

Stunell sets out future for corrupt councillors and for councils without Whitehall

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Serious misconduct for personal gain will be a criminal act, while petty local vendettas will no longer get a hearing as the unpopular standards board regime is axed, Communities Minister Andrew Stunell announced.

Mr Stunell said the top-down regime set up by central government to monitor council conduct had become a vehicle for malicious and frivolous complaints. For example, one authority had to fork out £160,000 after receiving over 170 complaints from the same person. Each one had to be examined, but only three were considered worth investigating and after investigation all were dismissed.

Local Standards Committees investigated 6000 complaints in the first two years - of which over half were judged not worthy of any further action. The Government is axing the entire Standards regime including the central board, which costs over £6 million a year; with investigations of complaints costing thousands of pounds each.

Genuine corruption in local government needs to be rooted out and the new Government is legislating to make serious misconduct a criminal offence dealt with by the courts not committees. Councillors will have to register certain personal interests in a publicly available register.

Andrew Stunell said:

"The Standards Board regime ended up fuelling petty complaints and malicious vendettas. Nearly every council had investigations hanging over them - most of which would be dismissed but not before reputations were damaged and taxpayer money was wasted. Frivolous allegations undermined local democracy and discouraged people from running for public office.

"That's why we are axing the unpopular and unelected standards board regime. Instead we will legislate to ensure that if a councillor is corrupt and abuses their office for personal gain they will be dealt with in the criminal courts. If a councillor behaves ineffectively or irresponsibly then it's a matter for the electorate not an unelected quango.

"This Government is freeing councillors from central prescription and top down bureaucracy so they can get on with their job. In the future councillors must expect to be judged at the ballot box by an electorate with real access to their accounts and personal interests in a new transparent era."

Communities Secretary Eric Pickles added:

"The standards board regime became the problem, not the solution. Unsubstantiated and petty allegations, often a storm in a teacup, damaged the reputation and standing of local government, as well as wasting taxpayers' money.

"But by abolishing the failed standards committees we're not letting councillors off the hook. Failure to register or declare an interest, or deliberately seeking to mislead the public about an interest, will become a criminal offence while a newly empowered Local Government Ombudsman will investigate incompetence on behalf local people."

Public to decide councillors' fates

Under new plans the public will also have greater confidence to challenge poor local services. The Government intends to give the Local Government Ombudsman, the established body for investigating public complaints over the way they have been treated by their council, real teeth. For the first time local authorities will be legally compelled to implement the Ombudsman's findings.

Councillors freed to speak their minds and organise themselves

Mr Stunell said the Government will also legislate to make it clear that councillors can campaign and vote freely on their issues. Councillors who have been prevented from speaking on the very issues they had been elected on, such as planning matters, will now have the freedom to express their views.

Councils will also be able to run themselves under a system that works best for their area. The new Government will let councils have a real choice and decide with local people what system is best for their community, whether that be a Mayor/Leader and Cabinet or a committee system.

In 2000 councils across the country were forced to give up committee systems and adopt a new executive model of governance prescribed by central government. The new Government will allow councils to return to the committee system, should they wish to.

Andrew Stunell said:

"For the last decade councils have been forced to implement a one-size fits all model of Government. This Government will let councils and communities decide how to organise themselves. We don't presume to know more than local people about how their area should be run.

"The Coalition Government is committed to localism and pushing power away from Westminster and back to local communities. We're not going to be micromanaging, second guessing and interfering in local affairs anymore."