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Standards shake-up

Government privately reaffirms commitment to legislative reforms to standards originally proposed under Starmer regime

EXCLUSIVE by Dan Peters

The Government under new Prime Minister Andy Burnham has privately committed to legislation that would reform the standards regime 'if at all possible', *The MJ* understands.

Labour ministers under Keir Starmer had promised legislative reforms to the standards regime, but there was no legislation in the King's Speech outlining Bills for the second session of Parliament earlier this year.

The Government committed to a whole-system reform of the standards framework last year, including giving local authorities powers to suspend councillors and mayors for serious misconduct for up to six months and withhold allowances when behaviour fell short.

A senior figure at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) said: 'On reforms to standards, sector pressure is huge. There was a really productive task and finish group ready to go with proposals that was then knocked off the Parliamentary timetable under the last [Keir Starmer] administration so we're now looking at whether the third session could produce enough time to get something on the books.

'I'm more positive now. Some sensible approaches are developing, which hopefully will enjoy mostly cross-party support.

'Nothing is yet concrete but there is a commitment to getting legislation through, if at all possible, subject to space in Parliament.'

Another senior MHCLG source said: 'We've got a plan that we're desperate to do. We need primary legislation. If we can get that legislation, we are ready to run at it.'

No date has been given for legislation, which the Government has said will be brought forward 'when Parliamentary time allows'.

A senior sector source added: 'I'm a bit more positive as the task and finish group is back and meeting. No guarantees but it's still in the process.'

Council chiefs have been privately lobbying senior civil servants over the issue after a survey by senior officers' group Solace found nine out of 10 chief executives and senior officers experienced poor or inappropriate behaviour by elected members during the past three years, with more than half (52%) believing that standards were getting worse.

The final report of Solace's commission on professional standards and ethics, chaired by former chief executive of St Helens MBC Kath O'Dwyer, will detail clear recommendations for reform when it is published next week.

O'Dwyer said: 'Standards and behaviours are not only poor, but in many cases getting worse. We welcome the Government's renewed commitment to reform and will continue working closely with ministers and officials to help make it a reality, but there is no time to lose – reforms must be delivered swiftly and in full.'

Chief executive of Lawyers in Local Government and the Association of Monitoring Officers, Deborah Evans, added: 'Without effective remedies, councils risk driving away good councillors and senior employees and eroding trust in local government. After years of discussion, the Government must now turn its promised reforms into reality by introducing a clear, proportionate and effective standards regime with meaningful sanctions.'

MHCLG declined to comment on whether it was looking at a standalone Bill, adding the reforms to another local government Bill or bringing in any reforms through secondary legislation.


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Ex-Prime Minister Keir Starmer and current PM Andy Burnham both made commitments to reforming standards

What could change for your council

- A single national code would replace locally adopted codes
- Standards committees would become compulsory for principal authorities
- Potential suspension powers of up to six months, with allowances withheld
- Interim suspension during investigations
- Rights of appeal for both complainants and accused councillors

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