



SoapBOY

As I write, hundreds of thousands across England are taking part in local council surveys – which are important contributions to comprehensive assessments (CAs) of several government departments' performance (PSAs). They will give a picture of how local authorities are performing in the eyes of the public. The surveys pose a real challenge for deprived and disadvantaged communities to be positive about other public services. The Commission are being thoughtful in their results and reflecting organisational performance even in areas that are relatively poor.

Some of the issues that often buck the trend are scores in more deprived areas. For example, in England the most positive government, in other services, the different in scores, at an average each region of that, in general deprived a region does in terms of scores. There is that does not fit Areas of high cost as the northeast better as organise the social problem they have more the southeast outlier from the CAA will show relationships between elements of different areas understanding between performance deprivation. At state is doing the wealthiest and regions of the should think of the middling and often more difficult.

Conduct unbecoming

Will the CLG's consultation on codes of conduct for local authority members and employees live up to expectations? asks **David Prince**

Leaders and chief executives, reeling from financial misfortunes not predicted even by the Audit Commission, won't have paid much attention to CLG's latest consultation on *Codes of conduct* for local authority members and employees.

While much of the document is house-keeping, in it lurk two explosive issues on what standards actually mean in a modern local governance setting.

First is the definition of when members' conduct in an unofficial capacity brings their office or authority into disrepute and diminishes public trust.

Disrepute will arise from conviction for a criminal offence by a court without the opportunity of a fixed penalty. Conviction is the evidence of disrepute. Foreign convictions count, provided the conduct is an offence here.

I'm sure the CLG has done its best with Parliament's opaque decision only to regulate private conduct within narrow, unspecified limits. But, instead of clear principles, it has proposed artificial distinctions.

Serious offences, such as assault, that result in imprisonment become disrepute. But public outrage also arises from private misconduct not resulting in imprisonment, such as benefit fraud. The resulting anomalies will delight headline writers.

Research shows public support for greater privacy for public figures, and resentment of media intrusiveness. This minefield was

avoidable simply by lowering, from three months, the period of imprisonment which automatically triggers disqualification, making imprisonment, not conviction, the basis of disrepute.

Principle and practice also clash in the proposed code for officers. I've always sympathised with members' long-standing and deeply felt grievance that they are much more tightly regulated than senior officers or others around the partnership table.

A member accepting hospitality worth only £25 must publicly register and declare it for three years, whereas an accompanying director, generally, privately registers it, with less onerous disclosure.

I support the first stage proposal that, as in Wales, staff terms and conditions should contain the core principles of public life. These enshrine the reasons why most people join the public sector. The second stage proposal requires senior staff to accept some – but not all – of the members' code relating to interests. This could be on the basis of the politically restricted categories as going with the turf, which I favour. The alternative applies to those officers discharging executive, regulatory and other powers under local delegation schemes.

Ostensibly, this ensures that whoever performs the functions abides by the same conduct. Except it doesn't. For example, for proper transparency, members who belong to lobbying organisations or charitable bod-

ies must declare membership, whereas officers wouldn't need to.

It is transparency of decision taking and public perception about decision takers that matter most in this debate.

There is a public interest case for a consistent and proportionate code that applies to those members and senior officers who steer and manage public bodies. Their decisions impact on life quality, while their salaries exceed what average people earn.

Disappointingly, though, the consultation leaves too much to chance in enforcing the officer code and safeguarding those officers subject to it. The risks are real.

Ideally, standards committees should oversee an effective local framework, and ensure guidance and training. But, to gain the trust needed to discharge this wider remit, many standards committees need greater skills, more robustness, higher calibre of members and, in some cases, genuine independence.

Where such limitations already exist, leaders and chief executives should be tackling them now as deficiencies in corporate governance.

Let's hope the consultation responses lift the practicalities from the 'too difficult' box and ensure fundamental principles aren't quietly consigned to the long grass. ■

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