

Honesty

Objectivity

Openness

Selflessness

Integrity

Accountability

Leadership

26 March 2026 Ewen Fergusson speech to the LGSCO Launch event – complaints code

Thank you for the introduction and for inviting me to join you for the launch of LGSCO’s complaints handling code.

We know that the code will sit at the heart of good public administration in a local government setting, clearing standards for how concerns from the public are addressed.

I am going to cover three things:

A quick introduction to the work of the new Ethics and Integrity Commission. I’ll cover a little bit of history and give an update on latest developments in our remit, one of which in particular is likely to be of interest in local government.

Then, an introduction to our latest review and how you can contribute.

Finally, some reflections on ways in which we hope that the Commission will make a real difference both to standards in public life and to public perception of the state.

1. Background

The EIC is the successor body to the Committee on Standards in Public Life and was created in October last year.

In October 1994, the Guardian newspaper exposed two MPs who had been taking money and gifts in exchange for asking questions in the House of Commons on behalf of Mohamed Al-Fayed.

The "cash for questions" scandal led the then Prime Minister, John Major, to establish a standing committee to recommend changes to promote high standards in public life.

Chaired by Lord Nolan, the Committee on Standards in Public Life subsequently produced its first report which set out the Seven Principles of Public Life, aka the Nolan Principles.

These are Honesty, Objectivity, Openness, Selflessness, Integrity, Accountability, and Leadership. Alongside these, Nolan identified three "golden threads" - codes of conduct, independent scrutiny, and guidance and education - to ensure standards are embedded in organisations rather than just remaining theoretical principles.

These principles apply to everyone in public life-civil servants, politicians, teachers, police officers and to private companies providing public services.

They aren't rules, but represent a shared understanding of what we expect in our liberal democracy and are helpful in providing a compass to help navigate decisions in the ambiguous situations we face. They are at the core of our work to date.

We are not a regulator, so we do not do casework.

Since 1994, CSPL has tended to produce an evidence-based report once a year addressed to the Prime Minister on subjects which it usually chooses for itself, containing recommendations for change. This includes a report some of you may be familiar with on ethical standards in local government in 2019. Many of CSPL's recommendations have been followed, and many of the key features of our current standards landscape are a product of its recommendations.

To bring you up to date: the last election Labour manifesto included a commitment to create an Ethics and Integrity Commission, and the way it has done this is by taking CSPL as the existing overarching standards body and giving it significantly enhanced responsibilities set out in our terms of reference.

1. We will continue to conduct research and thematic enquiries.
2. We advise public authorities on the development of clear codes of conduct and effective oversight arrangements.
3. We report annually to the Prime Minister on the health of standards in public life-a powerful tool.

4. We engage and inform the wider public on the values and rules that govern standards in public life-a challenging public engagement piece.
5. We convene ethics and standards bodies formally to share best practice.

2. Thematic Review

As mentioned, we retain our core work of regular reviews. Our last two reports, 'Leading in Practice' and 'Early Warning Signs', have been slightly different from our usual reviews which have tended to focus on rules and powers with specific recommendations. Our last two reports did not contain any recommendations but instead highlighted that rules are not enough and that something just as important is a focus on behaviour, leadership, and culture.

For example, the 'Early Warning Signs' report from last year highlighted the importance of organisations paying closer attention to the signals that something may be starting to go wrong and putting in place systems that allow these to be identified and acted on early.

This brings us to our next review, launched on 3 March.

From Windrush to Grenfell to Horizon IT, we have seen public institutions failing the people they serve. What is often dismissed as an unfortunate error can actually be a sign of a systemic issue. These need to be identified earlier.

That is why the EIC has decided that the theme of its first review will be the public sector ombudsman system-can Ombudsman play an enhanced role in spotting these issues?

By investigating individual complaints, public sector Ombudsman can gain insight into where the system is failing, where transparency may be lacking, and where redress may be denied. In short, it is an opportunity to see what otherwise might be missed.

For this review, we will seek to find out:

- What does the public expect from the modern ombudsman?
- Do Ombudsman have the tools to investigate broad institutional failings or are they held back by barriers?

- Should Complaints Standards be mandatory rather than advisory? Should Ombudsman recommendations be legally binding?
- How can we make the complex landscape easier for the public to navigate?

We do not come to this with any agenda; we want to hear a range of evidence, some of which will no doubt be contradictory. But our goal is to make recommendations which are necessary, implementable, and above all make a meaningful difference to the public.

Our call for evidence questions are published on our website. We are taking written evidence until the end of April and will follow up with in-person evidence as well from a range of interested bodies and communities. We are keen to get as many contributions as possible, so if you are minded to input, please do; we would be delighted.

3. Final reflections

As the EIC, we have kept the strong foundation of the Seven Principles of Public Life and three golden threads, but crucially, with our enhanced remit and marked support from the centre to build the organisation, we will have a greater opportunity to really develop those golden threads.

We will engage and educate; we will be a centre of excellence for Codes of Conduct and continue to undertake important reviews focused on systemic change with realistic and achievable recommendations to focus the minds of those in government.

But no matter how good this new institution is, the work will not be finished: issues change, problems evolve, cracks appear-and standards need to keep pace with these developments and the public's expectations. They also need to be timely and not create unnecessary bureaucracy.

Above all, there is a need for standards to be kept alive, talked about, and discussed, underscoring their relevance for new generations of public officials. We recognise that it can be confusing for people to understand what is required of them with different organisations having various perceptions on missions and vision statements, values posters, and codes of conduct which may or may not be up to date and may or may not be given organisational prominence.

As we see it, the work of the new Commission is about helping to build stronger awareness of standards from the inside out-supporting and challenging the public sector to live up to the Nolan Principles and providing a more visible platform for discussions about standards, leadership, and culture. The Seven Principles remain at the heart of our work.

High standards, applied well, make for better decision-making. Tough decisions are an inevitable fact of working in the public sector where there are limited funds and numerous competing interests. High standards allow office holders to navigate the complexity and demonstrate how decisions, however unpopular, are made in the right way.

We are encouraged by the commitment which the overwhelming majority of public servants show-most want to do their job well and in the right way. But we also know processes and uncertainty can make this difficult-when expectations aren't clear or processes fall behind, issues can arise and grow.

Public life today is complex, involving numerous public bodies and private contractors. There will always be barriers to overcome: the defensiveness of organisations, a tendency to hide problems rather than expose and deal with them, not listening to staff, and not intelligently interpreting the data in front of you.

Clearly, there will be standards failures in the future-nothing the EIC suggests could possibly eliminate failures altogether. But having the EIC does create a more visible and strategic role for standards. We will continue to look across the standards system, highlight what is working well, and identify where improvements are needed. We will take an evidence-based and constructive approach, focused on what can make a difference rather than add unnecessary complexity.

And to return to our review-we want to see what part Ombudsman may have to play in shining a light on those vital pieces of information before a problem becomes systemic or becomes the next public tragedy; we owe that much to victims and their families.

I encourage you to look at the call for evidence questions on our website and feed in your views before the end of April.

Thank you.

Ewen