



Briefing Report No: **55/2010**

Public Agenda Item: **Yes**

Title: **A Brief Overview of Standards for England's Proposed New Liaison Function "Offering a Helping Hand"**

Wards Affected: **All wards in Torbay**

To: **Standards Committee** On: **11 March 2010**

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## **1. Key points and Summary**

- 1.1 Standards for England (SfE) are intending to become more proactive with regard to how local authorities in England are carrying out their functions in relation to the local standards framework. This report highlights the most significant parts of their proposals.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 There are three main areas which SfE intend to develop their role, these are; guidance and advice, liaison with local authorities and risk based engagement with local authorities. No guidance has yet been issued by SfE and this report is meant only as a brief outline of SfE's current proposals. It is intended that SfE's proposals will come into effect in April 2010.

## **3. Proposals**

Standards for England intend to develop their role in the three main areas as follows:

### **3.1 Guidance and Advice**

Members will be aware that SfE already provide a considerable amount of guidance; to local authorities on how they should carry out their functions in relation to the local standards framework; and to members on how the code of conduct should be interpreted. SfE intends to develop this further by providing a dedicated helpline for Monitoring Officers, providing further guidance, developing the Standards Forum and producing tailored products arising from their liaisons with local authorities

### **3.2 Liaison with Local Authorities**

As well as developing tailored products SfE intend to develop relationships with

local authorities with a view to better assisting them with their functions in relation to the local standards framework. One such way of developing these arrangements is the appointment of four relationship managers who are to be the SfE's representative in the each area of England to which they are appointed.

### 3.3 Risk Based Engagement

This is the most controversial of SfE's current proposals. SfE intended to 'rate' local authorities as either red, amber or green, however, the Chairman of the Standards Committee (Mr Heath) has spoken to SfE recently and they have now decided that local authorities shall be rated as either low, medium or high risk. For internal purposes the SfE will continue to use the categories red, amber and green.

Risk based engagement involves all local authorities being telephoned at least twice a year by their relationship manager. Those local authorities rated as medium risk (amber) will also be visited at least once a year and those rated as high risk (red) will be subject to such intervention as the SfE deems necessary. How a local authority is rated depends on a number of factors including; the type of authority it is, the number of parish councils that are within an authority's area; the number of complaints an authority receives in any 12 month period; and the number of complaints to the Ombudsman relating to the standards framework of an authority. The current intention is for all London Boroughs and all mayoral authorities (such as Torbay) to be rated as medium risk regardless of any other factors. The 'rating' system has received substantial criticism from monitoring officers across the country as being rated anything other than low risk (green) will inevitably carry negative connotations. Hopefully, by changing the ratings to low, medium and high risk the negative connotations will be not as severe as they would be if the 'traffic light system' is maintained.

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