

Mission creep and the Committee on Standards in Public Life; why its time for a new approach to get back to basics

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Committee on Standards in Public Life was introduced in order to restore a degree of confidence in the integrity of public officials following a number of scandals during the late 1980s and early 1990's. **Alan Doig** suggests that the committee is not performing effectively, and that it is still unclear how to deliver and embed a system which delivers public integrity.*



Time to go 'back to basics'? (Chatham House, CC BY 2.0)

In my [previous blog](#) I asked if it was time to re-think how the UK approaches public integrity. I think there are three issues at play here. First, what are we talking about? Various words are bandied about – integrity, ethics, standards, culture, and so on – which, as [David Hine touched on in his blog](#), don't necessarily share commonality or complementarity depending on whose agenda or whose interpretation is involved. The first Committee on Standards in Public Life itself used many words interchangeably, including standards of behaviour, conduct, trustworthiness, corruption, misconduct, wrongdoing, malpractice, morally dubious behaviour, moral uncertainty, improperly, probity, and so on.

Second, and related to the first, standards in relation to what, and to whom? It is clear from the first report (and, indeed, the contents of the 7 Principles) that the primary focus was on overlaps between material benefits from and conflicts of interest between public office, and personal or political party benefit. The recommendations in the first few reports were primarily about lobbying, financial interests, patronage appointments, consultancies, and gifts and hospitality, and procedures for transparency, scrutiny or whistleblowing. The committee's language emphasised a focus on 'corruption', with four of the original 7 principles mentioning financial or private interests, favouritism and influence-peddling (Principles 1, 2, 3 and 6), three about leadership, openness and accountability – all involving public life.

What we now have is a committee whose 2013 report has changed – I have no doubt the Committee can point me to the grounded evidence base on which this is predicated – the Principles. It has transferred references to financial interests from Principle 1 to Principle 2, making Principle 1, like Principle 3 and 6 generic, and thus more aligned to

the remaining generic (and unchanged) Principles; only Principle 2 now carries the focus on financial interests and related issues. This revision appears to reflect a self-selected widening of the Committee's view of its remit which now seems to roam far and wide, encompassing in the 2013 report, care homes, the banking LIBOR scandal, the Care Quality Commission, Jimmy Savile, ethical requirements in public sector contracts, bullying, the death of Pat Finucane, and Hillsborough.

Now, when one reads the QCC and Monitor about what went on at Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, what has been going on among Tory activists, salary, benefits and pension arrangements for civil servants, quango staff and NHS staff, whistleblowing in the NHS, the conduct of the Anglian Church over allegations of sex abuse, the provision of care to the elderly and vulnerable, the culture at the BBC, how politicians and public agencies dealt with Rotherham, and so on, we understand the need for someone to remind those employed in, or paid by or through, the public sector what standards are or are not acceptable.

The two questions here are whether this is a valid extension of its mission for the Committee, taking it logically to proposing standards across public, voluntary and private sectors (and its 2015 report on Ethical Standards for Providers of Public Services could take it into everything from supply chain management to service delivery) and thus into the complexities of societal attitudes and behaviour that may or may not impact on the conduct, including the ethical conduct, of those working in those sectors.

The second question concerns how far the Committee is able to encompass the dynamics of general social attitudes, understanding how far these impact on those providing public services and functions and the how and why the Committee's exhortations could influence them. Frankly the expectations of the first Committee for a period of austerity have long been discarded and if reading reports by organisations as diverse as Transport Focus, the Insurance Fraud Taskforce and the Essex Centre for the Study of Integrity is anything to go by, the Committee is dangerously close to mission creep which would take it well beyond its comfort zone and competence when really it should be looking to getting back to basics. There are two reasons for this.

First, as the Prime Minister's Committee on Local Government Rules of Conduct and the Royal Commission on Standards in Public Life acknowledged as far back as the 1970s, one key issue in public life is addressing conflicts of interest, money and management. This issue essentially reprises not only the main themes behind the first Committee on Standards in Public Life but also the PAC's 2014 comments about public sector contractors and suppliers, conducting business 'in an ethical manner', which in turn reflects PAC's own words exactly 20 years earlier for 'a proper concern for the sensible conduct of public business and care for the honest handling of public money' – themselves a key concern in the climate surrounding the establishment of the first Committee on Standards in Public Life.

So, let's get back to basics for two reasons. First, it's about getting the balance right between the compliance environment and the internalisation of the norms that seek to ensure people don't get involved in potentially unethical situations in the first place. The first reports were all about rules and procedures – the compliance framework – but also, as the first report noted, the importance of 'planned promotion and reinforcement' of ethical standards – promoting normative values and standards. This low road/high road approach, first proposed by John Rohr, is a balanced and integrated means to set the rules, explain their purpose and encourage ways of thinking and behaving that ultimately leave the rules to deal with those deliberately intent on breaching them.

To turn to induction training some 20 years later is a significant failure of all the various iterations of the Committee to understand the importance of such an approach. It comes as no surprise that the Committee should be surprised that, despite the procedures, rules and means of enforcement, unethical conduct continues. Further, if training is all about the procedures and the rules, then it is even less surprising to hear those accused to unethical conduct fall back on the time-worn excuse that what they did, or didn't do, did not break or was allowed within the rules.

Second, where is the confirmation that what's in place is working and how is its being integrated into other agendas? Here one would want to ask the Committee: how many government departments, local authorities and public bodies

have in place the measures it lists in 2015 for providers of public services (and we note here the Committee's own comments on induction training), where is the evidence that these measures are not only in place but are effective in practice, and who are the monitors of such measures in the public sector? What is the Committee's role in ensuring the prevention aspects – leadership and culture – of the Fighting Fraud Locally strategy (both new and old), Transforming Supply Management and the Prevent and Prepare components of the UK Anti-Corruption Plan?

In other words, we still don't fully comprehend how to deliver and embed the building blocks of public integrity, and nor do we appreciate the value – but also the complexity – of doing so across a number of agendas and initiatives in a coordinated approach. We're still very much into compliance and the low road approach but, as we'll see from the next blog on local government, apparently a longstanding interest of the Committee, such an approach should be raising cause for concern about its viability and validity – and grounds for consideration of a new model to promoting and maintaining public integrity.

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Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.

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Alan Doig is Hon. Senior Research Fellow at the International Development Department, University of Birmingham; Visiting Professor, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University and Board member, Management Board, North-east Fraud Forum.

