

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Propriety, ethics and the wider standards landscape in the UK, HC 899

Tuesday 24 February 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 24 February 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lauren Edwards (Chair); Markus Campbell-Savours; Sam Carling; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Luke Taylor.

Questions 96-161

Witnesses

I: Sir John Pullinger CB, Chair, Electoral Commission; Ed Humpherson CB, Head, Office for Statistics Regulation.

II: Daniel Greenberg CB, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; Paula Sussex, Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [The Electoral Commission](#)
- [Office for Statistics Regulation](#)
- [Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sir John Pullinger and Ed Humpherson.

Chair: Good morning. Welcome to this meeting of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today, the Committee will be continuing our inquiry into propriety, ethics and the wider standards landscape. For our first panel, we welcome the Chair of the Electoral Commission, John Pullinger CB, and the Head of the Office for Statistics Regulation, Ed Humpherson CB. Good morning. Could you introduce yourselves for the record?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir John Pullinger: Good morning. I am John Pullinger. I am the Chair of the Electoral Commission.

Ed Humpherson: I am Ed Humpherson. I am Head of the Office for Statistics Regulation.

Q96 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for coming today. I am interested in your perspective on why standards in public life are important and what you see as the purpose of an effective standards system. John, would you like to kick off?

Sir John Pullinger: You cannot have a functioning society without standards. Standards are the basis for trust. Trust is, you could say, the currency of social wellbeing. In politics, two particular areas stand out for me. First of all, standards form the basis of trust between the public and the people whom the public have elected to represent them. Secondly, standards form the basis of trust between political parties at election time, so they know that they are facing a fair crack of the whip when they are seeking people's vote. Those would be the two things that I would highlight as an opening statement.

Ed Humpherson: I do not really have anything to add to John's general answer, but if I can relate it to my world of statistics, statistics are part of the lifeblood of democracy if they are used well. If they are misused, they become slop; they become misinformation. That can be an important driver of mistrust. As a standards-based regulator, we set the standards to ensure that statistics are used well, and step in when they are not. To us, it is really fundamental to have those standards in order to provide the bedrock for the appropriate use of statistics in public life.

Q97 **Chair:** What is your assessment of the standards system in the UK at the moment?

Ed Humpherson: My perspective, from my specific world, is that it is strong. We have a very clear code of practice for statistics, which we have just extended to cover more formally the way Government Departments and Ministers use statistics.

More generally, it is very striking that when you are inside the system, you see a series of bodies that play very clear roles, with clear remits. They handle cases effectively and well. From the outside, it might look like a little bit of an alphabet soup. That is why the creation of the Ethics and Integrity Commission is such a welcome move, because it provides the umbrella under which all the individual bodies, looking at appointments, looking at statistics, as we do, or looking at electoral behaviour, can perform. It provides the wrapper, generates the common themes, and magnifies the voice as well.

Q98 **Chair:** John, what is your view of the current standards system in the UK?



Sir John Pullinger: Like Ed, I think a lot of the elements are there, and each element is pretty strong, but it doesn't feel to me as though, as a whole system, it operates as effectively as it might. Three things stand out to me. First, public trust in the system is not as high as we want it to be. At the very minimum, there is a job of work to give people confidence that the system as a whole will be working for them.

Secondly, again specifically on the Electoral Commission experience, there are enforcement gaps. It is possible for a wrongdoing to slip between the cracks of the system, and we need to do something about that.

Thirdly, for those who are subject to standards, including Members of Parliament, it is often quite tricky to know who you are answerable to and exactly what kinds of sanctions you might face, because there are overlaps and complexity that are quite difficult to understand.

The building blocks are there but, like Ed, I think the opportunity that the Ethics and Integrity Commission provides is to think how the system as a whole works, what needs to change, and how we can make that change for the better to give the public the confidence that the system is working properly for them.

Q99 **Chair:** You have both referenced the Government fulfilling their manifesto commitment to create the Ethics and Integrity Commission, which has replaced the CSPL. You have given an overview of your views on the change. How effectively is that working?

Sir John Pullinger: I welcome the change too. The Ethics and Integrity Commission inherits the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and what I would hope for is that it becomes a CSPL-plus. Just to expand on that a bit, it needs to take all the good things that CSPL has done, in particular the recommendations from its first ever report under Lord Nolan to establish the seven principles of public life, which have stood the test of time and are as relevant now as they were then.

Another aspect of Lord Nolan's report that is as relevant now as it was then are what he called the golden threads that bring those principles to life and making sure that there is some action consequent on those principles. The golden threads were codes of practice and codes of conduct. We will probably come back to that later, and there is some good work that the CSPL had done and the EIC can do more of.

Independent scrutiny is another element, and that is particularly salient to me in the Electoral Commission, because independence is so critical in our work. Education is the final element of the golden threads that Lord Nolan spelt out. For the public to have confidence, education of the public as to how the system works and how they can seek redress if they need it from the system is going to be very important.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In that area, despite the great work of CSPL, there is definitely more to do, because there are problem areas. Codes of conduct for political campaigning are an example, and we have just started some work on taking forward recommendations from the Speaker's Conference on that.

The real reason it needs to be CSPL-plus is that Lord Nolan's report was 30 years ago, and the world is very different now from what it was when the report came out. Geopolitics is very much in the news at the moment. The world order that we are operating in, and the people who might seek to threaten us, are morphing and challenging, and we need to be up to the task of tackling those threats.

Society has changed dramatically in 30 years, and the consequences of the financial crash and the impact on people's cost of living, and standards of living more generally, are quite tricky.

The third one is technology. We didn't have any of the things that we are dealing with now, and particularly with the pace of technology change with AI, I think the EIC will need to keep abreast of those things and horizon-scan where it might go next, if it is to fulfil the ambitions that the Government set out in the manifesto to really have a system that is right for now and gives the public the confidence that we are ahead of the curve of the kinds of challenges that we are likely to face in the future.

Ed Humpherson: Can I just supplement that? John alluded to the golden threads in the original Lord Nolan report, being codes of conduct, independent scrutiny and education. In all three areas, the new commission has an opportunity, but also a challenge. It has a new role for implementing codes of conduct around the duty of candour—the Hillsborough Bill. That is really powerful and can really lead to cultural change. There is a risk, of course, that codes of conduct just become box-ticking exercises, and it is an opportunity and a challenge for the EIC to make sure that they are the good kind of code that leads to cultural change.

The second of the golden threads is independent scrutiny. In my view, the new role for the commission to write an annual letter to the Prime Minister on the standards landscape is an incredibly powerful lever. It can really highlight issues, raise challenges and drive change if it is used confidently, firmly and independently.

Education, of course, is the third thing that the new EIC has as one of its new roles. What sits underneath that could be a very significant range of activities or not very much. Making sure that that education is effective and lands with public authorities is really important.

Those three things—getting the codes of conduct landed in public authorities, using the independent scrutiny through this PM letter well, and education—will be really important challenges, but also opportunities.

Q100 **Chair:** You have referenced public trust in politics as being at quite a low



HOUSE OF COMMONS

level, and certainly recent events have really reinforced that. Have the Government gone far enough in the EIC, or could they have been bolder?

Sir John Pullinger: Time will tell as to how the EIC picks up its mandate. Ed used some good words in terms of acting confidently and interpreting its mandate in a way that really challenges the Government and all of us to fill the gaps and make this system much more resilient.

I particularly agree with Ed about the letter that the EIC will be writing to the Prime Minister. I know that EIC members are thinking very carefully about how they use that opportunity, because it is not just an opportunity for them, but a test of whether they really are fulfilling the ambition and the desire that we have for this to be strong and effective.

Time will tell. They are, I know, working on the first version of that letter, and that will be a chance for us, as regulators, but also as parliamentarians, to think, "Is this working? If not, how do we make it work better?" and we can iterate towards the kind of thing that we wanted, which is how CSPL operated too. It built on one report to get to the next and to the next. That cadre of evidence and experience made it immensely powerful in its later years, and we are using that as a springboard for the next steps.

Q101 **Chair:** Ed, could the Government have been bolder?

Ed Humpherson: Essentially, I agree with what John just said. My earlier answer is my answer to your question on boldness. The building blocks are now in place. If the commission uses its powers and its new role with confidence, with independence, with clarity and with firmness, it can be really effective.

Q102 **Chair:** I have a final question before I hand over to colleagues. In terms of the Nolan principles, there is a lot that is still incredibly relevant. Do they need a refresh?

Ed Humpherson: I don't think that they do. Those seven principles are timeless. They are enduring. Of course, if we leave them on a shelf and don't think about them, they are not doing their job and we are not doing our job. We need to reinterpret them for the changed context in which we now find ourselves. What does honesty mean in the contemporary environment? What does objectivity mean in our current world? What does leadership mean? Take them as enduring, but translate them into our current environment.

Q103 **Chair:** So not so much a refresh as maybe a rearticulation in the current environment with social media and those kinds of things that politicians are dealing with.

Ed Humpherson: Yes, absolutely. I talked earlier about things descending into box-ticking. This can happen in organisations. You can go to organisations and see words of values printed up on the wall, but if nobody is talking about them, and if nobody is thinking, "Well, how do



they relate to this decision that I have in front of me, or this task that I am doing, or this project that I am on?" they don't really mean anything. I would not change any of those seven principles, but what I would encourage—and this is what the codes of conduct will help drive if they are done well—is reflection and action to make them live.

Q104 **Chair:** Is there anything you would like to add, John?

Sir John Pullinger: No; I agree.

Q105 **John Lamont:** Good morning. My first batch of questions are directed to you, John. We have discussed the creation of the EIC, and my understanding is that, previously, you took part in informal meetings of other standards bodies, which were chaired by the chair of the CSPL. How is this new formal process working compared with what went before?

Sir John Pullinger: First, I found the informal process extremely valuable. Coming in as chair to an organisation, it is quite a lonely place, and to be in a room with colleagues in a similar kind of situation was really helpful. We shared experiences and challenges, and worked out how we each could live up to the Nolan principles in the fields in which we operate. We have taken that into the formal network.

Formalising the network is a good thing. It makes it much more transparent and clearer to people that this is happening, which is a virtue in itself. It also provides us with a more structured way of us bringing issues to the table where we are facing potentially common challenges. It gives us a place where we can talk about where we are working with the same group of people. You are seeing the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards immediately after this. I work very closely with him when we are looking at financial interests of Members, for example, to make sure that you face a system that is as coherent as we can make it.

The network will really come into its own as a sounding board for the EIC itself, in particular thinking about the most prominent and salient issues for the letter to the Prime Minister. Where can it go with becoming a centre of excellence for codes of practice? The network, working together, can be a very strong community to help the EIC live up to its aspirations.

Q106 **John Lamont:** Are there any risks of the formalisation, compared with the more informal process from before?

Sir John Pullinger: If it is informal, it has a fluidity to it, but the meetings that I have been to of the formal network have retained that essential ability to be flexible and adapt to the needs of the members. There are risks, but they are being well managed.

Q107 **John Lamont:** Are there other bodies that should be included within the network that are not there just now?

Sir John Pullinger: The size works quite well. We can sit in a room like this and have a conversation that flows effectively. If you have too many



HOUSE OF COMMONS

more people in the room, it becomes harder for it to work in a way that is really effective. What would really benefit the network—and we are starting to think about this—is where we can link into satellite networks. There are similar networks in each of the devolved nations, and working with them so that we think about standards across the UK will be very important.

An area that has possibly been neglected a bit is going down into local government, in England in particular, and understanding the role of chief executives, leaders and monitoring officers, and how they can work out how to use the Nolan principles within the field of local government.

I would not tinker with the network as it is too much, but I would really encourage it to be a network that embraces other networks and enables us to support and learn from local government and devolved nations in particular. There may well be other groups. Some others that we work with, for example, are sister regulators in the political space, and that could also be an area that the EIC network could engage with.

Ed Humpherson: Can I just supplement that? John makes a very good point about the satellite networks. Just to give an example, the Electoral Commission and the Office for Statistics Regulation form a satellite network around election time with bodies such as Ofcom, the Advertising Standards Authority and public service broadcasters around the presentation of information during pre-election campaign periods. That is a satellite network where we would not expect those bodies to attend the EIC network meeting, but we can tap into it.

Q108 **John Lamont:** That is a nice segue into my next question. John, beyond the network, should you have any other sort of relationship with the EIS, particularly around the conduct and finance of elections?

Sir John Pullinger: One thing that was immensely valuable to the Electoral Commission with CSPL was the detailed inquiries that CSPL did. This Committee has done similar inquiries, but the complementary nature of CSPL enabled it to think of its inquiries in this space around standards and Nolan very particularly. What I hope will continue is the opportunity to pick up. They mainly relate to political finance.

At the moment, I am working actively with some of the EIC members on education, and we have both referenced education already in our evidence to you this morning. There is a particular role to think about how we work with schools in giving children the opportunity to understand some of these questions at the earliest possible age.

Being part of the network will enable us to think, “Where are the different elements that we can pick up for further inquiry, and who are the other people we need to engage?” To Ed’s point, there could be other satellites that then flow from that; curriculum bodies would be another example.

Q109 **John Lamont:** Ed, just picking up on the networks again, what is your



view on the more formal creation of the networks compared with what went before?

Ed Humpherson: I welcome it, because it creates a stronger basis for these various organisations to share their experiences and to talk about the cases that they are dealing with and the emerging issues. What the EIC will be able to do with that flow of insight is to look at the landscape more coherently, so the formalisation just creates a stronger foundation.

Q110 **John Lamont:** The chair of the UKSA does not have a formal role, although the chair attends. Is that something that should be changed?

Ed Humpherson: I am very happy with the chair attending. The current chair, Penny Young, represents the things that we care about as the Office for Statistics Regulation very effectively into that group. I think it is fine.

Q111 **John Lamont:** On the same point that I made to John, beyond the role you play within the network, is there another role you should be playing in terms of monitoring the use of statistics?

Ed Humpherson: We monitor the use of statistics all the time, come rain or shine, during elections and outside of election times.

Q112 **John Lamont:** Particularly with the EIC.

Ed Humpherson: We have very good, regular interactions with EIC staff and with the chair, who was, of course, the chair of the CSPL. I will go and say, "This is something that we are dealing with and seeing. I thought you would be interested to know about it from a CSPL point of view." In fact, I had a conversation with the chair yesterday, and I spoke about a case that we published last Thursday, so it is a very constant flow.

Q113 **John Lamont:** Going back to you, John, looking forward five years from now, how would you determine the success or failure of the EIC?

Sir John Pullinger: I go back to my CSPL-plus point. If we get to a place where some of the metrics around public trust are better, then in five years we would hope to be seeing some of those things turn around. If we get to a place where we are not drawing attention to enforcement gaps in the system, because it is not clear who should take action in particular situations of wrongdoing, and if we have a system where those who are regulators or are subject to regulation really have clarity about the landscape and don't find it confusing and contradictory in the way that it sometimes is now, those would be the three dimensions I would wish to look at.

Ed Humpherson: In five years' time, if I was called back here, I would like to be able to say, "Look at what the EIC has achieved with the codes of conduct in public authorities. Look at the impact that it has had with its independent letter to the Prime Minister on the landscape. Look at its



HOUSE OF COMMONS

efforts on education, both within public bodies but also within the wider public sphere.” Those are the things that would be the real tests.

Q114 **John Lamont:** Surely, the ultimate test is whether the public have greater faith in the process, and in politicians and people making decisions.

Ed Humpherson: We are all here for that. We have a theory of change, if you will, which is that doing these things will drive increases in what are currently very low levels of public confidence in institutions and in our political system. Yes, absolutely.

Q115 **John Lamont:** Ed, do you think that the EIC and other standards bodies are sufficiently independent of Government and others?

Ed Humpherson: Yes, I do. I look at all of them, and I see, both in their construction and formal set-up, but also, more particularly, in the way that they are led, people who are acting independently and are willing to use their voice and to speak up about things that they are concerned about, which is the essence of independence.

Sir John Pullinger: I will talk specifically from the Electoral Commission perspective here. The independence of the Electoral Commission is an absolutely vital element for the public to be confident that the commission is acting impartially and in the interests of voters. It is vitally important for parties to feel that every party is being treated consistently by the commission in its interactions.

For that reason, the current power that enables the Government of the day to issue guidance to the Electoral Commission on its strategy and policy is inconsistent with independence. The Representation of the People Bill has its Second Reading here next week, and I hope that the Government take that opportunity to repeal this legislation, because independence is necessary for the Electoral Commission to function well, and this power is inconsistent with that independence.

Q116 **Chair:** We have talked a lot about restoring public faith in politics. How can the EIC measure that?

Sir John Pullinger: We have a whole series of tracker surveys that have a very long history of data, which enables us to track the ebbs and flows of confidence. Certainly, from the commission’s point of view, we look at some quite precise metrics that help us understand where the gaps and challenges are. As a board, we regularly discuss that when we are thinking about where we should make our priorities. We can draw on that evidence, as well as the evidence from the reviews that we do after every election. We will get the experience of voters. We will get the experience of candidates. We will get the experience of electoral administrators. We will gather the data and think, “What does it tell us?”

While I am on that, in the last few years that I have been in this job, the data point that has gone up the scale has been the abuse and



intimidation of candidates standing for election, and other campaigners. It is that data that has led us to the conclusion that this is a really serious problem that we need to do something about if we are to have confidence in our system. We are picking that up through a code of conduct, through the Speaker's Conference and elsewhere. We have the tools to do this job and to test whether we are doing it well.

Ed Humpherson: Can I just add something? I am afraid you cannot ask a question about measurement of somebody who works for the Office for Statistics Regulation without me getting all enthusiastic. There are a good range of measures. John has mentioned some of them. There is the British election study, which surveys people after each general election. There is the British social attitudes survey. There is a thing called the veracity index, run by Ipsos MORI, which asks citizens who they trust to tell the truth. There is a whole range of measures. At present, they are all pointing to a rather concerning conclusion, so you would look at those things.

I would also pick up something that operates at a slightly higher level. There is a very good new measure of life in the UK produced by a think-tank, Carnegie UK. One of the domains that it looks at is citizens' sense of democratic wellbeing, or whether they feel as though the democratic system that they observe represents their interests and whether they can influence it. That has been showing quite low scores.

That integrates lots of things. It does not ask people directly about trust in the political system. It is asking more broadly about their sense of their democratic stake, and I would look at that as well.

At present, all those things are showing quite an unhappy picture and, over time, we would need to track those and see them improve.

Q117 **Luke Taylor:** Just picking up a couple of things, Ed, you have given me one in your last sentence there. John, first of all, you talked about the independence of the Electoral Commission and the importance of that. If that is re-established and given much greater importance, is there an opportunity for the Electoral Commission to revisit some of the politically driven decisions that were made under the previous Government—for example, voter ID—and then say whether that is necessary and needed, or is impeding people taking part in the electoral process?

We have seen the statistics about the lowest turnout in the previous general election. With that newfound independence, should the Electoral Commission be looking into how political decisions may well have impacted the progress and the running of our elections?

Sir John Pullinger: The first thing to say is that, notwithstanding the legislation for the strategy and policy statement, the Electoral Commission has been determined to continue acting independently, and I would not still be sitting here if I felt that I was unable to act without fear or favour in the broader interests of voters.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of what we will do, we will use the opportunity that we have after every election to monitor how well it has gone, and to look at those areas where there have been problems. We are particularly concerned about problems that are getting in the way of people's participation and will continue to draw attention to those.

On voter ID, we will highlight where there are particular groups of people who are being disadvantaged by the voter ID requirement, and look very carefully at the changes to the requirement that are in the Representation of the People Bill to judge whether they are supporting that. One voter turned away is one too many, and we will want to be testing whether the electoral system lives up to that necessity.

Q118 Luke Taylor: Ed, you mentioned at the end there the study that suggested that people do not feel like democratic institutions are serving their value. We are all watching the news, and the fact that we are being broadcast suggests that people might be screaming at their televisions and talking about the very obvious major cases that we are seeing at the moment around misconduct in public office. Without wanting to go into too much detail, is a lot of that mistrust going to be driven by high-profile cases of unelected individuals acting inappropriately in public office? How do you see that interacting with the Nolan principles? You spoke of there not needing to be a revision or an update, but if we have such a news feed of bad behaviour, surely they are not working.

Ed Humpherson: It is really good that you have come back to me on this, because I was reflecting, after I gave that answer, on something that I should have emphasised. A really core principle for us is that the goal is not trust per se; the goal is well-placed trust. We don't want people to put their confidence in statistics that are not reliable or not high quality. For that reason, all of our work is about encouraging the production and use of statistics to be trustworthy—to be worthy of trust.

That really speaks to your point about what people can read and hear about current cases. People might be saying, "Here is a system where some of the actors are not worthy of trust." We don't want people to place their trust in that environment. Absolutely, the standards system is here to prevent those things happening, and to call them out when they do.

This distinction between not seeking trust per se, but seeking for people to have well-placed trust because the system is trustworthy, is absolutely fundamental. I should have clarified that. We don't want to just get those numbers up, come what may; we want to get those numbers up because the system is trustworthy.

Q119 Sam Carling: Just to go back to a couple of the questions that we were asking around the role of the EIC, I wondered, John, if you could give some thoughts on whether the fact that the EIC will be taking on quite a cross-cutting strategic role across standards could create duplication with the Electoral Commission on those issues around elections, or possibly



end up splitting strategy and delivery of that strategy and operations into different organisations.

Sir John Pullinger: I don't think it will, because it isn't as though the EIC has any particular powers that intersect with the Electoral Commission. It is looking system-wide at whether the whole thing works. I see it more as supporting us to properly use the powers that Parliament has given us, and holding us to account to some extent, which is what some of the previous CSPL reports did, but also giving us the benefit of the broader knowledge that it has.

I would describe the existing landscape as confusing. There is always a risk that if you put an extra player into the room, it becomes more confusing, but in this case the design has been good. It has been designed to be a network that functions better because all the parts fit together, rather than a confusing place where you have lots of bodies that really don't talk to each other very creatively.

Your question is a good one, and we need to watch how it plays out, but if it goes the way that it looks like it is going, in the way that CSPL went, I would see it as a positive extra player in the room, rather than a player in the room that could interfere with the clarity of exercise of functions that bodies such as the Electoral Commission and the OSR have.

Q120 **Sam Carling:** That is a really helpful perspective. In another answer just now, you also talked about having the powers and tools that you need already for a lot of your work, including being able to set up codes of practice and suchlike, but what teeth do you have if a political party or campaign group, or anyone, just decides to ignore those codes of practice and is not acting in good faith?

Sir John Pullinger: In the particular field of political finance, which is our primary area of operation, we have the power to investigate and to sanction political parties or non-party campaigners that break the rules. The rules are primarily around the transparency of donations and expenditure at election time.

Certainly, if you look through the history, there has been a very significant stream of cases that have generated public recognition that there are sanctions there. The Representation of the People Bill revisits some of that and looks at how we can make the sanctions regime more coherent and have more bite, with bigger sanctions, and I look forward to the parliamentary debate on that.

We welcome those provisions in the Bill. Some of them need some tweaking, because there are areas where we have identified, along with CSPL, loopholes, particularly around the risk of foreign money coming into the system. Checks on individual donors need to be strengthened, and the Bill suggests that they will. Proportionate checks on unincorporated associations are another area that the Bill tackles quite well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The area where we would like to see a strengthening is on donations made by companies. Again, the Bill tackles this area but it proposes a measure at the moment that we think is a little weak, and we would prefer the bite to be that companies should not donate more into politics than they have profit. Profit is linked to tax, and if you are paying tax in Britain you are a British company. Other measures might give less clarity to the public, but the sanctions around those kinds of things are very significant for the Bill.

I know that this Committee is going to come back, and we will be in this room talking about it again, but there are sanctions there at the moment. There are loopholes and weaknesses in the level of sanctions. The Bill is hoping to address some of those. We have drawn attention to them. CSPL has drawn attention to them. This Committee has drawn attention to them. The test now will be for the Government and Parliament to make sure that the Bill, when it is passed, really does follow through, and that the sanctions achieve the objectives that your question suggests we need.

Q121 Sam Carling: Thank you; that is really helpful. Just to move on to a slightly different area, in your written evidence, you have talked quite a bit about how the Electoral Commission works to ensure public confidence in the democratic system as a whole. Can you give us more of a sense of how you do that and how you are measuring your success?

Sir John Pullinger: There are two areas—one very practical and one a little more strategic. The very practical area is that, in advance of every election, we will be doing public awareness campaigns. We are cranking up now for the May elections, and the team is very busy working on the general elections in Scotland and Wales, and the quite significant number and variety of elections that we have taking place in England.

A key part of us giving the public confidence is giving them real clarity around how you register to vote, where your polling stations are, and all of those kinds of things, working in concert with local authorities to make sure that there is a good understanding.

In terms of confidence, there are very specific campaigns, such as those targeted in the area of, “Your vote is yours alone”, to give people the confidence that they can vote in secret. They should not be subject to any kind of coercion by another person. We consider that to be very vital. We get good feedback on those. That is something that we do at each election time, because that is when it is in people’s minds and that is the moment when you need to give them that confidence.

We talked earlier about some of the metrics. The metric around public confidence in whether elections are well run is and remains very high. It is one of the best metrics and we would worry if that were to dip, and so we will always be looking at that.



More strategically, we see education as being the critical thing for public confidence, because we are aware from our research among young people in particular that there is a very high level of desire to know more about politics and understand it, and yet there is a massive gap at the moment in terms of people's understanding—and the participation of younger people in particular, but also more generally.

Education is the most obvious way to fill that gap, particularly in schools and in further education; but also more generally in civic society, thinking about ways that we can work with community organisations and others to bring about the realisation that to be able to vote is to have a voice in the way that your community is run, that that voice is real and matters, and that if you want to say something, politics is the way to get it said in a way that will make action happen. The challenge then, of course, is for politicians to make sure that those decisions are made in the interests of voters, and voters then see that.

Q122 Sam Carling: You mentioned there the statistics on how well run elections are and how people feel about that, which is really important, but there is also, as you say, how people feel about the democratic system, trust in politics, and the process more generally, where there is a lot more concern. When measuring your success, which set of metrics do you primarily focus on?

Sir John Pullinger: We look at quite a wide range of metrics. The metric about people's confidence in whether elections have been well run is an important, high-level one, but you see very significant differences among people who have voted and people who do not vote. The concern about participation rates dropping off makes us really want to focus our attention on those who are not voting and why.

Some of that is very much down to lack of trust, or lack of feeling that there is anyone who represents them, or that there is someone out there who will be likely to act in their interests if they were elected. That then tempts us to start working with Committees such as this and think, "How do we make people understand politics better, so that they have more confidence in it and want to take part?"

We would also look at things much more precisely. Public confidence in the transparency of political finance is one that we would look at very closely, and that is one of the worst metrics that we look at. It is extraordinarily low, and yet we have, arguably, one of the most transparent systems in the world. As you know, we collect metrics on donations and expenses pretty rigorously, and we make sure that they are there for the public to scrutinise. The problem there is that the public then see it, and if they see things that they don't like, they want something to happen as a consequence. It is that element that we would want to highlight: what is going on with the pattern of donations at the moment that is causing the public to distrust it? This data helps us home in on the particular points.



I talked earlier about the data that we also collect from candidates, and abuse, intimidation and threats is a particular element there. We are working with the Jo Cox Foundation, which announced yesterday work that it is doing with the devolved Administrations. We will think about who else we can work with to ensure that issues of concern, particularly relating to trust, are brought to public and parliamentary attention, and then we can have debates such as this about what then needs to happen.

Q123 Luke Taylor: We have talked about—you have used the quote already, because it is quite a good one—how statistics are the lifeblood of democratic debate, and the misuse of statistics results in an erosion of trust, not just in Government but also in all of politics. Do you have any examples of how that has been manifested in election campaigns, government statistics, or political parties pushing particular narratives? Is there anything that you have seen that has particularly concerned you?

Ed Humpherson: We operate on the basis that we want statistics to be the lifeblood of democracy and democratic debate. There are things that threaten that outcome, and we regard our code of practice as putting in place the safeguards to mitigate those threats. We have lots of examples of interventions that we have made to make sure that the safeguards work—the safeguards of appropriate use, of equality of access, of intelligent transparency, of trustworthiness, and of heads of profession.

I would not want to pick out any particular example as being more egregious than any others. We see, effectively, three types of misuse. The rarest is a straight-up error, when a reference to a statistic in public debate is erroneous. The second is a lack of transparency, where statistics are quoted but it would be very hard for a citizen or, indeed, another politician to verify where those numbers came from and what they mean. The third and probably most serious category is when a statistic is used in a misleading way.

I can give you examples of all three if that would help. An example of a straight-up error involved us writing to then Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2022, who said that there were more people in work after the pandemic than before. The letter that went to him said, "It is wrong to say that there are more people in work after the pandemic than before." We said, "That is wrong." It was an erroneous statement.

That is very rare. The vast majority of our cases are in the space of transparency. To give an example, the current Prime Minister, in his speech at the Labour party conference in 2024, referred to some progress that the Government were making on an aspect of the immigration system, and quoted a number. The number was correct; it was drawn appropriately from the statistical evidence, but the underlying data was not due to be published until November. At the point that he said it, it was not transparent because nobody could access the number that he was referring to. We wrote to the Prime Minister, highlighting the importance of using only numbers in the public domain. We worked with



the Home Office to require it to publish the data promptly because he had put them into the public domain.

A fairly recent example of misleadingness happened in the second half of last year, when the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that water pollution was worse in Scotland than in England, and then presented some numbers to back up this claim. This was referred to us. We looked into it and, while the numbers that were used were correct—they passed the first test—and were transparent in the sense that anybody could access them, if you looked at the full range of evidence on the question of water quality in England as against Scotland, you would not conclude that water pollution was worse in Scotland, so we said that this was a very significant risk of being a misleading presentation of statistics.

We see examples of that all the time. In the current year, we have handled 141 cases, so we are quite active. In previous years, it has been over 200 cases, so there are a lot of examples.

Can I say one final thing? I am sure that you have some follow-ups. Every one of these interventions has two effects. The first is that we want to clarify the use of those particular statistics in that particular context. In the examples that I have given, we stepped in to clarify, in that particular moment, what the appropriate use is of statistics. In a sense, that is correcting the risk of misunderstanding that issue.

More importantly, we make the intervention to reinforce the principles and the safeguards of having heads of profession in Departments, and chief analysts who are responsible for signing off the use of statistics. The intervention is not just on the particular issue, but is reinforcing a system of safeguards, and the latter is the more powerful intervention that we make.

Q124 Luke Taylor: Do you have any examples of good practice, where an organisation or a particular use of statistics has built trust? While we want to stop undermining trust with poor use of statistics, where have you seen that improved and done in a positive way?

Ed Humpherson: Can I give you two examples? One is on a specific thing, and the other is absolutely this systemic factor that I have just described. As for the specific issue, when the Treasury publishes the Budget, it publishes a document alongside it called "data sources". If you look at that document, right at the beginning, it says, "We do this to comply with the Office for Statistics Regulation's code of practice and intelligent transparency". For every number that is in the Budget, it discloses the source and says how it got to it. It is tremendous practice. It really reinforces the ability for people to scrutinise, understand and verify, so that is a very specific thing.

The general thing is that we did a review of intelligent transparency in Government last November. We had some case examples of good



practice, one of which was the Department for Business and Trade, which has established an internal committee, in effect, to fact-check its own use of statistics. Anything that goes out from that Department will have been through this review panel made up of its analysts and statisticians to make sure that it is not misrepresenting statistics on business and trade. That is really good, strong practice, and exactly the kind of safeguard that we are here to reinforce.

Q125 Luke Taylor: You mentioned very briefly the powers or the practice that you have to highlight both poor use and, in this case, positive use. Do you have sufficient powers, audience or visibility to jockey on the rest to see that best practice and to see where positive trust is being generated by those behaviours?

Ed Humpherson: Yes and no. The “yes” bit is that, in all of the cases that I have mentioned, and in many others, I can demonstrate how our intervention has produced this dual impact of clarifying the particular issue and reinforcing a system of good practice. In that sense, we have a really good, clear story of impact, but your question was not quite on impact. It was also on visibility and whether our voice is sufficiently heard.

There is always more to do there. As a Committee, I have been before you in the context of the ONS and its performance, and I made the point very openly to you as a Committee that, No. 1, we made all the right judgments at the right time, but, No. 2, we probably did not convey them with enough clarity and directness. That is an ongoing challenge. I would be humble about that. We need to do more.

Luke Taylor: Let us not get into the whole ONS conversation again, but thank you. You have answered the questions that I had.

Q126 Peter Lamb: Mr Humpherson, you have specified that you believe that Ministers should be required to comply with the ministerial code, and not merely be mindful of it. Could you set out your reasons for believing that that should be the case?

Ed Humpherson: Being mindful has an air of voluntarism and of, “This is something that you might want to consider, but it is really not that important.” Making Ministers comply, as we expect Departments and civil servants within Departments to, will both symbolically strengthen the commitment among Ministers to the appropriate use of statistics, but also give us more leverage when concerns are raised. It would be a really good change to the ministerial code to say, “Not just be mindful, but comply with the code of practice for statistics,” as we expect from other public servants.

Q127 Peter Lamb: This Committee has dealt with various questions around the ministerial code over the last year and a half, including at the request of the Speaker. The ministerial code is, of course, the Prime Minister’s own code that he sets out. It is within his power to modify or enforce it. In order for it to be something that Ministers are required to comply with,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

would you envisage further changes to that? Perhaps the document becomes a document of the House rather than of the Prime Minister.

Ed Humpherson: I would support anything that can reinforce these standards, although, to be honest, my ambition is constrained simply to getting appropriate recognition for the code of practice for statistics in the ministerial code. The strengthening of the ministerial code itself is more for this Committee to take forward.

Q128 Peter Lamb: It is the mechanism for ensuring that the statistical part is protected that I am really inquiring about. One of the concerns that this Committee has had, or that some of its members have had, talking to you and to your colleagues in regulatory roles over the last year and a half, has been that it seems that much of our system is still heavily dependent upon the belief that everyone in it is of good mind and intention, and has a sense of shame.

You are the first person we have come across who seems to believe that there should be some further strengthening in these areas in terms of mandating Ministers rather than simply requiring them to act in good faith and in line with the rules. To what do we attribute the fact that you have taken a stronger position on this compared to your colleagues?

Ed Humpherson: Maybe I am just a miserable old cynic; I don't know. The reason for that is possibly that we have worked in this field for a long time. We have built up a regime for the appropriate production and use of statistics, and what we see is that good, well-intentioned policymakers can be tempted into using statistics inappropriately, not because they don't have good intentions, but because they are in an environment of media pressure or a 24-hour news cycle, or they feel that they need their message to cut through. Policymakers are in a difficult and challenging environment.

For that reason, simply appealing to good intentions will work in many situations, but in others it will not be sufficient because the temptations are there to use evidence in a way that is erroneous, not transparent or misleading. That is why our starting point is, "There are threats and you need safeguards against those threats." That is the whole system that we run.

I really reject the idea—and I know that you did not say this, but other people might—that our system has assumptions that it is all about good chaps. In a sense, it is almost the reverse. We assume that people with good intentions can misuse statistics despite themselves, and that is why we have the system that we have.

Q129 Peter Lamb: Should there be greater regulation in this area for other public officeholders rather than simply Members of the Government?

Ed Humpherson: The system that we have for statistics does not really single out Ministers. Statistics are a product of a system of actors. There are statisticians who compile the statistics. There are policymakers who



decide to use them to justify a policy. There are the communications professionals who put together the messaging. There are the Ministers who, as it were, speak the words and represent them in Parliament and in the media. There is a whole range of people. We do not really single out Ministers specifically. We want the whole system to work effectively and appropriately.

Q130 Peter Lamb: There are no safeguards in dealing with others. If I was to start spouting off statistics that I had made up or was misquoting, whereas a Minister would be subject to being required to comply with the ministerial code, it does not have a level playing field there for the Government compared to other individuals in public office.

Ed Humpherson: I would hope that, after meeting me, you would be so intimidated that it would never cross your mind to do such a terrible act. If you, as a Member of Parliament, were to start misusing a statistic—and there are examples of this—the first thing that we would do is to contact your office and say, “We have seen this. We do not think that is right.” We will raise it with you. The initial approach would be informal, but if it persists, we would make our view public. We do not distinguish in the case of a Member of Parliament. It is the statistics that matter, not the person who is doing the speaking.

Chair: Thank you very much. Unless there are any remaining members of the Committee who would like to come in, that concludes our first panel. Thank you both for your comprehensive responses and for your time today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Daniel Greenberg and Paula Sussex.

Q131 Chair: For our second panel, we now welcome the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Daniel Greenberg CB, and the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, Paula Sussex CBE. Good morning to you both. Thank you for your time. Could you both just introduce yourselves briefly for the record?

Paula Sussex: Good morning. I am Paula Sussex. I am the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Daniel Greenberg: I am Daniel Greenberg, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

Q132 Chair: Thank you both for being here this morning. For my opening question I will start with you, Daniel. What do you see as the purpose of an effective standards system? What is your current assessment of the system that we have here in the UK?

Daniel Greenberg: The only purpose of the standards system is trust between the public and the political class generally, and between the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

public and the establishment. Everything that we do here by way of maintaining standards can sensibly be benchmarked against, “Does it enhance trust? Does it damage trust?” I honestly cannot do better by way of elaboration than to stick with that word, “trust”.

Paula Sussex: I mostly agree with Daniel. Trust is enormously important to us at PHSO, but we also need benchmarks, a way of measuring and defining it. Without banging on for too long, Nolan is great. It is comprehensive and very clear.

To go to your second point, what is our view of the system of standards at the moment? We can all conclude that there has been an implementation gap. The standards are there. They are clear, but we do not believe—this is a matter of public record for PHSO—that the way in which they have been operationalised throughout the wider public service has been as good as it could have been. In 2023, we called for a review of how that has been done in health.

I am very happy to talk more at length about what we see as the implementation gap, from which we potentially need to take lessons for the implementation, as we go forward, of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

Q133 **Chair:** Do you want to elaborate now on the implementation gap?

Paula Sussex: I am very happy to do that. We see some of this evidence coming through in our casework. Of course, we are just looking at health here. Looking at the interim findings of the review, which was research-based, the dominant themes that came through as to deficiencies in the way in which it has been implemented in health relate to the culture of the organisation, not having these standards at the forefront of everybody’s minds; the inconsistency of applying the duty of candour; and the lack of training. I look forward to the review being finalised. It will give us a clue as to how we go forward.

Q134 **Chair:** Just more broadly, you mentioned the Nolan principles. Earlier in the session we heard that there is perhaps an argument for a rearticulation of the Nolan principles in the current environment that politicians are operating in, with social media and pressures that did not necessarily exist when they were first codified, while giving the view that the central substance behind the principles is as relevant as ever. Daniel, do you have a view on that? Is there a need to re-articulate some of those principles for the modern age?

Daniel Greenberg: I do not see it. I do not deny that others may see it. The Committee on Standards is likely to have a view on this; it is possibly better placed than I am, but I think the Nolan principles work. They are clear. As you say, Chair, they are still clearly relevant to the pressures that you face, albeit the pressures are different.

I do parliamentary outreach and I see it as a very important part of my role to discuss with the public, students and others their view of how they



can trust the institutions. I accept they are not empirical benchmarks in the way that others are, but as benchmarks of trust, students and others seem to get them very clearly: objectivity, selflessness and even integrity, which is quite wide. Again, people get it and understand it. My feeling in my own work is that they are serviceable, they are well understood and they cover what is necessary.

Paula Sussex: I agree. They are absolutely standing the test of time. Going back to something that you might have been alluding to in the first session, Chair, we live in a communications age. I hesitate to say that they might need a bit of a marketing relaunch, but there is something about the way in which we communicate these throughout the nation. They are solid. They are absolutely solid.

Q135 **Chair:** The Government have fulfilled their manifesto commitment to create the Ethics and Integrity Commission by replacing the Committee on Standards in Public Life with the EIC. What are your views on that change? Daniel, would you like to start?

Daniel Greenberg: First, I very strongly welcome the establishment of the commission. One of the things that I sense we need in terms of enhancing trust in standards generally is more coherence, more feeling that there is an overarching sense or a holistic understanding of how standards are applied across the whole of the public service.

If I could give you an example, Chair, when Members of Parliament ask me, as they occasionally have done, whether it is proper for them to write a letter in support of a national honour for a constituent who has been a donor to their campaign, I say that I do not think it is proper because it would not be in accordance with selflessness and objectivity, and they do not do it. It could be argued that that very clear principle is somehow undermined if, for example, political parties are seen to be rewarding major donors to the parties with peerages. If that were seen to be happening, that could be seen to be undermining the message that I am giving.

I welcome the fact that we now have a body that is able to take an overarching view of principles such as selflessness, objectivity, integrity and honesty, as well as openness and transparency, and indeed leadership, and to give some direction and coherence to the application of those principles across the whole of the public service.

I very strongly welcome the establishment of the commission. It will be able to build on the work of its predecessor, which was also very important and highly valued work, and it will massively contribute towards trust, if it is able to give a feeling of coherence to public service standards as a whole.

Q136 **Chair:** You have quite eloquently set out how you think it can improve things in terms of providing clarity and coherence to the standards system. Does it provide opportunities for simplification?



Daniel Greenberg: It is probably a bit too early to tell how much that is possible. Certainly, the Committee on Standards, as your Committee will know, before the election produced a landscape report. Again, the Committee on Standards will be able to tell you more about that, if you want.

There was definitely a feeling in that report that the overarching standards system is very difficult for people to understand. I very much agree with what Paula said a few moments ago about the importance of communicating clearly to the public what the system is. Complexity is, obviously, a barrier to clear communication. I would not want to prejudge how much they can do. Is it something that we should all be looking at, and that the commission should be able to help with? I hope so.

Paula Sussex: I very much agree with that. Going back to implementation and operationalisation, with slight apologies for the programme management language, the devil is always in execution.

The EIC can take a proactive rather than reactive role of translating the standards. To build on Daniel's point, yes, absolutely, it can work with all the related bodies—in a sense, this is exactly what you as a Committee are trying to do—and ask, "What is your part in this? How do you knit into the creation of this culture?" where a public servant, a chief executive of a trust, a DG, a CEO or an accounting officer thinks first, "Is this the right thing to do? Does this feel right?" The focus is on building that language rather than, "Something has gone wrong. What do we do? What is the offence against which we assess what has happened?"

Q137 **Chair:** That is helpful. That touches on some reflections from the last session. There seems to be quite a delicate balance, in terms of restoring public trust in politics and our institutions, between preventing bad behaviour and, when bad behaviour happens, ensuring that the public can see that there is a punishment for that bad behaviour.

This is a question for you both, really. From your respective positions with the Government and the EIC, have we got that balance right between focusing on prevention and making sure that remediation acts as a deterrent and is part of restoring faith in our institutions?

Paula Sussex: It is a very difficult balance, public trust and confidence. Again, it is being played out in the communication age, which makes it even more complex.

I have been with the organisation since August. Two particular cases stick in my mind, one that is a negative and one that perhaps is more positive.

One is the case that was quite fundamental to the duty of candour in health, which is the case of a gentleman called Will Powell and the avoidable death of his son Robbie. Thirty-six years ago, there was clear evidence of falsification of evidence in health and wider as it related to the avoidable death. Through relentless advocacy, that has given us—it is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

also a bit of a north star for me—the duty of candour as it potentially comes down the road after the Bill is made an Act.

The second one—this is more recent, and it points to how the public can have trust in the state—is an example that we have made some communication of, which relates to the Windrush compensation scheme. A particular victim, a gentleman called Thomas Tobierre, persisted and, after local resolution by the Home Office was not satisfactory, took his complaint to us at the ombudsman. Working with the Home Office, we identified that he was right. There was a flaw in the scheme that related to compensation and taking into account private pension loss. Working with him, the Home Office and the Windrush commissioner, we were all able to say, “We need to address this and change the scheme.” In so far as the public have observed this, they should see that as raising trust. The state will listen. Multiple units of the state will listen to a citizen who had faith that someone would listen. If the citizen is right, we will change the system; we will listen, to the benefit of others.

You can have stories of some remediation, which, while they have an unhappy end, create some good, but it is also important to celebrate the good when it is happening in public service.

Q138 **Chair:** Daniel, do you have views on whether we are getting it right in terms of the focus on prevention versus remediation?

Daniel Greenberg: I speak only for my very narrow role within the House, but I recognise and reflect what Paula has just said. I would add a word to the celebration of the good. It is also encouragement of the good. This is part of what Paula is describing, but when I took up my role I felt it was really important that the standards system in the House is not seen as a series of things not to get wrong or a series of breaches waiting to happen, so to speak. It should be seen as a very inspiring and practical agenda or manifesto, even, for individual politicians as to how they should show that they do what they do really well.

As you may know, Chair, I run Nolan principles in practice seminars with staff for Members here. I work on helping them to see how so much of what they do is really putting those principles into practice in a very positive, inspiring and trust-inducing way.

This is not saying whether we have the balance right or wrong because it is not necessarily a binary sum, but we should always put as much emphasis as possible on encouraging and displaying what good practice looks like, of which there is an enormous amount around in the House and elsewhere in public service, as well as effectively and properly enforcing sanctions against bad behaviour.

Q139 **Chair:** The media are just always a little more interested when things go wrong than when things go right, are they not?

Daniel Greenberg: I have to say, Chair, I have actually found the media quite fair. Of course, “MP sits in her office doing her work” is not going to



be front-page news. I have found that the media, when given helpful and solid information or stories about things working well, do their best. That is my impression.

Q140 John Lamont: Good morning to you both. Daniel, my first few questions will be directed to you. The EIC now has a more formal role in terms of co-ordinating the network of standards bodies. Previously, you took part in the more informal arrangements of the CSPL, co-ordinated through the Chair. How do you reflect on the more formal process? Do you prefer the structure now compared with what happened before?

Daniel Greenberg: It is too early, I think, to give any kind of mature judgment on that. Perhaps I can answer your question more by reference to my expectations and impressions than any kind of judgment after the event.

I think it is a good thing that we have not set out to try to simplify the arrangements, as the Chair mentioned before, by creating another overlapping body. That makes a lot of sense. The resourcing and capacity of the body is not a matter for me; it is something that you will be examining for yourselves.

The one thing that I have stressed at the beginning is that I very much welcome the opportunity to collaborate and co-operate with the commission. I think it has enormous potential for bringing much-needed coherence to public standards generally. What I have to ensure is that I maintain your independence—Parliament's independence—as part of that process. At the end of the day, the commission is a creation of the Government; I am an Officer of the House; and I collaborate and co-operate with the commission enthusiastically, very much expecting it to do a lot of good, but always remembering that I represent the interests of you, the self-regulating House, not of the Government.

Q141 John Lamont: That is helpful. Is there a wider range of bodies that should be included within the network?

Daniel Greenberg: Again, it is not for me to say. The only thing that I would say is that, whether it is you or the commission, when you are deciding which bodies to add or whether there are any bodies to draw within the network, I think the overarching question for you is, again, "Will it enhance trust and coherence?" I am not going to look at a body and say, "Therefore that," "Yes, that," or "No," but I would hope that that will be your guiding principle in discussing that with the commission, and I hope it would be the commission's guiding principle in determining who to bring within its network.

Q142 John Lamont: Paula, would you like the PHSO to be included?

Paula Sussex: We already work very closely with Doug and his team. Quite possibly it would be sensible to join the network, particularly as we move forward on the Bill, but we work very closely with him at working level and at my level.



Q143 **John Lamont:** What would be the advantage for you formally joining the network?

Paula Sussex: In other parts of our remit, John, we are working as closely as we can. I always describe it as the jigsaw. It is about working out where you can achieve—it is a terrible word—symbiosis. In other parts for me, that is CQC, NAO or GIAA. Here, it would be a similar thing to work out where we can get that “one plus one equals three” and to be cognisant of how we all interact. Daniel, I think, does not have a contact centre—I am going to guess you don’t, Daniel. But when we have members of the public ringing us to say, “I have this complaint. Where do I go?” it enables us to help them navigate the system better.

Q144 **Sam Carling:** Daniel, you touched on this topic just now, but I will ask the question anyway. We have a set-up now where the EIC has been set up and has had its scope and terms of reference set by Government, but it has a remit to cover standards all across public life, including in Parliament. Is it appropriate for a Government-sponsored body to have a remit over Parliament like that?

Daniel Greenberg: A lot will depend on what is meant by remit and what is understood by remit. I am sorry to be predictably boring in this session by constantly repeating coherence and trust, but coherence really is what is lacking in relation to trust and public standards. Any separatist attitude on my part would be incompatible with embracing the opportunity for greater coherence.

But you are right. I touched on this in the answer that I gave before. It is very important that Parliament collaborates and participates in this exercise, recognising all the time that Parliament is and must be independent, that the House of Commons must be self-regulating, but of course it does that, in a way, by appointing me and giving me operational independence to show that MPs are not marking their own homework and there is an element of independence, but within a constitutional framework of self-regulation and independence from Government.

Perhaps the best way I can answer your question is to say that it will be a constant balance and I have no reason to believe it is a balance that cannot be struck and maintained.

Q145 **Chair:** Thank you both very much. Winding up this section on the EIC, I am interested in what your views are in terms of what success and failure look like for the EIC.

Paula Sussex: Like all of us, we would like to see an increase in, as colleagues before were saying, the very many ways of measuring public trust. If we see that nudging north, which is what we all want, we should hopefully be able to see the cause and effect of the EIC.

In the meantime—I will borrow your phrase, Daniel—it is about coherence. This is the jigsaw that I talk about. There should be no gap, underlap or overlap. That is something that certainly can be achieved. If



you took all of the bodies in this hearing currently in the network, they need to be clear as to how they interact, what their roles are and how they can help each other.

Daniel Greenberg: I very much agree with that. I would add only this. In terms of success and failure measurements, I often say to Members of Parliament that, in the same way that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference, the opposite of trust is not suspicion but disengagement. We have a massive problem in this country, which we share with many countries around the world today, of disengagement on the part of many of the people who we want to be most involved in our political life.

If I were asked to advise, in any sense, the commission on what we should be regarding as one of the indicators of success, it would simply be engagement. Do people think it matters? Are people coming along? If you will permit me, Chair, that is “engagement” meaning two-way engagement. In Parliament, we are sometimes quite good at communicating, but that is not engagement; that is communication. I would like to think we will find ways, through the commission and in other ways as well, of making real two-way engagement so that people feel ownership of the system as well as trust in it.

Q146 **Chair:** I agree. Listening is a very underrated skill in politics, I have found. Thank you both very much. I appreciate that some of the distrust that we are seeing is being played out across a lot of western democracies at the moment. Given your experience, Daniel, are there any examples from other countries where they have had low levels of trust in Government or public institutions and, through changes to the standards landscape, they have been able to show, through the kind of metrics that some panellists in the first session were talking about, that upward trajectory or to turn the dial in improving public confidence? Is there anyone we can look to?

Daniel Greenberg: I don’t know. I imagine that you have had evidence from the Constitution Unit at UCL; I am sure you are in touch with them. The Constitution Unit did some very important work on public trust not that long ago and produced some very valuable reports. I would not be surprised if they did some comparative analysis as part of that. They may well be able to help you on that. I agree that it would be interesting.

Q147 **Chair:** I have a question for Paula now. You have talked a little about how you are engaging with the EIC, but how do you see the PHSO’s role in relation to upholding standards and trust in Government and public life a bit more widely?

Paula Sussex: The first thing to say is that we are not technically a standards body, but we do operate in the general understanding of it. This Committee particularly will know that our prime focus is on maladministration and injustice. You will also know that our intent and, indeed, our current focus is absolutely moving towards where that is



having a systemic effect and the impact that we want to have on public service.

We attend to standards that relate to performance and competence, but honesty is a really important part of that. If you look at our principles of good administration, back to Daniel's point about coherence, you will certainly see quite some overlap with some of the Nolan principles, recast. It is hugely important to us.

The duty of candour, again if it comes through in the Bill, is going to be extremely important to us. We will be part of operationalising it. Mostly, the discussions that we have had with Doug and his team are about how we can work with them and support them as they draft the guidance for the codes of conduct. It is a similar exercise to the work that we did with complaints standards in health and in Government.

Q148 Sam Carling: Before the 2024 election, the Standards Committee described the parliamentary standards landscape in a report as being complicated but having "a logic behind the complexity". Daniel, could you give us a sense of whether the system is well enough understood first by people within Parliament and by the general public more broadly?

Daniel Greenberg: Do I think it is well enough understood? No, I don't. As you say, the Committee on Standards went into considerable detail about the complexity of the system and, to be honest, it would be astonishing if it were well understood either internally or externally. The Chair early on in the session raised the question of simplification, and I agree that is something we should constantly be keeping an eye on.

The other part of the picture is education. We have done a fair amount within Parliament to try to improve the amount of information that we disseminate. Paula mentioned in her evidence the importance of sending people in the right direction when they contact you and you are not the right port of call. That is really important. We also get a lot of communications that are not something that I can do anything about. It is really important never to say to somebody, "That is not for me. Go away." You should try to say, "That is not for me. Go away and here are some places you might go to." If you decide that no one can help somebody, it is also quite helpful to communicate that.

We are doing what we can. Parliament is doing what it can in terms of information and dissemination. The Committee on Standards definitely had that in mind when it produced its report. Do we have a system where I could say to you, "Yes, it is fine. Everybody knows what is going on"? Of course not, no.

Q149 Sam Carling: No, that is very helpful. Off the back of that and some of the earlier comments that you made, does there need to be some more co-ordination in standards and reporting regimes across Parliament, Government and other areas of public life? I am particularly thinking about the interaction between the ministerial code and the Government



compared to parliamentary standards and how they mesh together.

Daniel Greenberg: As a general principle, yes, as I have said, that is definitely one of the things that I am hoping will come out from the commission—that they will be able to provide a degree of coherence.

In relation to the alignment of some of the rules, which would definitely make it simpler and easier for people to understand, that is something that I have been trying to advance since I took up the role. In successive annual reports I have had to admit that I have had less success than I would like. This is something that I report on regularly to the Committee on Standards and that I hope the commission will provide an opportunity to pursue. Yes, where there is opportunity for alignment, we should be taking it.

Q150 **Chair:** Both of your offices are identifying where mistakes and transgressions have taken place. That is having quite a negative impact on trust in politics. Daniel, the number of inquiries that your office carries out and the number of times you have made the step of referring a matter to the Standards Committee is very low. Why is there that big gap between public perception and findings of transgressions?

Daniel Greenberg: The starting point is that my remit in opening public investigations is set out in the House's Standing Orders. The process for it is set out, again, and published in the interests of transparency in the House-approved procedural protocol. That includes, very clearly, the matters that I can and cannot investigate.

In summary, I can look at complaints only if they are within my remit, if I have been given sufficient evidence, which can be an issue, and if an investigation is justified and proportionate. Proportionality is an important issue. Of course, the House has given me powers to rectify a large number of cases. Again, this is done openly on the website for the public and everybody to see. Where I decide that a breach is minor or inadvertent, I have power to rectify not all but most kinds of breaches, if the Member agrees to a rectification. Those never go to the Committee. I see those as success stories because, in my view, I would much rather reach a consensual position where a Member acknowledges that there may have been a minor or inadvertent failure, apologises to the House through me and agrees a package of rectification measures to prevent recurrence. To me, as a regulator, that is what success looks like.

It is important not to measure success, even in relation to the implementation or enforcement, by how many reports into wrongdoing the committee is asked to produce. Even before you get to rectification, the Standing Orders also give me power to give words of advice, which are confidential. Again, that is a power set out in the Standing Orders. There is quite a lot under the surface. Again, coming back to the Member's point about the importance of people understanding, perhaps we could do more to disseminate an understanding of all the activity that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

takes place within the standards regime here that does not result in a formal public investigation.

Q151 **Chair:** Paula, you sit at the end of a much larger complaints process for maladministration in Government, the NHS and other public bodies. Is there a similar gap between the public perception and the reality of maladministration across the UK?

Paula Sussex: The first thing to say is that it should not be missed from this hearing that we are seeing an unprecedented increase in the number of complaints coming to us—25% to 30% this year. Many of my colleagues in the other ombudsman schemes are seeing the same, which implies that there is a good deal of pain out there.

Do I think there is a gap? Possibly, yes. I go back to the communications age. Listening to Daniel, I was thinking that by definition we will be producing and closing more complaints. We usually uphold or partly uphold at a rate of about 60%. We are producing more. We are more productive. We are publishing more. Therefore, on our website there will be more tales of transgressions.

If you are a member of the public who is on our website day in, day out, you could believe that it is all a bit depressing, but we see many examples of very good practice. It goes back to how we communicate those examples and celebrate—that is the word that we use—where good public servants in both our jurisdictions are absolutely doing the right thing, monitoring the voice of the patient or the citizen at the board table or the non-executive table, and listening to their customer. It comes to us to make sure that we get those stories out as well as inevitably all the publications where public service has gone wrong. Balance in the communications is going to become even more important as there is even more business for the ombudsman.

Q152 **Chair:** I will bring in Markus in just a second. I just have a quick question of clarification. You mentioned a 25% or 30% increase in complaints. Is that predominantly in the NHS? What is the breakdown in terms of where you are seeing those?

Paula Sussex: The NHS is roughly 80% of our work, as I think you know, Chair. There is not a driver. It is quite spread across the jurisdictions. We are now doing a detailed piece of work to try to get underneath that increase in demand.

Q153 **Chair:** Do you have a timeframe for when that might be available? Will that be publicly available?

Paula Sussex: Yes, absolutely. It is being done iteratively during this year. Probably the first time that we will be able to publish something will be in June, but it will be finalised in early autumn.

Q154 **Chair:** You said that did not seem to be out of line with what you are hearing from other public bodies. Is that right?



Paula Sussex: It is exactly the same, certainly for the other ombudsmen. Anecdotally, we are in line with other bodies, but we are working closely with the other ombudsmen and the devolveds to see what insights they are taking.

Chair: As a Committee, we will be very interested in that work when it is available.

Q155 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Picking up on the Chair's questions about the gap between the public perception and the findings of transgression, this is a question for both of you. Are we seeing an increase in the number of people who are using or weaponising the standards system to malign people? As an MP, you get emails where people say that they have reported people to the police. The moment you have done that, there is a perception that there must be something wrong. People are using the idea that investigations have been opened based on initial evidence to undermine people. Is there a sense that that is happening? Are there any lessons to be learned about how we manage that?

Paula Sussex: I am happy to go first on that one, Daniel, if that is okay. We know that one of the drivers of demand is, of course, AI-enabled complaints. Generally, ChatGPT will enable complainants to throw the kitchen sink at it. Whenever there is a technology shift one way, there is always a technology response. It raises expectations. Of course, citizens know that AI is not infallible and it is to be questioned. It means we have to work harder to explain why this particular code, jurisdiction or point does not apply to your particular complaint.

Markus Campbell-Savours: I should declare an interest here. I was subject to a standards complaint when I was first elected, which was closed following a review very quickly. I just want to make that clear. That is part of my interest in this.

Daniel Greenberg: Chair, neither you nor the Member will expect me to comment on any particular case at all, but I would like to make some comments on the general principle underpinning the question.

I am not in a position to say whether there is an increase in what you describe as weaponisation, but I certainly can confirm that it is something that I take very seriously. It does happen, clearly. There are two things that are really important to say about it.

The first is that the process set out in the procedural protocol and in other ways for other sorts of complaint has to be able to move very quickly to identify vexatious or simply erroneous complaints. My emphasis there is on the word "quickly" because, clearly, for Members of Parliament, which is the only forum that I can speak about, the reputational damage of being under an investigation is significant. I must be able to deliver to Members a reassurance that their cases are being dealt with very fast—as fast as is consistent with proper management of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

evidence gathering—and that cases that are wholly without merit fall out of the system as quickly as possible.

The second point I would make is this. Having said that, the motive for a complaint is not and must not matter to me. I look at a complaint that has come forward and I treat every single complaint in exactly the same way, through the process set out by the House-approved procedural protocol. Ultimately, if a Member has breached the code, if a breach is found, that is what matters: that the House acknowledges and deals with the breach. The motive for the complaint is not a matter for me.

Those are my two reflections. It is very important to deal with vexatious allegations properly and quickly, but also motive is not a matter for me.

Q156 Markus Campbell-Savours: Can I ask a quick follow-up on that? Are you seeing an increase in the quantity of complaints being submitted in the same way that Paula has suggested that the PHSO is?

Daniel Greenberg: The statistics on this are set out in my annual report to the House. It is available to be seen. I cannot say that there is a consistent trend of massive increases in quite the same way that Paula has described. Some years we get blips. Three years ago, we had 5,500 complaints. The following year it was only 2,500 complaints. Last year, it was back up to 3,000. There is a little bit of danger in trying to identify trends, particularly when I am talking about such relatively small numbers compared to the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands that other bodies are dealing with.

I do not identify a trend, but that does not mean that I do not take the underlying point that you have made seriously, because I do.

Q157 Markus Campbell-Savours: Paula, your office looks at where Government have not acted properly and the procedures for handling complaints about this. What is your view on the system for standards for Ministers, where Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister and then held to a set of rules determined, judged and decided on by the Prime Minister?

Paula Sussex: Markus, that is outwith my remit.

Q158 Markus Campbell-Savours: I will ask a different question, then. The PHSO has the powers to make recommendations for change and redress, but it does not have the powers to require change or compel redress. How does this impact those who use your services and wider public trust in Government?

Paula Sussex: That is a very good question. That one I will definitely answer. The first thing to say is that we have a very high compliance rate with our recommendations, which is right up in the 90s. It is 99% or something like that across the thousands of complaints that we finalise. Some of that is because we work very hard with organisations to come to an acceptance of what has gone wrong. It is important that our



organisation is able to work to improve public service with other agencies and the organisations that we investigate.

The question goes to having enforcement powers. In some respects, yes, you could do that, but it makes it harder to work with organisations. If I give you the example of health trusts, which I and my chief executive visit on a monthly basis, they also look to the ombudsman as a source of what is good, what is right. "How can we do this better?" "How would you advise us to use these complaints?" "This is how we look at the insights and the patient stories at board level. What do you think about that?" We get a very open reception, so we can work with those organisations. There is a degree of trust, which with enforcement powers you might not get.

Secondly, we regard Parliament as our enforcement arm. If anything, we want to work more with your Committee and Select Committees in terms of revealing where we are not happy, as you say, with performance in public service. Generally, with recommendations, it is part of our strategy that we are going to follow through further and harder on them, particularly in some of the more systemic or larger cases where we really do want to follow through to see how the culture has changed and how process changes have been made. "Are they sticking? Are you slipping back?" etc.

Q159 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** You have the power to lay a report before Parliament. How effective a measure do you feel that is?

Paula Sussex: It can be, as it is public record. It certainly got the attention of the Charity Commission quite recently. It absolutely can be.

Q160 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Are there more powers that you feel that you should have? Are there things that you think would be useful?

Paula Sussex: I am sure we could have more powers, but we need to focus on what we can do with our existing powers, our resources, our data and the relationships that we build with the organisations around us and the organisations we investigate to go further and harder within what we have at the moment.

Q161 **Chair:** Thank you both. There is one final question from me. We have obviously talked about the EIC, the broader standards landscape and particularly what the Government have been doing over the last 18 months or so. Are there any other reforms to improve the standards landscape that you would recommend to the Government or hope that they would be pursuing?

Paula Sussex: I would not describe it exactly as a reform, but if this is my parting shot, don't underestimate the scale of the task to operationalise this. We need to get this right.

Daniel Greenberg: From my side, it is very important that we constantly monitor the operation of the standards, the part of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

standards system for which I am responsible. The Standards Committee has, broadly speaking, a five-year rolling review function. As we are coming towards the end of my five-year tenure, I am already beginning to think about the representations that I will make to them for specific reforms. They will then consider those and open up a consultation in whatever form they think right.

On our side, we have this rolling constant checking of what has gone wrong, what people do not understand and what could be clearer. I have an opportunity to feed that in through the Standards Committee once every five-year period. That is a really positive and useful process.

Chair: Thank you both very much. We are ending on the importance of the operational aspects and the implementation, which are very important. Thank you both very much for your time.