

**COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE
333rd MEETING HELD
AT 10.00 ON THURSDAY 10 APRIL 2025,**

MINUTES

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

Professor Mark Philp, Chair, Research Advisory Board

John Edwards, Information Commissioner attended for an informal discussion ahead of formal business

Lesley Bainsfair, Secretary
Amy Austin, Senior Policy Adviser
Peter Kelleher, Senior Policy Adviser
Lesley Glanz, Executive Officer

Maggie O'Boyle, Press Officer¹

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair welcomed John Edwards, Information Commissioner, who was accompanied by Amanda Williams, Director of Public Affairs, and Julianne Marriott, Group Manager, Central Government Team, ICO.

John Edwards thanked the Chair for the invitation which he said was a valuable opportunity to explain the ICO's role around the use of generative AI in the complex regulatory landscape where its mandate was restricted to personal data. Two of the ICO's mandates were most relevant to the CSPL in this respect: UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and Freedom of Information (FOI), which were central to transparency and accountability. The former was a much misunderstood and misrepresented set of rules. It was a principles-based and technology neutral set of rules which applied to data controllers and processors in respect of personal data i.e. it applied to every organisation and individual with regard to how they used personal information. Billions of transactions therefore fell within the ICO's mandate everyday. The ICO had to be clear and deliberate about how it

¹ 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.

used its resources in a discretionary capacity i.e. setting aside its statutory obligations. The ICO therefore prioritised certain areas of its work. Current priorities were AI and biometrics, children's privacy and online tracking and AdTech.

In discussion the following points were made. It was noted that the Information Commissioner was a corporation sole, which means that the IC is completely independent and must carry out his functions free from external influence. The Information Commissioner's relationship with the government is set out in the Management Agreement.

The Information Commissioner said that he had reflected on CSPL's reports on AI and public Standards (2020) and Recognising and responding to early warning signs in public sector bodies (2025). The Information Commissioner referred to data protection being principles-based and highlighted the importance of transparency and the importance of showing the workings of a decision which was essential as we embrace new technologies. It was important that CSPL looked at AI and how it interacted with the Principles, and for the ICO to see how they might work to promote adherence to the Principles.

The Information Commissioner explained the challenges that the ICO faced. The ICO looked to increase its efficacy by working 'upstream', issuing guidelines as it had done on generative AI, and working with other organisations. A key part of the Information Commissioner's philosophy was 'ease of compliance'; people were less likely to comply with complex regulations. The ICO provided guidance and other tools such as the SME Data Essentials Programme which helps organisations comply and reduce the cost burden on business.

With regard to generative AI, a large language model (LLM) is trained on personal data and is subject to UK GDPR. The promulgation of misinformation in the electoral system could involve personal data and the ICO had an obligation to ensure the information is accurate and fair. Actors in those arenas are data controllers, but the law does not intrude into personal, domestic family life, so a post about the conduct of a candidate might be exempt from UK GDPR since as an individual, whilst you may be a data controller using personal data, you are making a personal intervention. Political parties are more clearly in the jurisdiction of the ICO, but the ICO has to ask if it is appropriate for the ICO to mediate in a live, robust political debate?

The biggest challenge is not the theoretical application of law which is reasonably clear, it is the practicality. ICO has no preemptive ability to stop the publication of misinformation. There are gaps and practical limitations and interplays between different organisations, but the mechanisms and regulators work together and data principles are constant. ICO's remit concerns the use of personal data. OfCom is responsible for the Online Safety Act and content. The roles of CSPL and the ICO were different, but not in opposition in terms of how data protection and the Nolan Principles remain relevant in a world of new technologies, not least in protecting electoral integrity. An example of this is the previous Information Commissioner's formal investigation into the use of data analytics for political purposes after allegations were made about the 'invisible processing' of people's personal data and the

microtargeting of political adverts during the EU Referendum. The Information Commissioner believed it was more useful to work upstream with organisations than relying on retrospective enforcement.

Reference was made to recommender systems sitting in the middle of a Venn diagram of ICO priorities (AI and biometrics, children's privacy, and AdTech) which use personal data from people's interaction with content to decide what content to serve them. This could apply to a Venn diagram of the ICO's and Ofcom's work with recommender systems in the middle

Given the unique challenges posed by regulation of online platforms and digital services, a Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum had been set up which was a semi stand alone organisation made up of the ICO, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), the Office of Communications (Ofcom) and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA).² The DRCF strived to identify cross cutting challenges, and to provide a co-ordinated response and has been world leading with other jurisdictions now looking at that model.

The Information Commissioner concluded by commenting that transparency was key in his view. It may seem a simple concept, but organisations need to show their workings. In some jurisdictions there is a conflict between what the regulator demands and the propriety interests of those providing the software. The current volatile geo-political environment provided a real challenge to regulators with US tech companies taking an increasingly assertive stance, unconstrained by jurisdictions, which was a fundamental challenge to sovereignty.

The Chair thanked the Information Commissioner for a valuable and enlightening discussion and for sharing his expertise on the challenges posed by generative AI, in the complex regulatory landscape.

John Edwards, Amanda Williams and Julianne Marriott left the meeting.

1. APOLOGIES

Rt Hon Baroness Beckett GBE
John Henderson CB

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 20 March 2025 were agreed.

² <https://ico.org.uk/about-the-ico/what-we-do/digital-regulation-cooperation-forum/>

Chair's update

Members noted and discussed the Chair's recent and forthcoming meetings.³

Professor Mark Philp reported that he had attended a conference on Fostering Accountability for the Integrity of Research studies. The conference had been organised by Professor Dorothy Bishop, Honorary Fellow St John's College, Oxford University, and had focused on the problem of research fraud.

It was noted that the Committee had received one FOI request over the past month; the reply had been published on the Committee's website.

4. EARLY WARNING SIGNS REPORT

Members noted a successful launch of 'Recognising and Reporting to Early Warning Signs in Public Sector Bodies' on Tuesday 25 March. There had been wide media coverage in various sectors and good government engagement, including a letter from the Prime Minister congratulating the Committee on producing a valuable report.

A number of requests had already been received from government departments and public bodies to speak on the report. It was agreed that it was also important to be proactive and seek opportunities to speak to government departments and other public bodies about the report.

5. 30th ANNIVERSARY UPDATE

Professor Philp reported back on discussions with students at Cambridge and Sheffield universities on the Principles of Public Life and the case studies that Professor Philp had developed to assist decision-making in line with the Nolan Principles.

It was agreed that, once finalised, the Principles case studies should be published on the Committee's website as a resource for public sector bodies.

6. CURRENT STANDARDS ISSUES

No items were discussed.

7. FORWARD AGENDA

The Committee noted the forward agenda.

8. AOB

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

Communications Update

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

Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 15 May 2025.

CSPL Secretariat
April 2025