

Call for evidence on local leadership and public trust:  
openness and accountability in local and London government

Dear Christopher Kelly,

Thank you for your letter on 19th December and for confirming that I can provide comments by e.mail as long as they reach you by 10th March.

Hopefully this response is of use to you and the Committee; please note it is very much an officer perspective.

#### Local Government Leadership and Decision Making

You have asked for views and evidence on whether certain models of leadership or decision making in Local Government better support or reflect the Seven Principles of Public Life. Leicester has adopted the Cabinet and Leader model, now well established.

1. My understanding is that Executives have to publish a forward plan so as to make the public aware of decisions being made by the Executive, particularly in view of the fact that some authorities have opted to provide in their Constitutions that the Cabinet meets in private. Leicester's Cabinet meets in public unless there are Access to Information grounds justifying the placing of an item on the private i.e. exempt agenda.

As an officer, I question the merit in allowing Executives to conduct their business in private, even with the benefit of the publication of a Forward Plan.

Further, assuming that Executives do meet in public, I find the Forward Plan provisions to be rather bureaucratic and question whether the public gain anything from this procedure.

2. Executives are, by their nature, political e.g the law provides that Cabinets do not need to be politically balanced. Executives must hold themselves to account to full Council and the public. Given this, it would be helpful to have a clearer understanding as to what extent the Executive can present openly political reports to full Council for debate. Linked to this, it would be helpful to update the current National Code on Publicity.

#### Local Government: Openness and Accountability

You have asked for views and evidence on how well the provisions to support openness and accountability in Local Government work in practice.

1. The new local assessment of complaints system has proved to be extremely bureaucratic and time consuming. Fortunately, the number of complaints has now dropped to zero - hopefully that remains the case for some time, but initially complaints mushroomed to about 15. Because the system is local it is important to be as open as possible. Unfortunately the system is very restrictive as to what can and cannot be communicated to complainants and subject members. The system is something of a minefield given the interface with freedom of information and data protection legislation.

2. On a more positive note, Leicester now has a well established Standards Committee which is being proactive, aiming to be integrated and taking a lead role in the Council's Governance Framework. It would be helpful to have further guidance supporting this approach.

#### Local Government Officers: Role and Accountability

You have asked for views and evidence as to whether the roles and responsibilities of senior officers are clearly defined and understood by the public.

1. Leicester has a well established set of standards and rules, Political Conventions which complement the Code of Conduct, based on the national model. Even so, our Conventions are now in need of updating to reflect the current Administration and related practices.

Our Political Conventions are standards relating to the interface between officers, members and the public. .

I suggest it would be helpful for there to be national guidance and standards relating to what should be included in Political Conventions or their equivalent. I can provide a copy of Leicester's on request.

#### Statutory Roles

The role of the Monitoring Officer is increasingly legalistic and it would be helpful to have a clear view as to whether this post holder should be a lawyer.

#### Local Government Accountability and Partnerships

Much of the current focus is on outputs rather than mechanisms for working. More needs to be done to ensure partnership working is transparent and complies with the Seven Principles of Public Life. Leicester is keen to ensure these standards are achieved but national guidance would assist.

Kind regards.

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