

## New regulations come into force

In **Bulletin 42** we explained that regulations were being prepared to allow the Standards Board to suspend the initial assessment functions of an authority and to enable authorities to establish joint standards committees. The Standards Committee (Further Provisions) Regulations 2009 came into force on 15 June 2009. **Guidance about establishing joint standards committees** has been issued by the Standards Board to coincide with the regulations.

The regulations are much as expected and you may wish to refer to the **relevant article in Bulletin 42** for a summary of what they contain.

The regulations also amend the powers of standards committees to grant dispensations to members who would otherwise be unable to take part in authority business because of a prejudicial interest. There is a separate article about dispensations in this Bulletin and **guidance has also been issued** on our website.

## Changes to criteria for granting dispensations

The Standards Committee (Further Provisions) (England) Order 2009 makes changes to the criteria for granting dispensations for members to speak and vote when they have a prejudicial interest.

A standards committee can grant a dispensation to a member:

- where more than 50% of the members who would be entitled to vote at a meeting are prohibited from voting **OR**
- where the number of members that are prohibited from voting at a meeting would upset the political balance of the meeting to the extent that the outcome of voting would be prejudiced.

To decide whether these criteria apply, members must ignore any dispensations that have already been given to others at the meeting. The requirement to ignore any dispensations already granted means that any previously granted dispensations are disregarded for the purposes of working out whether the two circumstances above apply.

So, if there were ten members on a committee, six of whom would not be able to vote on some business, all six can claim a dispensation. If previously granted dispensations were not disregarded, a situation could arise where once two people had been granted dispensations, the remaining four would be ineligible. This is because at that point there would be less than 50% of the committee who could not vote.

Even if the criteria apply, members cannot get a dispensation to:

- allow them to take part in voting at an overview and scrutiny committee about a decision made by any body of which they were a member at the time the decision was taken
- allow an executive member with a prejudicial interest in an item of executive business to take an executive decision about it on their own

Ultimately it is for an authority's standards committee to decide what criteria they will apply when considering a request.

The criteria that will be applied and the process that will be followed should be made available to all members by the standards committee.

By law, a member must submit an application in writing for consideration by the standards committee. It is up to the standards committee whether or not they grant a dispensation and there is no right of appeal from their decision.

A standards committee can decide the nature of any dispensation it grants. For example, the dispensation may allow a member to speak and not vote, or to fully participate and vote. The committee can also decide how long the dispensation should apply, although it cannot be longer than four years.

After four years has elapsed since a dispensation was granted, it can no longer be used.

The decision must be recorded in writing and must be kept with the register of interests maintained by the monitoring officer.

We have issued new guidance on dispensations to reflect the new regulations. The guidance can be found by clicking [here](#).

## Standards Board responds to CSPL inquiry

The Standards Board has responded to the inquiry into MPs' expenses held by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. You can view our response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's inquiry by clicking [here](#).

## Support for Code of Conduct 'remains high'

Newly-published research suggests that member behaviour is improving and that support for the Code of Conduct remains high.

The Standards Board surveys the level of satisfaction in local government with our performance, and attitudes to the ethical environment, every two years. This year we commissioned BMG Research to carry out this survey on our behalf. As some of you may know, the survey was first undertaken in 2004

and was repeated in 2007.

The report's key findings are:

- 62% consider us successful in keeping local government, in general, informed about what we are doing (52% in 2007 and 46% in 2004). We are committed to making continuous improvements in this area.
- Support for the Code of Conduct remains high - 94% support the requirement for members to sign a Code of Conduct (93% in 2007 and 84% in 2004)
- 47% of respondents stated that they think members standards of behaviour have improved (44% in 2007, 27% in 2003).
- 75% of stakeholders have confidence in the way their local standards committee deals with complaints about members.
- This year we also asked respondents if they support the requirements for an officer's code - 88% of members expressed support for a requirement for an officer's code compared with 70% of monitoring officers and 78% of town/parish clerks. We will be feeding this information back to the department for Communities and Local Government.

Questions asked in the survey covered a number of areas including:

- attitudes to the Standards Board and ethical environment
- perceptions of the Standards Board
- views on our publication and website
- suggestions for ways in which we can improve our communication

In total, BMG received 1,973 completed questionnaires; this represents a response rate of 44% among town and parish councils, and 32% among principal and other authorities.

The research findings allow us to identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as demand for our services. In this way we can tailor our communications and advice and guidance to the needs of our stakeholders. Since the research also collects data on attitudes to the ethical environment, we can also use it to help us assess the impact of the standards framework.

Thank you to everyone who participated in this survey, it is only through your continued support with our research that we are able to track the progress we are making.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded by clicking [here](#).

For further information, please contact:

Cara Afzal (Deputy Research and Monitoring Manager) on 0161 817 5314 or email [cara.afzal@standardsboard.gov.uk](mailto:cara.afzal@standardsboard.gov.uk).

## **Studying the impact and effectiveness of the ethical framework in local government**

In 2006, we commissioned Cardiff University to carry out a five-year project to identify the impact of the standards framework within nine local authorities. Year one of this study is now complete.

This project also involved a survey of the public within the nine areas to identify any link between the activities of a local authority and public perceptions. This research is being led by Dr Richard Cowell from the Centre for Local and Regional Government Research.

The research aims to address three main questions:

- Has the ethical framework caused any changes in local government processes and systems, and culture and values?
- Has the ethical framework had any effect on the conduct of councillors?
- Has the ethical framework had any effect on public attitudes to local government either directly, or through any changes in council processes and/or councillor conduct?

**What has the research found so far?**

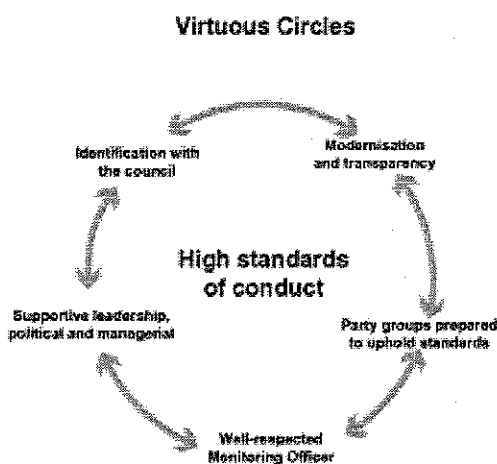
**Changes in processes, systems, culture, and values:** The research identifies that, in most councils, the ethical framework and standards have become established and accepted as part of corporate life. The majority of respondents are positive about the move towards local regulation (apart from a concern about costs). The formal components of the ethical framework are being implemented successfully and there is some desire among those interviewed for committees to take a more pro-active role in promoting good conduct.

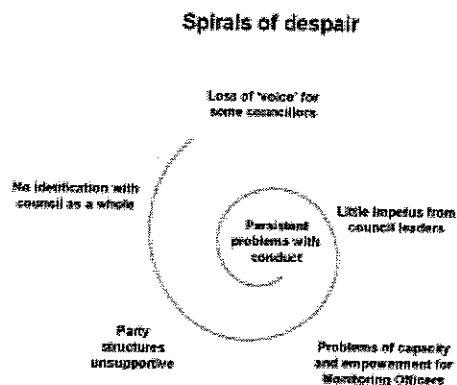
**The conduct of councillors:** The research reveals many feel that the conduct of councillors has improved in recent years, and that ethical issues are being treated seriously. There also seems to be widespread support for the view that the ethical framework has been beneficial. Councils with better conduct tend to make more effort to continually train and remind councillors of their responsibilities, and to make involvement in training mandatory. The ethical framework has helped improve conduct by acting as a regulatory mechanism, being used to support the sanctioning, demotion or resignation of councillors who have caused serious ethical problems.

**Effect on public attitudes:** The research found that more positive public survey responses for trust are achieved in councils displaying good standards of conduct. In addition, councils with high levels of trust tend to be well managed. Nearly half of the public survey respondents were confident that their local authority would uncover breaches in standards of behaviour by a councillor. Furthermore, a similar proportion believe that those breaching the Code would be dealt with effectively.

The research has also highlighted two very useful typologies, "Virtuous circles", and 'Spirals of despair'.

- **"Virtuous circles"** - refer to those organisational and cultural factors that lead to effective use of the ethical framework and good conduct
- **"Spirals of despair"** - are factors that result in poor conduct





For more details on these factors, please click [here](#) to read the full report.

We are committed to making findings from our research accessible to our stakeholders and to this end we will continue to use various forums to disseminate the findings.

If you have any thoughts on this report, or the usefulness and accessibility of other Standards Board research please do not hesitate to contact Cara Afzal, Deputy Research and Monitoring Manager on 0161 817 5414, or email [cara.afzal@standardsboard.gov.uk](mailto:cara.afzal@standardsboard.gov.uk).

## Quarterly returns – one year on

We have been collecting quarterly returns for a year now and so take the opportunity to reflect on how the local framework has bedded in.

Firstly, we would like to thank all monitoring officers and their colleagues who made returns to the Standards Board. We are delighted with the consistent high level of completed returns. For quarter four – as with quarter two – we received a return from every authority. This was a particularly good achievement as we asked those authorities that were being abolished to send their returns earlier than the normal schedule. Undoubtedly, these authorities were under extreme pressure preparing for the transition to unitary status.

We do not underestimate how difficult it must have been to find time to complete the quarterly returns. We are hopeful that the impressive return rate will continue into the next financial year.

The next collection period for the 1 April – 30 June quarter will be 1-14 July.

### What can we tell from the first year's worth of data?

#### Standards committees

Quarterly returns tell us that a typical standards committee has **10** members. In an authority without parishes it has **9** members, including **4** independent members. In an authority with parishes it is slightly larger with **11** members, including **4** independent members and **3** parish representatives.

On average, district and metropolitan councils have the largest standards committees and police authorities have the smallest. Standards committee composition has remained constant through all quarters

#### Case handling

A total of **2,863** cases have been recorded on quarterly returns so far. This covers the time period 8 May 2008 to 31 March 2009. **345** authorities have dealt with at least one case during the first year. Of all the authorities with cases, the average recorded is **2** per quarter, a total of **8**.

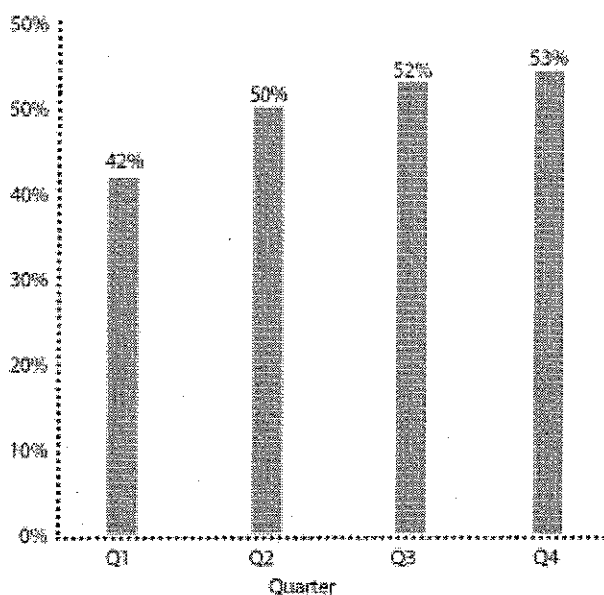
It is still perhaps too early to identify trends and make generalisations, but it is interesting to note that in quarter 4, the number of cases received under the new framework is very similar to the previous two quarters (see chart below). This may indicate that the case load is levelling out, now that potential complainants are aware of the new system.

The majority of complaints, **54%**, are made by the public and **36%** are from council members. The remaining **10%** are from a combination of officers, parish or town clerks, MPs, monitoring officers, and those that fall into the category of 'other'. Again, these percentages have seen little change during the year.

#### Initial assessment

The percentage of cases where no further action is taken is increasing each quarter.

#### Percentage of no further action decisions



There have been 526 review requests through the year and 384 of these have been assessed. **94%** have remained 'no further action' and the other 25 (6%) were either referred for investigation or referred to us.

There are 224 cases with investigation outcomes recorded on quarterly returns. In **71%** of cases, no

breach of the Code was found. In **25%** of cases, a breach was found and a penalty was imposed, and in **4%** of cases a breach was found but no further action was taken.

More details about the quarterly returns, such as what breaches of the Code have been recorded, can be found on our website by clicking [here](#). You can also contact the monitoring team on 0161 817 5300 or email [authorityreturns@standardsboard.gov.uk](mailto:authorityreturns@standardsboard.gov.uk).

## Good response for annual returns

We are very pleased with the number of returns we have received for the annual return questionnaire, which was launched on 20 April 2009.

As of 29 May, 95% of authorities had completed a return. This figure includes the new unitary authorities, which completed a shortened version.

We are now entering the analysis phase and first impressions are that there is a good range of notable practice to share with standards committees. More information about our findings will follow in future *Bulletins* and on our website.

## Probity in Planning Guidance Issued

The Local Government Association has recently published a revised guidance note on good planning practice for councillors and officers dealing with planning matters.

This 2009 update provides refreshed advice on achieving the balance between the needs and interests of individual constituents and the community and the need to maintain an ethic of impartial decision-making with regards to planning decisions.

For more information please see the [LGA website](#).

## A new look

From July this year there's a new look and feel to our communications – and we're introducing an abbreviated version of our name: Standards for England.

We've made this switch to emphasise how our role has changed over the past 18 months. During that time we've moved from being an organisation focused mostly on handling complaints to the strategic regulator of standards among local politicians. We'll be telling you more about our new role in our corporate plan, which will be available shortly.

And in our new role we're all about Standards for England.

We believe in principled local politics. Working with local authorities, their monitoring officers and local standards committees, 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.

You can read more about our refreshed identity on our website from 1 July. We'll be introducing style changes to our publications and our website over the next few months. We hope you'll like them, and as always we'll welcome your feedback.

We believe in Standards for England. We hope you do too.

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