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Strategic Plan 2012-15

Committee on Standards
In Public Life

October 2012

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THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC LIFE

SELFLESSNESS

INTEGRITY

OBJECTIVITY

ACCOUNTABILITY

OPENNESS

HONESTY

LEADERSHIP

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Introduction

This plan sets out the Committee's strategy over the next three years. It presents our objectives and approach to the terms of reference we have been given. The plan provides a framework within which we will determine our annual programme of work and agree our budget with the Cabinet Office over each Spending Review period.

This is the first time we have published a strategic plan. We hope that it will increase public knowledge and understanding of our work and clarify our objectives and approach for our stakeholders and anyone else who is interested in our work.

Christopher Kelly
Chair

About the CSPL

Our remit

On 25 October 1994, the then Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Major MP, announced the setting up of the Committee on Standards in Public Life with the following terms of reference:

'To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life.'

'For these purposes, public office should include: ministers, civil servants and advisers; Members of Parliament and UK Members of the European Parliament; members and senior officers of all non-departmental public bodies and of national health service bodies; non-ministerial office holders; members and other senior officers of other bodies discharging publicly-funded functions; and elected members and senior officers of local authorities'.¹

On 12 November 1997 the terms of reference were extended by the then Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Tony Blair MP:

'To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements'.²

Our purpose

Standards of ethical behaviour among public office holders underpin every aspect of public life from the delivery of health and social care services to the passing of new laws and their application in the courts. The maintenance of high ethical standards is important for society. Decisions made impartially and objectively promote the best outcomes and provide a degree of predictability. Appointments made fairly allow everyone to compete on the same footing. Public trust in institutions which demonstrate high ethical standards enables things to happen. There is increasing recognition that high ethical standards are good for efficiency and tax-payer value.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life monitors, reports and makes recommendations on all issues relating to standards in public life.

We are uniquely placed to consider the ethical landscape as a whole and across the United Kingdom as a whole – from the standards of local councillors to the ethical behaviour of senior NHS staff and the conduct of MPs, peers and members of the devolved legislatures. As a standing committee we have a constant presence, which enables us to monitor progress on different issues, including our own recommendations, over time. It also enables us to respond quickly when an ethical issue arises which requires our consideration.

¹ Hansard (HC) 25 October 1994, col. 758

² Hansard (HC) 12 November 1997, col. 899

Our purpose is to help promote and maintain ethical standards in public life and thereby to protect the public interest through:

- Monitoring standards issues and risks across all parts of the United Kingdom.
- Conducting inquiries and making practical and proportional recommendations that are generally implemented.
- Researching public perceptions on standards issues relating to specific areas of concern, and also over time.

Our remit does not allow us to investigate individual allegations of misconduct. That is the role of the relevant regulator. We do, however, seek to draw any general lessons that can be learned from individual instances.

Our status

The Committee is an independent advisory non-departmental public body (NDPB). It is not founded in statute and has no legal powers to compel witnesses to provide evidence or to enforce its recommendations. Our secretariat and budget are provided by the Cabinet Office.

Our independence

To fulfil our remit effectively it is important that we remain robustly non-partisan and independent of the Government that appoints us. It is for that reason that the chair and other members, other than those representing the political parties, are now appointed through a fair and transparent public appointment process, for non-renewable terms.

By convention, the Committee consults the Prime Minister before starting an inquiry, and can be asked by the Prime Minister to mount an inquiry on a specific subject. But the decision on whether to proceed is our own. Formally our reports are made to the Prime Minister. But they are published simultaneously and it is for the Committee to determine the timing of publication.

Our values

The Committee believes that the Seven Principles of Public Life should apply to all those delivering public service, including ourselves. These principles, with the descriptions of what they mean set out in the original Nolan report, are set out below. The Committee is considering as part of our current review whether these descriptions still adequately capture the essence of the principles in the most appropriate way in today's circumstances.

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Our strategic objectives

The CSPL has identified the following five objectives.

- Where appropriate, we will undertake balanced, comprehensive inquiries which enable us to develop evidence-based, practical recommendations which will help maintain or improve ethical standards across public services.
- We will undertake robust and effective research which will provide useful information about public perceptions of ethical standards across public services. We believe that it is important to check our perceptions of the standards the public expects of public servants and organisations, and the extent to which they are being met, against reality.
- We will make informed contributions to public debates about ethical standards.
- We will constantly be alert, spotting developments and responding promptly to emerging ethical risks, engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to develop the ethical standards agenda.
- We will improve the way we work, evolving so that we continue to be an effective, efficient organisation delivering value for money.

Our accountability

The Committee is appointed by the Prime Minister and the chair meets with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary as appropriate. But we regard ourselves as being

accountable to all our stakeholders. We produce an annual report and hold an annual meeting open to all. We answer to Parliament through the Public Administration Select Committee.

Like all non-departmental public bodies we are now subject to triennial review to ensure that our remit and governance arrangements remain appropriate. We expect to receive our first review in autumn 2012.

Our membership

All our members are appointed by the Prime Minister. A majority of our members, including the chairman, are chosen through open competition under the rules of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). The remaining three members are nominated by the three main political parties. The appointment of the chair and, from 2012, the non-political members are for a non-renewable term of five years.

Our chairman is appointed on the basis that he will on average spend two days a week on Committee business. Our members are expected to commit around two days a month, for which they are remunerated on the basis of a daily fee. Both the chairman and other members necessarily commit more days as appropriate when the Committee is engaged in an inquiry.

Setting priorities

We aim to promote the highest standards of ethical conduct in public life. Since our remit is wide and our resources limited, we will ensure that we take a strategic approach and set priorities. The distribution of our effort between substantive inquiries and the rest of our work will depend on our assessment of current standards issues, their relative importance and how best they can be addressed. We will ensure that time spent in responding to inquiries and consultations initiated by others, while important, is not allowed to crowd out work on other issues we regard as important.

Selection of inquiries

The choice and scope of our inquiries will be informed by our assessment of the importance of the issue, the scope for a distinctive and authoritative contribution and its potential impact. In each inquiry we will aim to identify concrete recommendations which will ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life. After reports have been delivered we will continue to follow up on our recommendations, as appropriate, to monitor the extent of their implementation and the effectiveness of the measures taken.

Specific areas in which we will continue to take an interest in the next few years, which may not necessarily become the subject of a full inquiry, include the following:

- The maintenance of appropriate ethical standards within an increasingly mixed economy with greater involvement of the private and voluntary sectors in delivering public services.
- The effectiveness of the Ministerial Code and of the Prime Minister's Independent Adviser on Ministerial Interests.
- The adequacy of the current legislation and machinery for detection and prevention of electoral fraud.
- The effectiveness of the current arrangements relating to lobbying in the light of recent changes and proposals.
- Ethical standards in the police.
- The role of the media in promoting and maintaining standards and its effects on public trust in the light of the Leveson inquiry.

We are likely to take a particular interest in following up previous inquiries over the next three years in the areas of:

- Party political funding. We regard this as a particularly important issue to be kept under non-partisan review, as it is in all democracies.
- Local government standards. We will review how the new system introduced by the Localism Act 2011 is bedding down and whether it is delivering its objectives.

We will be ready to initiate inquiries promptly on other issues not currently on the horizon, as circumstances require, and to identify any general lessons from individual issues of impropriety that may come to light.

Monitoring standards issues

In furtherance of our remit to monitor ethical standards across public services as a whole we will:

- Maintain a watching brief to identify emerging or persistent standards issues and respond promptly to them.
- Undertake independent quantitative and qualitative research into public perceptions of ethical standards.
- Respond to consultations and key policy announcements and legislation where these impact on ethical standards and we have an informed contribution to make.

Making sure our voice is heard on standards issues

In addition to our inquiries and monitoring of standards issues, we will take steps to ensure our voice is heard promoting high ethical standards, including as appropriate by:

- Providing evidence to Select Committees and Public Bill Committees in both Houses.
- Writing to ministers and others on key issues.
- Participating in conferences, seminars and workshops.
- Writing articles and delivering speeches to communicate our key messages; and
- Speaking to the media.

Using our resources to best effect

The Committee accepts the importance of being as economical as possible in its use of resources, consistent with delivering effectively against its remit. Its annual budget is currently around £0.5 million. Both budget and staff numbers have reduced considerably over the last few years. The understanding with the Cabinet Office is that discussions will take place about supplementing our budget in the event of a major inquiry or other circumstances where we require additional resource.

We will continue to exercise economy, including in the following ways:

a) Research

On the last two occasions on which the Committee has commissioned research into public attitudes to ethical standards our Research Advisory Board has added questions to omnibus surveys being undertaken by research companies, rather than commissioning a stand-alone piece of quantitative research. This has significantly reduced costs without, we think, significantly compromising the quality of the results. In addition, analysis of the results of the research has been undertaken by a doctoral student part funded by the Committee, under the supervision of the Research Advisory Board, rather than by the research company in question. This too has also significantly reduced costs. We expect to continue this approach in the future, provide it continues to be possible to maintain quality.

b) Visits

The Committee's remit covers the whole of the United Kingdom. It is important therefore that we continue to monitor standards in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as in England and continue to listen to, and be accessible to, the public and other stakeholders there. For that reason we will, for example, when holding public hearings in connection with an inquiry, usually include some or all of Edinburgh, Cardiff

and Belfast among the places visited. But we will continue to practice economy in the amount of secretariat support provided on these occasions.

In recent times budgets have not allowed the Committee to investigate comparable issues in countries outside the UK by making visits there. We have instead made use of videoconferencing and commissioned international comparative work from academic sources. We may, however, request the resources necessary for overseas visits should the circumstances of an inquiry and the absence of the availability of necessary information from other sources appear to demand it.

c) *Administrative processes*

All services (including travel, accommodation, IT and HR) are obtained wherever possible through Cabinet Office framework agreements or approved providers in order to ensure best value for money and help maximise the volume of public sector business being obtained through certain contracts, in order to drive down costs across the public sector.

Communications

We will ensure that we communicate our work effectively, making it visible to public office holders and others with an interest in ethical standards. Recommendations will be targeted and specific and followed up as appropriate. We will contribute to relevant policy debates where we can add an informed and distinctive voice. We will engage in constructive dialogue with key stakeholders including ethical regulators. We will ensure our website provides an effective means of communicating our views and activities. We will make use of blogging, Twitter and other techniques as appropriate.

Measuring our effectiveness

Our effectiveness will depend upon the success with which we fulfil the specifics of each year's action plan. But we ought to be able to identify issues on which our voice has been heard and we have made a difference.

We have developed the following Key Performance Indicators. We will improve and elaborate on these during the life of this strategic plan in the light of experience:

- Delivering effective reports as frequently as necessary which identify ways to improve and maintain ethical standards in public services, together with other proactive outputs as specific issues arise. We will always try to produce a rounded and proportionate package of measures intended to be implemented as a whole. During the eighteen years of its existence the Committee has on average produced a report roughly every 16 months. We will not, however, fall into the trap of producing reports just for the sake of it;

- Demonstrably increasing the profile of ethical standards as an issue in public services; and
- Ensuring we continue to justify our role and contribution through meaningful mechanisms of openness and accountability (including via our website and annual accountability meeting).

One measure of the effectiveness of our reports is the proportion of recommendations accepted and implemented. It should always be our intention to make recommendations that are persuasive, practical and firmly evidence- based. In the past the Committee has usually had the vast majority of its recommendations accepted, although not always in the precise form suggested and sometimes not immediately. We will not hesitate to make recommendations that we believe to be right even though we anticipate that those responsible for implementing them may find them difficult.