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Officers



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BLOG

Ethics, standards, risk, and leadership culture



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Recent public interest reports and independent inquiries shine a much-needed light on the importance of ethics and standards in ensuring good decision-making in local government.

Ethics refers to morally right and wrong decision making. Standards typically encompasses acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Law, policy, and guidance goes some way to defining acceptable conduct and decision making, but “legal” and “ethical” aren't necessarily the same. Your culture defines ‘how things are done around here’ in your council. Your culture will dictate who has authority, who is consulted, the speed you move at, and how risk averse you are.

Ethics enhances the law by outlining acceptable behaviours beyond the control of legislation. The world is not unambiguous, nor does it stay still, so it is essential that members are adept at understanding what socially acceptable behaviour looks like. Ethics are also intrinsically linked with risk - an ethical decision will avoid legal risk manage financial risk, and guard against reputational risk such as a backlash from the community or media.

So as a councillor, how do you navigate this ethical landscape? It's about balancing the positives with the negatives. If the council make this decision, what will the reaction from our residents be?

The recent Independent Inquiry on the 'Sheffield Trees Dispute' demonstrates the impact and risk of decision making in an ethical context. Whilst it is legally permissible to remove trees from the perspective of managing the health of the tree stack and maintaining highways, that does not give the Council 'Carte Blanche' to remove hundreds of mature, healthy trees against the will of

residents. It moves the Council from a position of collaborating with their communities and the residents it represents, to the position of aggressor. The ethical question for members is not solely 'Is the council legally able to do this' but 'should the council do it'? Just because you can, doesn't necessarily mean you should.

Similarly, the need for managing risk - looking at investment and funding decisions against a shifting financial landscape - is well illustrated by the situation in Woking. An ethical decision explores all potential options and outcomes to ensure the decision does not create risk. If the council is borrowing money to undertake significant investment, is it affordable if the interest rate changes? If we see a societal shift (such as the decline of the High Street)- is the decision still sound?

An essential tool in ensuring ethics and standards are maintained, risk is managed, and the culture is open and transparent, is the Monitoring Officer - typically the most senior lawyer in the building. Your Monitoring Officer is the conscience of the council, ensuring your decisions are legally compliant. They are a sounding board for your ideas and should help you understand the risks in decision making. Working alongside the Chief Finance Officer (the s151 officer) with a focus on the purse strings, and the Chief Executive (Head of Paid Service) who focusses on balancing resources and operational delivery. - they form the 'Golden Triangle'. Three statutory roles with a focus on the delivery of good decision making and compliant outcomes, with ethics, standards, risk, and culture at its heart. A positive culture creates opportunity for their measured input and respects their recommendations.

The best way to navigate the shifting sands of ethics and standards? Don't do it alone - take advice from those appointed to give it.

