
Ethics Committee

8 October 2020

Name of Cabinet Member:

N/A- Ethics Committee

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director of Law and Governance

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Annual Report for 2019-20

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

This report is to outline the matters raised in the Annual Report for 2019- 2020 of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and to inform the Ethics Committee of relevant matters of concern in their work area on a national level.

Recommendations:

The Ethics Committee is recommended to

- (1) note the content of the report and consider any points upon which it may wish to take action; and
- (2) request the Monitoring Officer to continue to monitor the national picture as regards standards and report back on any issue which may be of relevance to the Council on a local level.

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background papers: Committee on Standards in Public Life Annual Report July 2019-June 2020

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/902998/CSPL_Annual_Report_2019-2020.pdf

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Committee on Standards in Public Life: Annual Report 2019-20

1. Context (or background)

1.1 The Committee on Standards in Public Life ('the CSPL') was set up in 1994. It monitors, reports and makes recommendations on all issues relating to standards in public life. This includes not only the standards of conduct of holders of public office, but all those involved in the delivery of public services. Its 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 the United Kingdom (by invitation in the devolved areas);
- conducting inquiries and reviews 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.

Its terms of reference make it clear that it encompasses all involved in the delivery of public services, not solely those appointed or elected to public office.

1.2 Whilst it is a national body, having an overarching concern about public standards, its views and recommendations can be taken in account by local government and other organisations delivering public services when designing, implementing and monitoring their own ethical standards regime. The CSPL has undertaken and been involved in 4 key pieces of work in their financial year 2019-2020 (to which this report relates):

- AI and Public Standards
- Local Government Ethical Standards-follow up
- Intimidation in Public Life- follow up; and
- Parliament: Bullying and Harassment

In addition, the Committee organised some events and activities to mark its 25th anniversary in October 2019.

1.3 This report gives a very brief overview of the main areas of work of the CSPL over the last 12 months.

2 Options considered and recommended proposal

2.1 *Local Government Ethical Standards—follow up*

2.1.1 The Committee has followed up its report (published in January 2019) by liaising with leadership organisations in local government, the Local Government Ombudsman and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

2.1.2 The Committee has expressed its pleasure that a draft Model Code of Conduct has been produced for consultation by the Local Government Association but has noted that it awaits the government's formal response to its report.

2.1.3 The Committee still intends to review local council's take up of its best practice recommendations, but in view of the pandemic, has deferred this to later in the year.

N.B. Since the CSPL's report was drafted, it has now written to all local authorities to say that it will be contacting them in the autumn.

2.2. *Artificial Intelligence and Public Standards*

2.2.1 A major review into artificial intelligence and public standards was the main focus of the Committee's work. This is relevant as technologically assisted decision-making is adopted more widely across the public sector.

2.2.2 The report was published in February 2020 and concluded that the government is currently failing on openness regarding its use of new technology, and that risks need to be mitigated to uphold accountability and openness. It found that regulators will need to adapt to a new data-driven world, and that a central body is needed to assist this process.

2.2.3 The report was well-received, and the Committee is awaiting the government's formal response.

2.3 *Intimidation in Public Life*

2.3.1 The Committee's report on a review of intimidation in public life, with particular reference to the experience of Parliamentary candidates at the 2017 General Election was published in December 2017.

2.3.2 The report made 33 recommendations to government, social media companies, political parties, press organisations, MPs, candidates and other public office-holders. The Government responded formally to the report on 7 March 2018 committing to action on most of the recommendations made to government and again in March 2019, updating action taken in response to the report

2.3.3. The Committee has received further correspondence from social media companies and attended meetings with the Parliamentary authorities to discuss the security offer to MPs. The Chair has written a blog post and given media interviews on the impact of intimidation on democracy. In September the Chair wrote an open letter to all public office holders on the tone of public debate and the importance of upholding public standards.

2.3.4 The Committee continued its partnership with The Jo Cox Foundation and during the December 2019 General Election campaign, jointly published a 3- point pledge calling on all candidates to pledge to:

- set an appropriate tone when campaigning
- lead by example to foster democratic debate
- promote and defend the dignity of others, including opponents.

The pledge had significant pick-up on social media and was endorsed by candidates from across the parties.

2.4 *Parliament: Bullying and Harassment*

2.4.1 The Committee has continued to take a close interest in the response of the Parliamentary authorities to the independent assessments of what must be done to address bullying and harassment in both Houses of Parliament. While progress has been slow, there have been significant developments this year. These included:

- The opening up of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme to those who either have complaints pre-dating June 2017 or are no longer employed in the parliamentary community.
- Consultation on the implementation of a fully independent process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in the Commons.
- Approval by the House of Commons Commission of plans to establish a new Independent Expert Panel to ensure that complaints relating to bullying and harassment in the Commons are determined entirely independent of MPs.
- In the Lords, a new Conduct Committee has been appointed.

Long lasting cultural change takes time and the Committee will continue to actively monitor progress.

2.4.2 The Committee has continued to hold meetings with senior people in Parliament responsible for delivering change and providing visible leadership in building a culture of respect and value across both Houses.

2.5 *Future Work*

2.5.1 The Committee's plans for further work this year has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it will maintain an active watching brief over the coming year (2020/21) on the impact of Covid-19 on standards in local and national government and intends to contribute to reviews and inquiries on these issues. The Committee has also announced that it will undertake a new review into electoral regulation.

2.6 *Recommendations*

The Ethics Committee is recommended to

- (1) note the content of the report and consider any points upon which it may wish to take action; and
- (2) request the Monitoring Officer to continue to monitor the national picture as regards standards and report back on any issue which may be of relevance to the Council on a local level.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

3.1 There has been no consultation as there is no proposal to implement at this stage which would require a consultation.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

4.1 Not applicable

5. Comments from Director of Finance and Director of Law and Governance

5.1 Financial implications

There are no specific financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report.

5.2 Legal implications

The Council's current standards regime complies fully with the Localism Act 2011. However, the implications of the Annual Report are that the Ethics Committee may wish to continue to monitor how the follow up work on the report on local government ethical standards progresses.

6. Other implications

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

Not applicable.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

There is no direct risk to the organisation as a result of the contents of this report, but the Ethics Committee may wish to consider the wider impact of the damage to public confidence in the elected membership of the Council if the ethical standards framework is not perceived as transparent and effective.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

There is no immediate impact on the organisation.

6.4 Equalities / EIA

There are no public sector equality duties which are of relevance at this stage.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None

Report author(s): Carol Bradford

Name and job title: Corporate Governance Lawyer, Regulatory Team, Legal Services

Directorate: Law and Governance

Tel and email contact: 024 7697 7271 carol.bradford@coventry.gov.uk

Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Directorate or organisation	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Suzanne Bennett	Governance Services Officer	Law and Governance	14/09/20	
Names of approvers for submission: (officers and members)				
Graham Clark	Finance	Finance	11/09/20	14/09/20
Julie Newman	City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer	Law and Governance	11/09/20	15/09/20
Cllr Walsh	Chair, Ethics Committee		16/09/20	16/09/20

This report is published on the council's website: www.coventry.gov.uk/councilmeetings