

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP  
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities  
& Local Government  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
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19 February 2021

Sent by email to [robert.jenrick@communities.gov.uk](mailto:robert.jenrick@communities.gov.uk)

Dear Secretary of State,

## **Government Response to the Review of Local Government Ethical Standards**

The Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) worked closely with the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) on its Review of Local Government Ethical Standards and strongly supported its findings and recommendations – particularly in relation to the strengthening of the standards regime. We note with continued concern, that two years later, the Government is yet to respond to the Committee and the recommendations it made.

The SLCC strongly supports the National Association of Local Councils in calling for measures to dramatically strengthen the current standards regime. Specifically, we believe that the introduction of sanctions including suspension and disqualification must be a central part of a range of available measures aimed at improving standards of conduct and behaviour.

The recent coverage of Jackie Weaver from the Cheshire Association of Local Councils, and the manner in which she was treated by some members of Handforth Parish Council, serves to highlight some of the issues facing our members. Although superficially amusing, this type of bullying is an occurrence seen all too often in our sector, leaving professional officers distraught and often mentally scarred. As the membership organisation for those officers, we could provide countless similar examples and, sadly, far too many of more unacceptable and extreme behaviour.

In the local council sector, the clerk is usually the sole employee and therefore the only person offering advice on government legislation and government guidelines. A lone voice.

The SLCC periodically surveys its members and provided evidence to the CSPL in 2018 to support its review. We did so once again over the Christmas period and, although the final results are still in draft, the early figures suggest a worrying trend. In 2018, 15% of local councils were experiencing behavioural difficulties,

with about a third (5%) effectively making the local council dysfunctional. This figure remains largely unchanged in 2021.

However, in the context of an unchanging reported level of behavioural difficulties, the number of complaints reported through the standards regime has dropped from 42% in 2018 to 14% in 2021. This suggests a growing frustration with the inability of the standards regime to deal with the bullying behaviour of parish councillors. Whilst these individuals are in the minority, they do so much to damage the communities they purport to serve as well as the reputation of the vast majority of local councils which do such wonderful work for the benefit of their communities and electors.

As you have quite rightly noted, now, more than ever, the first tier of local government needs to 'step up'. And, as you have similarly noted, during the pandemic parish, town and community councils have been at the forefront of the support and relief effort. Many vulnerable residents owe their wellbeing to the efforts of these professionally run councils.

Sadly, in at least 500 councils there is evidence of bullying by elected members who see the council as their personal fiefdom and who will stop at nothing to undermine those who act professionally.

We do not believe the government condones this type of behaviour and wish to see a dramatic strengthening of the standards regime, to drive out this appalling behaviour once and for all. Our members, serving over 5,000 town and parish councils would implore you, in the strongest terms, to move forward with the recommendations of the CSPL's report without delay. I and senior members of SLCC would be pleased to join other local council representatives in meeting you at any time to discuss these issues.

Yours sincerely,



Steven Trice  
Chairman



Linda Larter  
President



Robert Smith  
Chief Executive