



Drawing up high standards

As Westminster faces an outcry over MPs' expenses, **David Prince** asks why local government has not called for its standards to be imposed on national politicians

Remarkably muted, amid all the column inches on MPs' expenses, has been the voice of local government.

Why is this? Local government has every right to lead the public debate, and demand that its own rigorous standards of transparency and accountability are applied to MPs, quangos and local partnerships.

Councillors not only support their code of conduct but, mostly, abide by it. Interests are recorded and publicly declared.

The code embodies all the 'Seven principles of public life', especially those of leadership by example and selflessness, so lacking in recent Westminster sagas of household bills and address book creativity. Most importantly, the independent oversight locally, within standards committees, and nationally, by the Standards Board for England, provides the outside scrutiny the public lack in Westminster and quangoland.

Yet local government's leading lights, with rare exception, seldom rise above the language of acquiescence and compliance, using head, not heart, when discussing standards – and that's not often.

They confidently affirm their democratic role and manifest personal commitment – as is right – but can't quite give tongue to their equally good performance on standards and governance, for which they should be just as loud and proud.

Councillors used to have a justifiable grievance that they were the most tightly regulated of any in public life. Now their level of accountability accords with what the public want to see throughout public life. And

councillors can be powerful advocates of what needs to change nationally.

Everyone in the forefront of public life would profit from a re-read of the public attitudes survey, conducted by the Committee of Standards in Public Life, and published last year. Since then, MPs' remuneration has become the emblematic issue for the public as to what standards in public life actually mean, in spirit as well as letter, and how the rules for 'them up there' accord with the experiences of 'us down here'.

The survey shows politicians as being increasingly out of touch. What people want is that all public servants use public money wisely and display basic honesty, plus selfless dedication to public service.

An increasingly-sceptical public have grave doubts about whether the authorities are genuinely committed to upholding standards, whether wrong-doing is generally discovered and, if so, rigorously investigated and effectively punished. Public trust in local politicians has risen, but only stands at 45% – still 1% below MPs, even before recent scandals. Senior officers score a mere 35%, four points below senior civil servants. They have since become fair game in the fat-cat hunt.

The row about MPs' remuneration isn't ring-fenced to London SW1. Councillors face heavy damage as cynical voters stay indoors or turn to the siren voices of extreme parties. History shows falling public confidence and economic recession to be dangerous bedfellows for democracy. That's why it's timely for the LGA and

SOLACE to re-affirm, from the democratic frontline, the importance of local government's generally-good governance, and highlight the positive benefit of self-adherence to a proportionate code of conduct, independently enforced and monitored.

They should similarly lead from the front by welcoming [minister for communities and local government] Sadiq Khan's recent Parliamentary assurance that he was keen to move forward as soon as possible on implementing the officers' code – too long overdue. They can't stay tone deaf to the current public mood around transparency of interests and accountability of top officers who influence or take far-reaching decisions affecting people's lives, and whose earnings are in the top 5% bracket.

Local government might initially have welcomed the CSPL's rapid switch from its Twelfth inquiry covering local leadership models into sorting out MPs' remuneration. Some will question the committee's credibility in revisiting local government if it fails to resolve the Westminster conundrum.

But the two topics are linked. Good governance and public trust are fragile flowers. They only flourish where tone is set from the top, and where leaders' daily deeds match the written word. Isn't it now time to level standards upwards, so that the rest of the public realm matches what local government already does? ■

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