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answers not options

A fragile balance

The revised standards regime needs robust leadership and visible action against those who fall short, writes Lord Bew, chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life

Recent research published by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which I chair, contained very impressive figures about the level of public confidence in local front line officials.

Asked about whether or not they felt they would be treated fairly by a range of local services, 70% to 74% thought they would be treated fairly. These levels of trust would be the envy of other professions and politicians at a national level.

There was also a clear message in the research that the public's perceptions of standards are not static; they respond to events and developments in the public sphere – how they are handled and reported. There is no reason to believe that people who are currently sceptical of politics could not become more hopeful. This requires public office holders to be seen to live up to the seven principles: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Prime responsibility for maintaining high standards of behaviour must lie with individuals and organisations, not with external regulation. That is one of the reasons why the Committee welcomed some aspects of the new standards regime for local government which replaced a scheme which was widely cited as an example of ethical 'over-engineering'.

A step too far?

The new arrangements emphasised local responsibility for standards and reduced the opportunity for vexatious or politically-motivated complaints. But we also expressed our concern that the new regime was stripped back too far.

Its lack of a range of available sanctions means that its success is entirely dependent on robust local leadership and ethical championing. This is a fragile balance and we fear that those local authorities that are 'good at this stuff' will continue to be, while others resort to the old tactics.

To function effectively, local leadership and responsibility for standards requires certain conditions to be met – including strong leadership and robust, visible action against those who fall short. The Local Government Association has a particularly important responsibility in this respect.

A smattering of recent cases in the media illustrate these arguments and my Committee is alert to the fact that it may have to look at the subject again where individual cases give rise to wider public concern.

The Committee is currently monitoring the impact of new models of service delivery in the vast range of services now procured

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by local government. Local councillors – through their involvement in Local Commissioning Groups – control significant health and local government expenditure.

New responsibilities for public health give local government responsibilities to procure preventative services. Increasingly, public bodies are urged to pool their resources and to undertake joint activity in order to achieve value for money for local communities.

Those involved in procurement may argue that they have very little leeway in the way they handle the whole procurement process, due to its often centralised nature and having to comply with UK and EU regulations, but my Committee argues strongly that councils should apply a rigorous approach to ensuring that high ethical standards are applied at all stages of the process, including the continuing outcomes once contracts are signed, as part of ensuring transparency and the regularity and propriety of procurement.

Openness and decision-making

In our latest report, *Strengthening Transparency Around Lobbying*, published in November, the Committee called for even greater openness around decision makers across the public sector.

We called for more timely and detailed disclosure about all significant meetings and hospitality involving external attempts to influence a public policy decision and encouraged local government (and other public authorities not covered by the FOI Act) to live up to this new level of transparency.

Local government is responsible for decisions that can be high value and complex. Decisions relating to the commissioning and procuring of public services is one example, but decisions in respect of applications for permits, planning or licences are others – the process by which a decision is made matters. High ethical standards and transparency are mutually supportive and together can strengthen public accountability, increase public engagement and improve public trust.

Society can expect better outcomes when decisions are made fairly and on merit and not influenced by personal and private interests. High ethical standards need to be deeply embedded in governance and processes so that they become an integral part of 'the way things are done' and so that individual or corporate behaviour which does not meet these standards is challenged.

Organisations in every sector benefit from greater legitimacy when the public has confidence in their integrity. The UK economy benefits nationally and internationally from that confidence. The current high level of public confidence in front line local officials should not be taken for granted.

Lord (Paul) Bew is chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life

