



the
Standards Board
for England

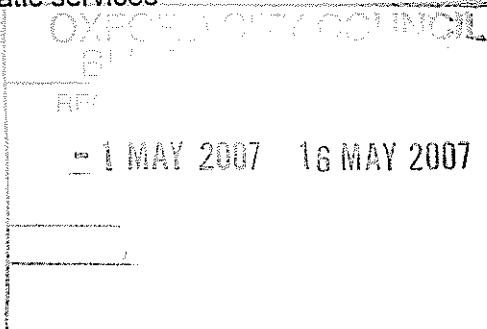
30 April 2007

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Dear Mr Reed

Thank you for your letter dated 13 April 2007 expressing the concerns your standards committee has in relation to the changing role of the Standards Board under the new ethical framework.

I would like to address your concerns in the order they appear in your letter.

Towards a more local system

As you say, the Government's proposals in *The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill* contain a series of provisions for a more locally-based conduct framework, with more responsibilities for local self-regulation and the Standards Board having a more strategic role in supporting and guiding local authorities.

You say in your letter that your committee is concerned about local filtering. The decision to introduce such arrangements is of course a matter for parliament rather than the Board and was a specific recommendation of the committee of Standards in Public Life (the Graham Committee). It has been strongly advocated and supported by the Local Government Association. As well as having devolved responsibility for dealing with allegations about breaches of the Code to individual standards committees, the Bill also places a duty on the Standards Board to assess, monitor and audit the performance of standards committees. This is designed to help us support authorities and counteract some of the issues you raise, whilst also ensuring decisions are made at an appropriate local level. One of the key balances we will need to strike will be between allowing effective local discretion on the one hand and ensuring some degree of consistency on the other.

Where an authority is not operating effectively, the Standards Board will be able to suspend the local arrangements for dealing with complaints, though this could only be for specific reasons of failure and is likely to be exceptional since we will be seeking to prevent such failures in the first place.

Political impartiality

One of the specific concerns you express in your letter is that the local filter may mean a lack of political impartiality. The Government has sought to address this by making it a requirement for standards committees to have an independent chair. The existence of an independent chair together with the Standards Board's power to assess performance will I hope address these concerns.

Resources and the local filter

You also raise concerns about the resource implications of local filtering. Our initial analysis of potential workload for a typical authority based on the number of cases we have dealt with over 5 years showed that most authorities have had very few allegations over the years but there may be burden on councils with responsibility for thirty parishes or more. DCLG were aware of this in considering funding settlement levels.

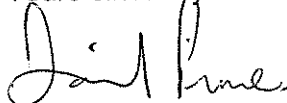
The burden may be eased in that The Local Government Bill allows for joint working across standards committees. Regulations will allow two or more authorities to establish a joint committee to exercise any of the functions of standards committees that the authorities wish to combine. It is anticipated that this approach will help with resources and will also ensure a greater consistency in approach and help local authorities to manage the potential increase in workload that the changes to the new framework will bring. We are currently running some pilots to test these arrangements, drawing on local expertise and experience.

The Standard Board as a strategic regulator

I do believe that there are benefits in the introduction of more local decision-making and a more strategic role for the Board. The local ownership of standards allows local knowledge and sensitivities to be reflected more easily in each case. It enables the experience and skills of the monitoring officer to be used more effectively, including potentially allowing more opportunity for local mediation or other intervention falling short of investigation, which might allow disagreements to be defused before they turn into full-blown investigations. At the same time, the Board will be free to support those authorities which face serious difficulties and we will be better placed to use our resources more effectively to guide and monitor authorities. We will also of course continue to deal with cases which are unsuitable to be dealt with locally, for example those involving leading members or involving conflicts of interest.

Thank you again for taking the time to write to me personally. I hope I have satisfactorily addressed your concerns. The Board will do all that it can to ensure the success of the legislative change and to ensure public confidence in the more locally owned system.

Yours sincerely



David Prince
Chief Executive