

**STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND - THE FUTURE?
(Report by the Head of Law, Property and Governance
and Monitoring Officer)**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The new coalition government published its programme for partnership government in a document entitled "The coalition: our programme for government" in May 2010.

1.2 Section 4 of the document relates to Communities and Local Government and included the following statement -

"We will abolish the Standards Board Regime".

1.2 Standards for England (SFE) made the following initial response to this announcement -

"We are very disappointed at the Government's decision to abolish the Local Government Standards Regime. Since 2007, Standards for England has dealt only with those matters which local authorities could not deal with themselves. Our recent review of this devolved local framework found that it is delivering increased confidence in the accountability of local politicians, improved member behaviour and contributing to better governance. We do not have clear details as yet of what is proposed for the future, but for now the local standards framework remains pending legislative change. Our priorities are to fulfil our statutory duties, to support local authorities in maintaining high standards and to assist the Government in developing and implementing any new arrangements."

2. DEVELOPMENTS SINCE MAY 2010

2.1 The Chairman of Standards for England (SFE), Mr Bob Chilton subsequently issued a letter to all Standards Committee Chairmen about the future of the local government standards framework and this is reproduced as an Appendix.

2.2 Since then, SFE has announced the cancellation of the Annual Assembly 2010 and has postponed completion of the quarterly monitoring return which was to be made by the Monitoring Officer in July. This last instruction had suggested that the SFE budget had been reduced and that a process to review activities and update the business plan had begun.

2.3 In the first parliamentary questions for CLG's new ministerial team in June, the Local Government Minister Andrew Stunell, confirmed that the Localism Bill would include legislation to scrap the expensive Local Government Standards Board meeting the commitment made in the Coalition Agreement.

In response, MPs suggested that this would make Mr Stunell "the pin-up boy for every councillor in the country" and that he would now receive an enormous amount of fan mail. Mr Stunell said:-

"Around the country, there are councillors of every political persuasion deeply frustrated by the fact that the Standards Board remains a burden and a threat to them. It costs £7.8m, but it dealt with only 1,000 real complaints last year, which is £7,800 per complaint. The sooner we get rid of it, the better. This will be done on a statutory basis through the De-centralisation and Localism Bill." Mr Stunell also informed Members of Parliament in an adjournment debate on 8th June that the Bill would also end the unfair practice known as "predetermination" which bars elected council members from taking part in decisions where they had complained or expressed a predisposed view. He added -

"It is absolutely the case that it is wrong for local representatives to be barred from taking part in decisions, even if they have a clear predisposed view. They may even have been elected on a particular issue, and it would of course then be deeply frustrating for them to receive apparently professional advice that disqualifies them from taking part. The Government certainly understands the concern that the issue causes to councillors, and if necessary, we will legislate to ensure that councillors are not prevented from speaking up on issues on which they have complained".

3. UPDATE FROM MONITORING OFFICER

- 3.1 Should any further announcements be made subsequent to the publication of the Agenda, the Monitoring Officer will update the Committee.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The Committee is requested to note the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Letter received from SFE dated 1st June 2010.
Press release - Department of Communities and Local Government.

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