

The future of the Standards Framework after the Localisation Bill.

Background and Context.

At the time of the Introduction of the Code of Conduct and the Standards Regime both were highly controversial, especially but not exclusively amongst Parish Councils. In Maidstone a number of long serving Parish Councillors were so concerned by the new environment that they stepped down from public office, rather than adopt the Model Code of Conduct.

Certainly there have been problems with the Standards Framework. There have been trivial and even upon occasion malicious complaints made at all levels of Local Government, but there have also been other issues raised, that were serious matters of concern. After some years experience it is the view of most Parishes in Maidstone and of the Area Committee that there is a danger of over reacting to the criticism of the Standards Regime, most of which relates to the operational functioning of the Standards Board for England.

The Way Forward

The Area Committee feel strongly that there is a need for local authorities to appear transparent and accountable to the public and voted unanimously in favour of retaining some form of local Standards Arrangements for local Parishes, and preferably for other tiers of local Government as well.

We felt that ideally there would continue to be a national Model Code and arrangements, but that this was not likely to find favour with the current government. The Area Committee therefore took the view that there should be arrangements made across the County, or at the very least Districts of Kent. We would very much like to pursue this matter in co-operation with Maidstone Borough Council.

Concern was also expressed that training would be needed for members of Parish Councils, and other local authorities, to understand the details of the new system. In particular the reversion to the previous system in relation to declarations of prejudicial interests and the continuing application of the legal principles of fettered discretion as reinterpreted by the Localism Bills clause on advocacy. The Area Committee also felt Parish Councils should be encouraged to have robust internal complaints procedures in place which would act as a filter to any new arrangements.

The Committee further agreed to lobby national and local government through the KALC County Association and the National Association of Local Councils.