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Dear Joan Munro,

The Standards Board for England welcomes the recently published local government workforce strategy *local government the place to be, the place to work*. The strategy rightly highlights the importance of the local government workforce in ensuring that local government is able to meet future challenges. We fully endorse your call for local government to be at the heart of the community and a place that people are proud to work for.

In this response to your report we would like to place your concern with pride in local government within the wider context of ensuring confidence in local democracy, and to raise a concern about the omission of any reference to high standards of governance as integral to strategic priorities of organisational development and leadership.

A key means of ensuring workforce pride in local government is by building confidence in local democracy and local government and public perceptions of them. This includes greater public confidence in the integrity of both officers and members as well as confidence in services proffered. Ethics and standards of behaviour are a cornerstone of ensuring trust in local government. Indeed, the former Local Government Minister, Phil Woolas, has said that “if the trust between members and the people they serve is missing people will not invest their time and energy in taking part in the democratic process.” The importance of promoting high standards in public life has been recognised in the recent concordat between central and local government, developed by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Association. The Councillors Commission, in their report *Representing the Future* (2007,) also recommended that maintaining high standards and ethics should be a key feature of any councillor role description.

Citizens can expect, and should experience and perceive there to be, good ethical behaviour and governance whenever decisions are taken and resources allocated that effect their lives and communities. Although the Board’s experience is that generally speaking there are not high incidences of serious poor behaviour at a local level, where incidences do occur these have a disproportionate impact on the public’s perception of local democracy as a whole. If the public have confidence in local government it follows that local government will be perceived as being at the heart of communities and a place in which officers can be proud to work.

The ethical behaviour of members and officers can have a direct impact on the trust of the people they serve. Evidence abounds of public distrust in politicians. The Councillors Commission report, referred to above, concluded that there was “A prevailing atmosphere of public mistrust with formal politics, political parties and institutions of government”. The Power Inquiry (2006) into disengagement from formal democratic politics concluded that political institutions were perceived as untrustworthy, and research commissioned by the Standards Board suggests that much work needs to be done to improve the trust that citizens have in local government (Ipsos MORI 2005, GfK NOP 2007).

Moving on to the strategic priorities for the workforce, we welcome the emphasis on partnership working within organisational development and leadership development. Partnerships provide opportunities for innovative ways to ensure better public services that meet local needs and, via the devolution of power, a welcome means of engaging local people in the decision-making process. We are anxious to ensure that the opportunities for innovation and vision are balanced with the need to ensure high standards and accountability in decision-making and in the delivery of partnership objectives.

We believe that partnership working has serious implications for ethical governance arrangements at a local level, particularly in terms of accountability and decision-making. We agree with the Audit Commission’s report (2005) that has highlighted concerns about an accountability gap in the way that governance of partnerships work. The importance of effective governance of partnerships has been recognised by the Audit Commission in the latest draft of its ‘use of resources’ key lines of enquiry. The descriptor for a council that is performing well, which we endorse, is:

The organisation can demonstrate that partnerships, stakeholders and local people have confidence in the organisation, including the standards of conduct of its board members and officers, and its governance arrangements.

Research undertaken for the Standards Board for England by the University of Manchester (Greasley *et al* 2006) highlighted the problems of differences between organisations with respect to openness and transparency, inconsistency in the codes of conduct that partners are working to and the difficulties of enforcement. A further problem, and one identified in the Councillors Commission report, is that the plethora of organisations involved in the provision of services, combined with the various governance arrangements, makes it difficult for the public to understand local governance arrangements, and subsequently it is hard for them to feel a sense of engagement with what is happening at a local level.

As things currently stand, the behaviour of councillors is regulated through a framework of accountability including a Code of Conduct. We understand that the Department for Communities and Local Government also plans a Code of Conduct for officers. The Standards Board for England strongly supports the latter development, as it is extremely important that those responsible for decision-making and the allocation of resources are seen to be accountable. A Code for Officers will be complementary to that for members and the delay in this has been unfair to members who have had to adhere to higher standards of behaviour than officers, some of whom have considerable decision-making powers.

People involved in partnership arrangements are often making decisions or allocating resources that affect the lives of the wider public without necessarily being accountable for those decisions. Ultimately, local people should be able to see that the people making the decisions in their local area, whether that is in the capacity of a local businessperson sitting on a Local Strategic Partnership or their elected member, are not bolstering their own protected interests but have to account publicly for their decisions. It is important that high standards of behaviour are built into any system where people are making decisions on behalf of the wider public.

Closing the accountability gap will involve a locally agreed framework of values that all decision makers agree to adhere to. This does not mean a 'one size fits all' set of rules, but there does need to be an accountability framework which is commensurate with the risk involved in terms of the nature of the decision-making, does not duplicate existing regulatory safeguards and helps ensure public confidence in local governance systems. We are concerned that the emphasis on innovation in partnerships does not result in this issue of accountability being overlooked. Councils, as elected multi-purpose authorities, have a unique democratic legitimacy to take the lead in local partnerships and ensure an appropriate accountability framework.

In short, we believe that visionary leadership in a partnership context needs to incorporate a concern with ethics and high standards of behaviour. Local government, as the body with democratic legitimacy and demonstrable high standards has both the right and the responsibility to lead the development of an appropriate local accountability framework and define the standards it would expect from partners in the context of its own communities' needs. By demonstrating that it lives out high standards and holds those within its community to the same high standards, local government can take a further step in building trust with the communities it has been elected to serve. This public confidence will make local government a place in which its workforce can properly have pride. By spreading this message the local workforce can actively reinforce a virtuous circle.

If you would like further discussion on any of these points, or want more information on any of the research, then please do contact me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Prince". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a period at the end.

David Prince
Chief Executive