Big Society” mentioned above.

On behalf of the Standards Committee

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