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1 Horse Guards Road
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Committee on Standards in Public Life

25 March 2025

OPEN LETTER TO PUBLIC SECTOR LEADERS

Public service delivery is more complex today than ever, involving a range of public sector bodies and private providers and operating within resourcing constraints. We recognise that you are dealing with some of the most difficult challenges we face as a country.

It is inevitable that errors sometimes occur and things go wrong. But it is how public bodies respond that matters. If leaders quickly correct errors, identify the wider lessons to be learned and ensure that those lessons are embedded fully within the organisation, the public benefits.

Our report, 'Recognising and responding to early warning signs in public sector bodies', published today is designed to support you. We want to help you, as public sector leaders, reflect on how you can best equip your staff to identify and resolve problems or issues that might get in the way of delivering the core purpose of your organisation. We share insights from leaders and practitioners. And we have included '20 points for reflection' (attached) which we hope will assist you, and which your staff can use to encourage your organisation's attention on these areas.

We hope that this report will stimulate discussion and that you find these points for reflection a helpful resource.

If you would like to discuss our report, please do get in touch. Our email address is: public@public-standards.gov.uk

Yours,

Doug Chalmers CB DSO OBE
Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life

Points for reflection

Building accountable organisations

1. How do you support your employees in understanding how their role, and the purposes of your organisation, serves the public?

2. Is it clear to your employees how decisions are made within your organisation and who is accountable for them?

3. What do you do to build strong relationships with those bodies that report to your organisation as well as those bodies you are accountable to?

Identifying and assessing risks

4. How do you know that the arrangements you have in place for the identification and mitigation of risks are effective?

5. How do you assure yourself that the data your organisation collects to assess its activities is of a high quality and that there is sufficient capability within the organisation to interpret the data intelligently?

6. How do you ensure your organisation views complaints as valuable feedback reflecting the public's experience of its service and uses that data to spot systemic issues and make improvements?

Speaking up

7. What do you do to build an open culture where people feel comfortable raising issues, asking questions and sharing their ideas?

8. How do you help your employees to understand that everyone in your organisation has a responsibility to speak up when they see something going wrong?

9. Are there clear and well-understood ways for people to raise concerns formally? How do you know these routes are trusted? How do you ensure that when people speak up, they are protected and not victimised?

Development and performance management

10. How does your organisation support the development of leaders who have the skills and confidence to handle a crisis appropriately?

11. How is listening to feedback and embedding learning incorporated into the process for assessing your organisation's executive and non-executive leaders?

Public scrutiny

12. Is your organisation as transparent as it can be when deciding what information to publish about its activities, including the provision of contextual detail where appropriate?

13. Could your organisation do more to engage proactively with the public and to understand the public's perspectives on how to improve your organisation's public services?

14. When things go wrong, how quickly do you acknowledge the failure and offer a meaningful apology?

Learning lessons

15. Does your organisation have mechanisms in place to support a robust corporate memory of why previous decisions were or were not taken?

16. How do you ensure that the lessons learned from evaluating projects and policies are shared within the organisation and that these lessons inform future decisions?

17. How do you ensure that your organisation regularly considers what it can learn from the successes and failures of other public bodies?

Board scrutiny

18. How do you ensure that your board receives the information it needs about risks and issues in a format that is most useful to board members, enabling them to evaluate the significance of that information?

19. How is your board encouraged to scrutinise robustly the decisions made by your organisation? Is it sufficiently curious? Does it listen to the views of public service users?

20. What do you do to ensure that your board has the right balance of skills, backgrounds, experiences and independence of judgement? Is understanding prospective board members' values and commitment part of the recruitment process?