

## **The Committee on Standards in Public Life**

### **Accountability within public bodies - acting on early warning signs**

#### **Terms of Reference - frequently asked questions**

##### **Q1. Why have you chosen this area for your review?**

A. When public institutions fail badly, there is a huge personal cost for those affected. And the cost to the public purse of investigating what went wrong and providing compensation, where due, can be colossal. Major failures sometimes lead to the government commissioning public inquiries at a high cost to the public purse, for example, the cost of the infected blood inquiry was reported as £130.350 million to date in March 2023.<sup>1</sup>

A common theme of a number of public sector failings in recent years is that there were numerous indicators that something was amiss. We have seen a failure of public bodies to listen to and act on concerns raised by employees and the public; a failure to properly investigate issues and a failure of boards to have proper oversight of issues and concerns or to be sufficiently inquisitive about what was going on in their organisation. We want to look at how organisations can be more responsive to the early warning signs and be guided by the Nolan Principles in choosing how to act.

##### **Q2. Are you looking at how to sanction public office-holders for wrongdoing?**

A. When mistakes happen in the public sector due to negligence or recklessness, the public rightly expects elected and appointed public office holders to pay the price. Considering who should bear responsibility when things go wrong and what form this should take is therefore a legitimate area for consideration, but it is not within the scope of this review. We want to identify good practices to help organisations to get better at holding themselves to account and pre-empting failures in the first place where possible.

##### **Q3. You are looking at what happens inside an organisation, but isn't true accountability about how external bodies - like the NAO or Parliamentary select committees - hold public bodies to account for their actions?**

A. The scrutiny provided by external bodies, such as Parliament, ombudsmen and regulators, is a crucial and fundamental part of the accountability framework for public life. We recognise how important this is. We have chosen to focus on accountability within organisations because it is an area where we think there needs to be greater attention as getting this right should prevent far greater problems further down the line. As part of our review we will be looking at how public bodies should make available the information required to enable other bodies such as Parliament and the NAO to scrutinise them.

##### **Q4. Are you looking at the whole of public life? How can you cover it all?**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.infectedbloodinquiry.org.uk/about/financial-reports>

A. Our review will take a high-level overview of the public sector rather than an in-depth exploration of any specific area. We will explore some important themes that will arise in all areas of public life and we are looking for examples of good practice that can have wide application.

**Q5. There are already numerous public inquiries underway looking at where things have gone wrong. Are you going to be duplicating this work?**

A. No. We will not be investigating any particular instance of failure. Where there are lessons to be learned from inquiries that have reported, we will take these on board, but we are focused on looking for good practice that we can share across the public sector. We want to understand what organisations can do, across the areas listed in our terms of reference, to implement the processes and culture needed to support issues being surfaced and addressed earlier and to disclose meaningful information about decisions made in the public interest, so that they can be properly held to account.

**Q6. Who will you be speaking to for this review?**

A. As well as an open consultation, we will be speaking to a range of people with an interest in accountability in the public sector, including experts in this area and public body leaders from different parts of the public sector.

**Q7. How can I contribute to the review?**

A. We have launched an open consultation on our website.

**Q8. How long will this review take?**

A. We expect the review to report in the spring of 2025. As with all Committee reviews, the report will be presented to the Prime Minister and published on our website.