

Honesty

Objectivity

Openness

Selflessness

Integrity

Accountability

Leadership

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

[sent by email]

13 October 2026

Dear Prime Minister,

I am pleased to be writing to you on the first anniversary of the formation of the Ethics and Integrity Commission (the EIC), established by this Government to promote the highest standards in public life.

This letter fulfils the responsibility assigned to the EIC to report annually to the Prime Minister on the health of standards in public life. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents with you in person.

Standards failures, whether institutional – such as the Hillsborough disaster and the Post Office Horizon scandal – or resulting from personal misconduct, damage public trust. While the British public's trust in politicians and political parties has never been high, recent surveys show that it is in decline and is now among the lowest in Western Europe.

In this letter we have identified the areas of public life that the EIC believes should form the current priorities for standards reform. These include the standards framework in local government, lobbying regulation, political finance and codes of ethical conduct.

A number of positive steps have been taken since the July 2024 general election towards strengthening England's standards system, but progress is at risk of stalling. Your personal leadership is needed to accelerate standards reform and to ensure that the core values and standards expressed in the Principles of Public Life remain at the heart of government and our public services.

Local government

Soon after entering office in 2024, the Government launched a public consultation, which led to the publication in November 2025 of a set of [proposals](#) for a stronger and more accountable standards system for local government. The EIC was pleased to see these plans given that our predecessor, the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL), had been calling for change since its 2019 report, [Local Government Ethical Standards](#), which made a number of recommendations designed to strengthen and clarify the existing framework for local government.

It is disappointing that primary legislation was not announced in the 2026 King's Speech. We would urge the Government to find Parliamentary time. While bad behaviour is committed by a small minority, it can have a significant impact on councillor and officer wellbeing and public trust. The proposed changes have the potential to build confidence in local government and, in doing so, support the government's broader plans to empower local communities through greater devolution.

Lobbying

Lobbying is an integral part of a functioning democracy. But a lack of transparency can create the impression that vested interests are influencing decisions about policy, legislation or contracts and that other groups without the same financial backing or networks, are excluded.

In March, the Government asked the EIC to examine the systems for regulating lobbying, financial interests and post government employment. The EIC was pleased to publish its [report](#) in July. Lobbying has been a long-standing area of concern for the EIC. The CSPL made a number of recommendations in its 2021 report, [Upholding Standards in Public Life](#), that were left unimplemented and the EIC welcomed the opportunity to revisit the issue. We have yet to receive a response to our report.

Drawing on the wealth of evidence presented to us, we recommended a fresh approach to lobbying regulation that has transparency and ease of use at its heart. We made the case for replacing the current register of consultant lobbyists with a register of all lobbying activity, supported by an AI-enabled digital platform that consolidates this data with government records of the meetings held by departments. This approach would support external scrutiny. But it would also offer benefits to government by providing a clear picture of who is lobbying whom across departments.

We recognised that primary legislation would be required to broaden the scope of the lobbying register to include all lobbyists and have recommended the Government give urgent consideration to bringing forward a bill in the current parliamentary term.

There are some actions that can be taken now, pending primary legislation. First, extending the reporting requirement to contact with special advisers and the ultimate intended beneficiary of lobbying activity. Both can be achieved through secondary legislation. Secondly, work should begin to develop a single database to collate and publish departmental transparency returns. This should be built in such a way that it can connect to the new lobbying register, once the scope has been expanded through legislation.

Our recommendations also called on the Government to modernise the Business Appointment Rules and formalise a risk-based approach to considering applications. The Government should also improve coordination of the bodies charged with administering the Rules.

Ethical conduct in public bodies

Living up to high ethical standards is a personal responsibility but people do not operate within a vacuum. High standards must be internalised within the culture of our public bodies.

The EIC has been tasked by the Government with providing guidance to support public authorities to produce and embed a code of conduct that meets the requirements in the Hillsborough Bill. Our call for evidence closed at the end of September and we have engaged with a range of public sector organisations on what works. We intend to make our initial guidance available to public authorities to coincide with Royal Assent, in order to support timely and consistent implementation. This will be supplemented by further guidance over time as we develop into a centre of excellence on codes of ethical conduct.

We expect most public authorities will already have codes of conduct, but the value of our work will be in supporting public bodies to elevate their codes to an equally high standard and take steps to integrate these high standards of ethical conduct into the culture of their organisations.

Political finance and the Electoral Commission

The EIC welcomes the decisive steps taken by the Government to safeguard our democracy through the Representation of the People Bill. We are pleased that the Government has incorporated key recommendations from CSPL's 2021 report, [Regulating Election Finance](#), including measures intended to tighten the rules preventing donations from foreign sources entering UK politics and to strengthen the Electoral Commission's enforcement powers. The EIC also welcomes the decision to abolish the power for government to guide the Electoral Commission's strategic priorities by issuing a strategy and policy statement.

We note the Government has accepted the recommendations in the [Rycroft Review](#) and brought forward amendments to introduce a moratorium on donations being made using cryptoassets and a cap on donations from overseas voters at £100,000 per annum. The commitment in the [Government's response](#) to prioritise action to address hostile state activity online is important. We recommend the Government keep under review whether the UK has the right safeguards to respond to existing and emerging threats.

The longstanding debate around the merits of a universal annual cap on permissible donations is receiving increased attention from Parliamentarians and the media in light of the trend for large donations to originate from a small number of donors. Political parties play a vital role in our democracy and need significant sums of money to function, yet the reliance on large donations from a limited number of sources creates the risk that donors may exert undue influence, or may be perceived to do so, which is damaging for trust in politics. A universal donation cap is likely to affect the major parties in different ways. The EIC recommends that the cross-government 'task and finish' team announced in September engage with all major political parties so that decisions are not seen to be enacted in a partisan manner. This will also ensure reforms have democratic legitimacy and are more likely to endure. This work should complement the independent [review into spending limits](#) being undertaken by the Electoral Commission.

Intimidation in public life

Intimidation has a pernicious impact on our democracy. It can drive dedicated individuals out of public service and deter strong candidates from standing. Candidates who are female, or from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds are disproportionately targeted, which risks narrowing political representation.

[Evidence](#) that offences against MPs are rising, is deeply concerning. We note that the [Speaker's Conference](#) on the security of MPs, candidates and elections called for action across government, regulatory bodies, the media, and wider society. The EIC welcomes the [action being taken](#), including work to develop a Code of Conduct for Campaigning to set clear expectations for behaviour during election campaigns, building on the [principles](#) developed for the May 2026 elections. The EIC was pleased to see legislative measures included within the Representation of the People Bill, including a new statutory aggravating factor to be considered by courts when sentencing offenders for intimidatory offences motivated by hostility towards candidates, campaigners, elective office holders and electoral staff.

Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards

The Government's decision, in November 2024, to strengthen the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards' ability to initiate investigations by removing the need to seek the Prime Minister's consent was a positive development. However, we recommend the Government goes further. The CSPL 2021 report, [Upholding Standards in Public Life](#), called for all future Independent Advisers to be appointed through an enhanced version of the current process for significant public appointments and for the role to be placed on a statutory footing. We share the view of CSPL that the system for the enforcement of standards at the top of government requires a greater degree of independence. Making this change for future appointments would future-proof the integrity of the role.

Public appointments

The [Network of Standards Bodies](#) that I convene on a quarterly basis has discussed how the timeliness of the public appointments process has been a persistent issue in recent years. The EIC is concerned about the real risk that lengthy delays could deter the best candidates from entering public service. Carrying vacancies also impacts on the ability of public bodies to deliver their functions. We would encourage departments and the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to focus on meeting the completion targets in the Government's own [Governance Code on Public Appointments](#).

Addressing systemic failures

There have been far too many state failings over the years that could have been averted had the warning signs been heeded. Hillsborough is but one, with warnings ignored of crushing during the semi-final at the ground the previous year. There are many others, including the Infected Blood scandal, Post Office Horizon, Windrush and a plethora of maternity services scandals. These all dent public trust and confidence. This can be further damaged if the recommendations from public inquiries and other reviews are not adopted without good reason and a clear explanation.

The EIC launched a [review](#) in March to look at whether public ombudsman services can support public bodies to take action to resolve problems before they escalate by playing a greater role in investigating systemic issues within and across organisations delivering public services. We have taken evidence from

a range of contributors, including public bodies, academics, the judiciary and ombudsman bodies (ombuds) themselves and intend to issue our report early next year.

Our report will call for greater collaboration, consistency and a more pre-emptive approach by public sector ombuds. In order to achieve this, we are likely to recommend that ombuds be given additional powers to allow them to act in the absence of a complaint. We will also call for a more consistent approach to Parliamentary oversight of public sector ombuds and government ombuds policy.

Education and engagement

We are developing the EIC's role to engage and inform the wider public on the values, rules and oversight mechanisms that govern standards in public life. This is important because the standards system is complex and context-specific, reflecting the complexity of our system of government. We will work with members of the Network of Standards Bodies to amplify their work to educate the public about the rules and processes they oversee.

As custodian of the [Principles of Public Life](#), also known as the Nolan Principles, the EIC is planning a number of initiatives for 2027 to promote high ethical standards in the public sector. We will be running an England-wide roadshow to support public bodies to implement their Codes of Ethical Conduct. And we will be launching a Standards Week which will include a tour of public institutions. We will also be holding a Practitioner conference to bring together people across the public sector to talk about why standards matter and how to uphold ethical standards in practice. We will be looking at how to involve Mayors across England in these events.

I look forward to receiving your response and to discussing the issues in this letter with you in more detail. I know you share my view that high ethical standards matter. The Principles of Public Life – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership – are not lofty ideals but a guide to support public office holders to focus on the public interest at all times. Failing to live up to these standards has a negative impact on public trust in government and stands in the way of delivering high-quality public services.

We will publish this letter on our website in line with the Commission's transparency policy.

Yours sincerely,



Doug Chalmers
Chair, Ethics and Integrity Commission