

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE RESPONSE TO IMPRESS STANDARDS CODE REVIEW

Background

1. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent, non-departmental public body sponsored by the Cabinet Office. It advises the Prime Minister on ethical standards across public life in England and reports on issues relating to the standards of conduct of all public office holders. The Committee has no investigative powers and does not comment on individual cases. Please see **Annex A** for the Committee's remit and current membership.
2. In its first report (1995), the Committee articulated the Seven Principles of Public Life, commonly referred to as the Nolan Principles: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, leadership and honesty. These principles apply to all public office holders, including those who are elected or appointed to public office and those in the private sector providing public services.

Impress Standards Code and CSPL 2017 Intimidation in Public Life report

3. Thank you for inviting the Committee to submit evidence to your review of the Standards Code.
4. As you will be aware, the Committee was asked in July 2017 by the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, to undertake a review on the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, considering the broader implications for all holders of public office. We heard evidence of persistent and shocking intimidatory behaviour, including harassment, threatened violence and sexual violence, and damage to property. Much of that abuse was targeted at certain groups and was accelerated and enabled by social media, which has increasingly played a role in political debate in recent years. The [Committee published our report](#) in December of that year.
5. We have recently published an [update on progress made against the report's recommendations](#), from which you will see we took assurance from press regulators on the current arrangements. It is clear that much has happened to tackle threats to public office holders since the publication of the report in 2017, but there is more to do, and at a greater pace – by all those in public life.
6. The Committee agrees that freedom of expression and the right of the press to report, scrutinise and comment on public affairs is essential and should be protected. However, the Committee is also of the view that editors and journalists should exercise discretion for their own content and use of language, particularly where it could incite intimidation by delegitimising someone's engagement in the political process, placing undue influence on their individual characteristics, or by using threatening language. To that end, the Committee recommended in 2017 that *press regulators should extend their codes of conduct to prohibit language that incites*

intimidation.¹ We are glad to see that the Impress Code is already wide ranging and protects individuals against discrimination and harassment in most circumstances.

7. The Committee also recommended in 2017 that *news organisations should only consider stories from freelance journalists that meet the appropriate standards (i.e. of IPSO's Code of Practice or the Impress Standards Code)*. We note that the preamble to the Impress Standards Code makes clear that publishers are responsible for the content they publish. It may be helpful to make explicit that this includes content from external contributors, including non-journalists and freelancers (i.e. publishers should take care to ensure that the Code is observed by all editorial staff and external contributors, including freelancers, and that freelancers are aware of their obligations).
8. We look forward to seeing the outcome of the consultation and the new Standards Code.

CSPL January 2021

¹ For the purpose of the review, we defined intimidation as “words and/or behaviour intended or likely to block or deter participation, which could reasonably lead to an individual wanting to withdraw from public life.” Intimidation is different from legitimate persuasion or influence which takes place as part of the democratic process.

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Background

The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent, advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). The Committee was established in October 1994, by the then Prime Minister, with the following terms of reference:

To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life.

The Principles of Selflessness, Objectivity, Integrity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership remain the basis of the ethical standards expected of public office holders and continue as key criteria for assessing the quality of public life.

The remit of the Committee excludes investigation of individual allegations of misconduct.

On 12 November 1997, the terms of reference were extended by the then Prime Minister:

To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements.

The Committee's terms of reference were further clarified following the Triennial Review of the Committee in 2013. The then Minister of the Cabinet Office confirmed that the Committee:

Should not inquire into matters relating to the devolved legislatures and Governments except with the agreement of those bodies. Secondly the Government understands the Committee's remit to examine "standards of conduct of all holders of public office" as encompassing all those involved in the delivery of public services, not solely, those appointed or elected to public office.

Committee membership as January 2021:

- Lord Evans of Weardale KCB DL, Chair
- Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP
- Dr Jane Martin CBE
- Professor Dame Shirley Pearce DBE
- Monish Shah
- [Vacancy]
- Rt Hon Lord Stunell OBE
- Rt Hon Jeremy Wright QC MP

The Committee's work is supported by a Research Advisory Board, chaired by Professor Mark Philp.