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The long-awaited ISO 26000 social responsibility standard is to be published by the end of October after receiving a final tidy-up over the next month.

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The last meeting of the International Organisation for Standardisation's multi-stakeholder working group on social responsibility approved various minor alterations to the final draft standard at a seven-day meeting in Denmark attended by 450 delegates.

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The 100-page document is now being edited to incorporate the changes agreed at the meeting, which had been called to consider 2482 written suggestions for relatively small improvements. Once the alterations are complete, the document will be submitted to a final formal vote by ISO member countries in August or September, followed by publication as a fully-fledged ISO standard 'by November'.

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Staffan Soderberg, the working group's vice-chair, reported there were emotional scenes as the meeting finished, bringing closure to five years of deliberations and the consideration of more than 25,000 comments.

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'It was a truly heart-warming moment when [we] finally found consensus and the experts and observers stood up and clapped their hands,' he said. 'I believe the working group has delivered a fantastic result, and it's time now to hand over to the market.'

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Brian Mikkelsen, the Danish economic and business affairs minister, who hosted the final meeting, said the standard would be 'a huge step forward' and that 'companies and organizations around the world will now have a mutual starting point for working with social responsibility'.

The working group, including all its sub-groups, will be disbanded after publication. However, its secretariat, augmented by stakeholder group representatives, will form a

'post-publication body' to advise the ISO on proposals to revise the standard, help with requests for interpretation of its contents, produce suggestions on promotion, communication and training activities, and gather examples of good and bad practice among organizations using ISO 26000.

The ISO insists that ISO 26000 is a guidance standard, and will not be linked to any form of certification. It emphasises that it will be 'vigilant in seeing that this is respected' and has already issued warnings to several consultancies that have suggested they can offer companies some form of related certification.

However, debate on the standard has already shifted to whether, and when, ISO 26000 should become a certification standard. UK-based CSR experts who met at the House of Lords in London last month to discuss the new standard said they would like to see certification offered as soon as possible.

Delegates at the event, held by GoodCorporation, felt ISO 26000 would be a useful reference document, and of particular benefit in emerging markets or for organizations introducing a CSR programme - but most were concerned that a standard that excludes the possibility of certification will have weaker impact and effectiveness.

Some involved in preparing the standard have hinted privately to EP that certification will come, but that the standard must be allowed to bed down first.

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