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MEDIA RELEASE | INQUIRY BY PRIME MINISTER'S INDEPENDENT ADVISORY BODY BACKS NALC CALL TO STRENGTHEN STANDARDS REGIME FOR 100,000 COUNCILLORS

A year-long Parliamentary inquiry into ethical standards in local government, published today (30 January), has backed calls from the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for reforms to the current regime aimed at improving behaviour in 10,000 local (parish and town) councils.

NALC has campaigned for a range of measures to be introduced to support high standards of conduct by its 100,000 local councillors, including the re-introduction of sanctions, greater emphasis on training and development, and a single code of conduct for all tiers of local government based on NALC's own model code.

However, the national membership body - which represents the first tier of local government in England - has issued a plea to the Government to address the report's failure to recommend and promote more councillor training and development. NALC has been pressing for greater encouragement and support for induction and regular refresher training for local councillors on standards, coupled with new investment in a national training programme.

Measures recommended in the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life report on ethical standards in local government, presented to the Prime Minister, include:

- a new power for principal authorities, such as district and county councils, to suspend councillors from all tiers of local government
- revised rules on declaring interests, gifts and hospitality
- an updated model code of conduct, in consultation with representative bodies of councillors and officers of all tiers of local government
- a right of appeal for suspended councillors to the Local Government Ombudsman
- greater transparency about the number and nature of complaints.

Cllr Sue Baxter, chairman of NALC, said: “NALC is fully committed to promoting and supporting the highest standards of conduct by local councillors and officers in the first tier of local government, which is increasingly playing a bigger role in communities including the delivery of public services and community facilities.

“Since the Localism Act was introduced in 2010, NALC has long-called for its review, including the standards regime it introduced, and therefore strongly welcomed this inquiry into local government ethical standards.

“Whilst the present regime is not fundamentally flawed, it does require some strengthening, therefore I am pleased the Committee on Standards in Public Life has listened to the concerns of NALC, county associations of local councils, and local councils themselves.

“The Committee rightly acknowledges it is a minority of local councillors who engage in bullying or harassment, or other highly disruptive behaviour, therefore NALC is delighted the Committee agrees with our proposal for the regime to have more teeth through the re-introduction of sanctions for breaches of the code.

“However, NALC is bitterly disappointed at the report’s failure to support local councillors by helping them develop a better understanding of the standards regime through councillor training such as induction and regular refresher training. That is why I am urging the government to go further and work with NALC to encourage and support training for local councillors, and to provide investment to support a national training programme comprising a range of initiatives including a member development charter. Such investment could come from existing funding into local government improvement.

“We support the recommendation to develop an updated model code of conduct to reflect the proposed changes, but given over half of local councils and many principal authorities use NALC’s model code of conduct, this should be the foundation for the development of an updated model code of conduct for all tiers of local government. NALC looks forward to further dialogue and engagement with the Committee and the government over taking forward the report’s recommendations.”

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