

**STANDARDS ISSUES**  
**(Report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance**  
**and Monitoring Officer)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise the Committee of -

- ◆ a new name and profile for the former Standards Board for England;
- ◆ the outcome of new research about the public perception of Councillors; and
- ◆ indemnification arrangements for Standards Committee Members.

1.2 The Items are presented for information.

**2. A NEW IDENTITY FOR THE STANDARDS BOARD**

2.1 From 1st July 2009 the former Standards Board for England revealed a "new look and feel" to their communications and re-introduced themselves as "Standards for England".

2.2 In changing their name "Standards for England" wanted to emphasise how their role has varied over the past 18 months. During that time the organisation has moved from being one which focused mostly on handling complaints to the strategic regulator of standards among local politicians -

"We believe in principled local politics, working with local authorities, their Monitoring Officers and local Standards Committee; it's our job to champion and promote high standards of conduct among our local politicians. We want to make sure the public are in no doubt that standards and principles matter to local government.

We've made changes after sampling the views of key stakeholders, including those in local government. We asked: what leadership do you expect from us ? Our communications will do more to highlight the positive aspects of conduct; making the point that ethical behaviour is both a good thing in itself and good for local democracy."

2.3 In short "Standards for England" now describe themselves as follows:-

"Standards for England provides the national and independent oversight necessary for there to be confidence in a locally based system of ethical complaints. Our responsibilities include:-

- ◆ giving Standards Committees and Councillors support and guidance on understanding the Code of Conduct, and on how to deal with complaints about the conduct of Members of their Council or Authority;

- ◆ monitoring the performance of authorities in the local assessment of complaints;
- ◆ publishing information about how councils and other authorities are dealing with complaints about their Members;
- ◆ working with Standards Committees to help them improve if they do not deal with complaints about their Members properly;
- ◆ removing the power of the Standards Committee to receive complaints about their Members, if we believe it necessary; and
- ◆ investigating the most serious cases where the local Standards Committee believes it is not best placed to deal with the matter and we agree with them".

### **3. PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ETHICS**

- 3.1 Recent research carried out for "Standards for England" has indicated that the public feel that local Councillors are more likely to be truthful than local MPs. A total of 1,735 adults were polled through Gfk NOP Research's Random Location Omnibus poll - adults aged 18 and above were interviewed face to face in their homes between 11th and 16th June 2009. The research report on public perceptions of ethics is now published and can be found on-line at [www.standardsforengland.gov.uk](http://www.standardsforengland.gov.uk)
- 3.2 The research, which repeated questions asked previously in 2007 was carried out at a time when press coverage about MPs expenses was hitting the headlines. For local MPs, more people now think they "rarely or never" tell the truth than think they are "always" or mostly" truthful. Whilst only 2% feel Councillors "always" tell the truth, for MPs that figure drops below 1% and while 20% (18% in 2007) feel Councillors "never or rarely" tell the truth 29% (20% in 2007) feel that way about their local MP.
- 3.2 The Standards for England Chief Executive, Glenys Stacey, is quoted as saying "anecdotally we are told that the MPs expenses issue was much discussed on the doorstep during the recent local election campaign. It is pleasing, therefore, to see that trust in local politicians held up favourably compared to people's views about national politicians. Local Councillors sign up to a robust code of conduct allied to an effective local standards framework which deals with 2,800 complaints a year about England's 80,000 local politicians. The system is supported by "Standards for England", an independent national regulator with the status to deal with issues councils cannot manage themselves. Cases of the most serious wrong doing are rare, only 19 councillors were suspended or disqualified as a result of standards complaints in 2007/08. Working with English Councils, we need to do more to let local residents know how the standards framework is helping to safeguard high standards in local government".

**PERCENTAGE RESPONSES TO: HOW OFTEN DO YOU THINK THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF PEOPLE TELL THE TRUTH?**

	Always / most of the time		Sometimes		Rarely / Never		Don't Know	
	2007	<b>2009</b>	2007	<b>2009</b>	2007	<b>2009</b>	2007	<b>2009</b>
Your local MP	29%	<b>24%</b>	37%	<b>40%</b>	20%	<b>29%</b>	12%	<b>7%</b>
Your local councillor	30%	<b>28%</b>	38%	<b>40%</b>	18%	<b>20%</b>	14%	<b>12%</b>
Politicians in general	17%	<b>14%</b>	44%	<b>40%</b>	33%	<b>42%</b>	6%	<b>4%</b>

**4. INDEMNIFICATION ARRANGEMENTS FOR STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

4.1 "Standards for England" has raised some concerns with authorities about sufficiency and coverage of Councils indemnification arrangements. Under the Local Authorities (Indemnities for Members and Officers) Order 2004, local authorities can choose whether to indemnify their Members and "Standards for England" has recommended that Independent Members should be included in an authority's indemnification arrangements.

4.2 In response to a request to the District Council's Insurance and risk Officer to check the level of indemnification for Members, including Independent Members of the Committee, the Monitoring Officer has been advised that the Council has £2m indemnity for Officers and £1m indemnity for libel and slander which is considered to be sufficient. The Council's insurers and brokers also have not advised that it would be necessary to raise these thresholds when insurances have been renewed. It has also been confirmed that these arrangements cover the Independent Members of the Standards Committee.

**5. CONCLUSION**

5.1 The Committee is requested to receive and note the foregoing information.

**BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Bulletin Numbers 42 and 44 and Press Release dated 5th August 2009.

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