

PRESS NOTICE

14 December 2010

**“PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT STANDARDS
IS AT RISK” - SIR CHRISTOPHER KELLY**

The lack of a national code of conduct and an independent complaints mechanism in the proposed new regime for standards in local government risks lower standards and a decline in public confidence, Sir Christopher Kelly, Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, said today.

Following the publication today of the Decentralisation and Localism Bill, which includes provision for the abolition of Standards for England, the body which oversees the ethical standards regime in local government, Sir Christopher said:

“The Committee has long argued for proportionate ways of upholding strong ethical standards at local level and we recognise the problem in the existing regime of vexatious or politically motivated complaints. But the proposed stripping back of the current structure to virtually nothing loses sight of some important principles.

“The proposals go well beyond the abolition of Standards for England. They involve the abolition of the national code of conduct for local authority members and remove the obligation on local authorities to maintain standards committees, chaired by independent people, to monitor standards and sanction aberrant behaviour. In future it appears that the only way of sanctioning poor behaviour between elections will be the criminal law or appeals to the ombudsman where someone’s interests are directly affected by a decision.

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“The Bill refers to a duty on local authorities to promote and maintain high standards. If this is to mean anything, in the Committee’s view it is essential that there remains a national code of conduct so that both councillors and – most importantly – the public can judge what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. Leaving it up to each local authority to decide whether to have their own code and - if so - what it should contain, risks confusion. National codes of conduct govern the behaviour of MPs, civil servants and others in public life. Why are councillors judged to be different?”

“Nor is it acceptable that the new regime leaves no independent mechanism for dealing with complaints about the behaviour of an individual Councillor aside from the criminal law– which will leave no way of responding between elections to behaviour which is seriously in breach of acceptable limits but not appropriate for criminal prosecution.

“The Committee welcome the intention to make regulation more proportionate. But we believe that a national code and an independent complaints mechanism – however achieved – need to be retained to ensure that the public can have confidence in the integrity of the behaviour of our locally elected politicians.”

Ends

Notes to Editors

- 1. For all media enquiries and interview requests for the Committee chairman, Sir Christopher Kelly, media should contact Maggie O’Boyle on 07880 740627**
2. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) sponsored by the Cabinet Office. The Chair and Members are appointed by the Prime Minister. The Committee was established in October 1994 with the following terms of reference: “To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any

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changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life. Additional terms of reference were announced on 12 November 1997: “To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements.”

3. The current members of the Committee are: Sir Christopher Kelly KCB, Chairman, Rt. Hon Lord Alderdice, Rt. Hon Margaret Beckett MP, Lloyd Clarke QPM, Oliver Heald MP, Sir Derek Morris MA DPhil, Dame Denise Platt DBE, David Prince CBE, Dr Elizabeth Vallance JP, and Dr Brian Woods-Scawen DL CBE.
4. The First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life identified weaknesses in the procedures for maintaining and enforcing standards across public life. The Report called for “urgent remedial action” to address the “public disquiet” including that “all public bodies should draw up Codes of Conduct” and that “Internal systems for maintaining standards should be supported by independent scrutiny”. [First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life Cm 2850-1]
5. The Committee’s third report, *Standards of Conduct in Local Government* which was published in 1997 made a number of recommendations many of which formed the framework for the new standards regimes in the Local Government Act 2000. The Committee returned to local government standards in its tenth report published in January 2005. Both reports are available on the Committee’s website www.public-standards.org.uk
6. The Committee is currently carrying out an inquiry into the funding of political parties. The Issues and Questions consultation paper for the Party Political Finance Inquiry is available on the Committee’s website or from 0207 276 2595.
7. Additional information about the Committee and its work is available on the Committee’s website www.public-standards.org.uk.

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