

**COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE  
331st MEETING HELD  
AT 10.00 ON THURSDAY 20 FEBRUARY 2025**

**MINUTES**

Present: Doug Chalmers CB DSO OBE (Chair)  
Rt Hon Lady (Mary) Arden DBE  
Rt Hon Ian Blackford  
Councillor Ruth Dombey OBE  
Ewen Fergusson  
John Henderson CB  
Professor Gillian Peele

Professor Mark Philp, Chair, Research Advisory Board

Lesley Bainsfair, Secretary  
Nicola Richardson, Deputy Head, Secretariat  
Amy Austin, Senior Policy Adviser  
Peter Kelleher, Senior Policy Adviser  
Lesley Glanz, Executive Officer

Maggie O'Boyle, Press Officer<sup>1</sup>

Sir Mike Aaronson, Staff Counsellor for the National Security  
Community (outside formal business)

**Discussion with Sir Mike Aaronson, Staff Counsellor for the National Security  
Community**

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair welcomed Sir Mike Aaronson, Staff Counsellor for the National Security Community, for an informal discussion with the Committee.

Sir Mike explained that his role dated to 1987 when, as a result of the Peter Wright 'Spycatcher' case, it was felt important to give people in that community, an authorised channel for disclosure if they felt they had something of public interest to reveal - a whistleblowing channel. The role was set up as staff counsellor for the security and intelligence agencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Maggie O'Boyle provides part-time press support to the Civil Service Commission; the House of Lords Appointments Commission; the Advisory Committee for Business Appointments; the Office for the Commissioner for Public Appointments; and the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

In 2004, the role was extended to those working in intelligence assessment across government, so there was somewhere for people to go if, for example, they felt they had a public interest matter to raise, if they felt intelligence was being misused, or they felt there was political pressure to present intelligence in a certain way.

In the mid 2000s, the security and intelligence agencies decided to establish internal ethics counsellors. This development has helped leadership of those organisations to move to a more open culture where people are not shy of talking about complex ethical issues. Part of this is sensible risk management. Enabling people to speak about something they feel is of public interest, will make the individual and the organisation more effective and will be less damaging to them both.

The role involved three main parts. The first was to listen, which meant that any member of the community - an individual or team - could get in touch for a private discussion, although there was a clear protocol that the exception to the confidential discussion was if the Staff Counsellor perceived an issue of safety to the individual or the organisation. Outcomes of the individual or group discussion could be getting more information from those with expert knowledge, facilitating discussions, intranet blogs, providing reassurance, encouraging people to get more support. A protocol was important too to provide clarity around the role and particularly around protecting individuals who came forward. (It was noted that the Public Accounts Committee, in its report of May 2024, found that the Cabinet Office was missing key metrics on whistleblowing concerns across the civil service.<sup>2</sup>)

The second part of the role was about supporting the leadership in moving to a more open culture, encouraging staff to talk about concerns.

The third part of the role was a challenge function. The Ethics Counsellor was able to ask questions of the leadership such as 'have you considered this may have ethical aspects'; does more need to be done to provide reassurance, do communications need to be clearer?

In 2019, the role was rebadged as Staff Counsellor for the national security community, when it was decided to replicate the Ethics Counsellor function in the wider Whitehall national security world. The role's remit was now wide, extending to all departments and agencies represented at the National Security Council Officials meeting. Sir Mike recommended a high level framework and consistency of approach at the top, but with room for leaders in different organisations to work out the arrangements that best worked for their organisation.

It was essential that leaders understood the importance of embedding a culture where people feel it is safe to speak up and to create space to have a conversation. This is better for the individual and the organisation. However, given how pressures of urgent work often crowded out important work, the space and time for leadership to take a longer term view

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<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/201733/whistleblowing-pac-calls-for-civil-service-cultural-change-to-create-speak-up-environment/>

was inevitably constrained. Sir Mike emphasised the need for more emphasis on leaders thinking about the responsibility for their teams, not just on delivery.

The Chair thanked Sir Mike for sparing his time to talk to the Committee and for sharing his experience.

## **1. APOLOGIES**

Rt Hon Baroness (Margaret) Beckett GBE  
Baroness (Simone) Finn

The Chair welcomed John Henderson's return to the meeting in person.

## **2. REGISTERS**

Members were asked to let the Secretariat know of any changes to the register of interests which had been circulated.

## **3. MINUTES AND MATTERS ARISING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2025 were agreed.

### **Chair's update**

Members noted the Chair's recent and forthcoming meetings.<sup>3</sup>

### **Correspondence on regulating election finance**

The Chair had received a positive reply from Rushanara Ali MP, Minister for Homelessness and Democracy, to his letter of 20 January 2025 to the Deputy Prime Minister which drew attention to our Regulating Election Finance report. Both letters will be published on the CSPL website.

The government made a [statement](#) on 12 February, responding to the Electoral Commission's reports on the 2024 elections.

### **FOI requests**

It was noted that the Committee had not received any new FOI requests over the past month.

It was noted that a reply had been sent to an FOI request for the September 2024 meeting papers. Four papers were released; other papers were withheld under the

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<sup>3</sup> Meetings are [published](#) in the Committee's register of stakeholder meetings.

following sections of the Freedom of Information Act: 21 - information available to the public by other means; 22 - information intended for future publication; and 36(2)(b)(i) and (ii) - information likely to inhibit the free and frank provision of advice and the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation.

#### **4. CURRENT REVIEW**

It was noted that the early warning signs review was now at the stage of being designed and produced. Preparations for the launch on 25 March were in hand.

#### **5. LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Members discussed handling of the local government seminar to be held in the afternoon. The primary purpose of the seminar was to inform CSPL's response to the government's consultation on strengthening the local authority standards and conduct framework in England, and to consider whether CSPL's 2019 Local Government Ethical Standards report's recommendations remained valid.

#### **6. HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS INQUIRY INTO MPs' OUTSIDE INTERESTS AND EMPLOYMENT**

Members discussed CSPL's response to the House of Commons Standards Inquiry into "whether there should be changes to the rules relating to outside interests and employment in the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament".

#### **7. 30th ANNIVERSARY PLAN**

Members noted updated plans to mark the 30th anniversary of the Principles of Public Life. This included visits to Cambridge and Sheffield universities to discuss standards challenges with students; and an IfG conference to be held later in the year.

#### **8. CURRENT STANDARDS ISSUES**

Lady Arden raised the issue of politicians being untruthful on their CVs.

#### **9. FORWARD AGENDA**

The Committee noted the forward agenda.

#### **10. AOB**

**Communications Update**

The Committee noted the monthly dashboard overview of CSPL's website for January 2025.

**Date of Next Meeting**

Thursday 20 March 2025, to be held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

CSPL Secretariat  
February 2025