

# Public Document Pack



## STANDARDS THURSDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2021

A MEETING of the STANDARDS COMMITTEE will be held VIA MS TEAMS on THURSDAY, 9 DECEMBER 2021 at 3.30 pm

J. J. WILKINSON,  
Clerk to the Council,

2 December 2021

| <b>BUSINESS</b> |   |         |
|-----------------|---|---------|
| 1.              | <b>Apologies for Absence.</b>   |         |
| 2.              | <b>Order of Business.</b>   |         |
| 3.              | <b>Declarations of Interest.</b>  |         |
| 4.              | <b>Standards Commission Annual Report 2020/21</b> (Pages 3 - 54)<br>Consider The Standards Commission for Scotland Annual Report 2020/21.<br>(Attached)   | 15 mins |
| 5.              | <b>Code of Conduct for Councillors</b> (Pages 55 - 134)<br>Consider new Code of Conduct for Councillors. (Draft new Code and Guidance attached.)  | 20 mins |
| 6.              | <b>Role of Standards Committee in Complaints against Councillors</b> (Pages 135 - 136)<br>Discussion on the future role of the Standards Committee in Complaints against Councillors. (Remit of Committee from Scheme of Administration attached) | 10 mins |
| 7.              | <b>Any Other Items which the Chairman Decides are Urgent.</b>   |         |

### NOTES

1. Timings given above are only indicative and not intended to inhibit Members' discussions.
2. Members are reminded that, if they have a pecuniary or non-pecuniary interest in any item of business coming before the meeting, that interest should be declared prior to commencement of discussion on that item. Such declaration will be recorded in the Minute of the meeting.

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**Membership of Committee:-** Councillors S. Aitchison (Chairman), A. Anderson, J. Greenwell, C. Hamilton, E. Jardine, E. Robson and S. Scott.

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Please direct any enquiries to Jenny Wilkinson, Clerk to the Council  
Tel: 01835 825004 Email: [jjwilkinson@scotborders.gov.uk](mailto:jjwilkinson@scotborders.gov.uk)

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# The Standards Commission for Scotland


## ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21





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“It is notable that the percentage of cases which involve disrespectful conduct has increased and, in particular, where offensive comments have been made on social media. Describing some of the conduct as disrespectful underplays the impact it can have, so we were pleased that the Scottish Government amended the Councillors’ Code of Conduct in 2018 to make specific reference to behaviour which constitutes bullying and harassment”

“adherence to the Codes of Conduct is essential to allow the public to have trust in elected politicians and those appointed to the boards of public bodies. There must be confidence that individuals are being honest and are acting with integrity and in the public interest, when making decisions on how public money is to be spent, awarding of contracts, or deciding on planning applications. At all times those in such positions need to consider whether their relationships with others gives rise to the reasonable perception that they may be influenced in their decision-making.”

# SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I am pleased to present the Annual Report of the Standards Commission for Scotland ('the Standards Commission'), which covers the period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

The Standards Commission's objectives are outlined in our Strategic Plan for 2020-24, which can be found at:

[www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/  
corporate-info/strategic-and-business-plans](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/corporate-info/strategic-and-business-plans)

This report summarises the progress we have made towards delivering and achieving the stated aims in the first year of the Plan.



## Overview

My tenure at the Standards Commission ends on 31 August 2021. I have, therefore, taken the time to highlight aspects of our work since I joined as a member in 2015 and since I was appointed as Convener in early February 2017 and, more broadly, to reflect on compliance with the Codes of Conduct.

## Compliance

A key part of the Standards Commission's role is to promote compliance with the Codes. At the outset it should be recognised that, at a time when there have been high profile reports as to confusion and shortcomings regarding the ethical conduct of some individuals in senior positions in the UK, the vast majority of those elected as councillors and appointed to public bodies in Scotland are aware of, and comply with, the standards required of those in public life.

Over the past 6 years the Standards Commission has hosted 24 regional roadshows for councillors and officers, together with some 46 supporting training and education events for specific devolved public bodies and local authorities. In 2020/21 we adapted our training so that it could be held online and successfully held four online training sessions, on the Councillors' Code of Conduct,

for elected members and senior officers of Angus, Borders, Highland and Stirling Councils. Attendees have taken the opportunity to ask questions on how certain provisions in the Code should be interpreted and to discuss illustrations and examples, which were aimed at helping them to relate the obligations under the Code to the scenarios they face and situations they could find themselves in.

We have also developed, published, and disseminated guidance on the Councillors' Code and have produced Advice Notes on a variety of topics, including on:

- ▶ how to identify and declare interests;
- ▶ how to distinguish between a strategic role and any operational work;
- ▶ bullying and harassment;
- ▶ how to balance the requirement to behave with respect towards others, alongside the right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights;
- ▶ how to balance the different responsibilities when appointed to arm's-length external organisations and to Health and Social Care Integration Joint Boards.



## Enforcement

Set against a background of general good awareness and compliance, there are instances of individual failure to meet the standards required. Sometimes this is inadvertent or careless such as failing to register an interest; other times it is through poor judgement such as failing to declare an interest at a meeting or disclosing information received in confidence. On occasion however the behaviour is a flagrant breach of the requirement to treat other councillors, staff, or the public with respect.

It is notable that the percentage of cases which involve disrespectful conduct has increased and, in particular, where offensive comments have been made on social media. Describing some of the conduct as disrespectful underplays the impact it can have, so we were pleased that the Scottish Government amended the Councillors' Code of Conduct in 2018 to make specific reference to behaviour which constitutes bullying and harassment. Our Hearing Panels can consider an impact statement provided by anyone who has been affected by the respondent's conduct, when determining the sanction to be applied in cases where a breach of the respect or bullying and

harassment provisions in a Code of Conduct has been found.

Over the past six years we have held 63 Hearings and where breaches of the Codes have been found sanctions applied have ranged from censure, suspension for up to one year, and even disqualification.

In 2020/21, the Standards Commission held and concluded 14 Hearings to determine whether 14 councillors had contravened the Councillors' Code of Conduct. These were held at a time when Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were in place, so we developed policies, procedures and guidance that enabled us to hold and livestream 12 of the Hearings online, in accordance with legislative requirements and the Hearing Rules.

Even after the pandemic restrictions are lifted it is likely that some Hearings will still be held online as we have included a new provision in our Rules that states that Hearings can be held online in circumstances where there is little factual dispute or where the alleged breach is admitted, and where no witnesses other than the respondent are to give evidence.



## Adjudication

A notable action in 2020/21 was that, for the first time, the Standards Commission required to exercise its statutory oversight authority and issued Directions to the Ethical Standards Commissioner. These have the purpose and effect of more clearly separating the investigatory functions of the Commissioner and the adjudicatory functions of Commission.

The background to this is that the Standards Commission must receive a report from the Ethical Standards Commissioner before a decision can be taken as to whether to hold a Hearing. Up until now reports were only submitted where the Ethical Standards Commissioner was of the view that a breach had occurred. In my opinion, whether a breach had occurred should be a matter for the Standards Commission to determine. On receipt of a report, we can decide whether to take no action, or to require further investigation or to hold a Hearing. Commission Hearings are held in public, with submissions from the Ethical Standards Commissioner and the respondent and taking evidence from witnesses. Furthermore, decisions made at Standards Commission Hearings as to whether or not a breach has occurred are subject to appeal. It was a matter of concern that the Ethical Standards Commissioner could conclude there was no breach in a report which was not made public, was not submitted to the Standards Commission and was not the subject of any external review or appeal.

This concern was shared by other Standards Commission members and, following consultation, by other stakeholders. This was especially so, when it became clear that the Ethical Standards Commissioner was deciding that no breach had occurred because, in her view, the behaviour was not sufficiently disrespectful, or it was permitted by the enhanced right to freedom of expression afforded to politicians under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Although the Ethical Standards Commissioner, being an independent officeholder, is responsible for conducting investigations into eligible complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies, the Standards Commission has an oversight role and powers of Direction

Over the past six years we have held 63 Hearings and where breaches of the Codes have been found sanctions applied have ranged from censure, suspension for up to one year, and even disqualification.

under the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, ('the Ethical Standards Act'). It was this power which we exercised for the first time in 2020/21 by issuing Directions with the purpose of:

- ▶ Ensuring the Standards Commission makes the final decision, under Section 16 of the Ethical Standards Act, on all complaints that have been investigated.
- ▶ Providing the Standards Commission with assurance that investigations into complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies are being progressed without any undue delays and that the parties to any complaint are provided with regular progress updates. This is to ensure confidence in the overall ethical standards framework is maintained.
- ▶ Ensuring there is clarity and consistency in respect of the criteria the ESC uses to assess whether complaints are eligible/admissible for investigation.

The outcome is that there now is a clear separation between the investigatory and adjudicatory functions and should serve to remove any concerns about fairness of process or inconsistencies between the two organisations as to how the Codes should be interpreted.

## Looking Forward

As this report shows we have strong and constructive relationships with our key stakeholders, and many of them including the Scottish Government, the Ethical Standards Commissioner, SOLAR, SOLACE, COSLA and the Improvement Service, were consulted before finalising our Strategic Plan and objectives for 2020/24.

The Standards Commission's Strategic Plan for 2020/24 identifies the following four key aims:

1. To have a positive impact on ethical standards in public life.
2. To pursue continuous improvement in the ethical standards framework and the way we do our work.
3. To pursue and develop strong relationships with our stakeholders.
4. To ensure all stakeholders have easy access to high quality information about the organisation, its work, and any initiatives.

Our Business Plan for 2021/22 outlines its objectives for the forthcoming year that will contribute to the achievement of these aims. In particular, the Standards Commission intends to support these aims by:

- Obtaining and undertaking detailed analysis of qualitative and quantitative evidence on its work to promote the Codes of Conduct so that it can evaluate its impact in a meaningful way.
- Following a consultation exercise, to publish and promote Guidance and Advice Notes to support the revised Codes of Conduct for Councillors and Members of devolved public bodies.
- Continuing to work with the Scottish Government and other stakeholders to promote the revised Codes of Conduct and to increase awareness of the ethical standards framework and how to make a complaint if any provisions in the Codes are contravened.
- Offering training events for councillors on the Councillors' Code of Conduct, and for the chairs of devolved public bodies on the ethical standards framework.

Underpinning these aims and objectives is the firm belief that adherence to the Codes of Conduct is essential to allow the public to have trust in elected politicians and those appointed to the boards of public bodies. There must be confidence that individuals are being honest and are acting with integrity and in the public interest, when making decisions on how public money is to be spent, awarding of contracts, or deciding on planning applications. At all times those in such positions need to consider whether their relationships with others gives rise to the reasonable perception that they may be influenced in their decision-making. We can be re-assured that in Scotland we have an ethical standards framework to which councillors and Board members must adhere when taking up their roles, with which overwhelmingly they comply, and which is effective when they do not.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Standards Commission's members, staff, and stakeholders for their support and to wish everyone the best for the future.



**Professor Kevin Dunion OBE, Convener**



## SECTION 2: ABOUT US

### Principles of Public Life

In 1995, the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Nolan Committee) identified seven principles of conduct underpinning public life and recommended that public bodies should draw up Codes of Conduct incorporating these principles.

The seven Nolan Principles were:

- ▶ Selflessness
- ▶ Integrity
- ▶ Objectivity
- ▶ Accountability
- ▶ Openness
- ▶ Honesty
- ▶ Leadership

The then Scottish Executive took the Nolan Committee recommendations one step further with the introduction of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, ('the Ethical Standards Act'), which brought in statutory Codes of Conduct for Councillors and Members of devolved public bodies.

The Scottish Executive also identified nine key principles underpinning public life in Scotland, which incorporated the seven Nolan principles and introduced two further principles, which are:

- ▶ Duty (Public Service) and
- ▶ Respect.

The Codes of Conduct are based on the nine key principles of public life.

### Councillors

The Councillors' Code of Conduct applies to all the elected members of every council in Scotland.

Following a review of the original Councillors' Code of Conduct that was led by the Scottish Government and a consultation exercise, a revised Councillors' Code of Conduct was approved by the Scottish Parliament and introduced with effect from July 2018. It is available online at:

[www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/12/10145144/0](http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/12/10145144/0)

The Standards Commission provides guidance to Councillors on the revised Code of Conduct. The latest version of this was published and issued to councillors and councils in December 2018.

The Standards Commission's Guidance on the Councillors' Code of Conduct is available online at: [www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/guidance/guidance-notes](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/guidance/guidance-notes)

The Scottish Government undertook a consultation on a proposed new version of the Councillors' Code of Conduct in 2020/21. It is anticipated that the revised Code will be put before the Scottish Parliament for approval in 2021/22.

### Members of Devolved Public Body Boards

Each devolved public body covered by the framework is required to have its own Code that is based on the Model Code of Conduct approved by the Scottish Parliament. These individual Codes are also approved by Scottish Ministers.

The devolved public bodies covered by the framework are listed in Schedule 3 to the 2000 Act. Details of all those covered by the Codes of Conduct can be found on the Scottish Government's website at: [www.gov.scot/publications/public-bodies-covered-by-the-ethical-standards-framework/](http://www.gov.scot/publications/public-bodies-covered-by-the-ethical-standards-framework/)

The list of devolved public bodies is under constant revision as bodies are created, abolished and merged.

Following a review of the original Model Code of Conduct that was led by the Scottish Government and a consultation exercise, a revised Model Code of Conduct was approved by the Scottish Parliament and introduced with effect from 3 February 2014. It is available online at:

[www.gov.scot/publications/model-code-conduct-members-devolved-public-bodies/](http://www.gov.scot/publications/model-code-conduct-members-devolved-public-bodies/)

The Standards Commission also provides guidance to members of devolved public bodies. The Standards Commission's Guidance on the Model Code for Devolved Public Bodies was issued in December 2014 and is available online at:

[www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/guidance/guidance-notes](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/guidance/guidance-notes)

The Scottish Government undertook a consultation on a proposed new version of the Model Code of Conduct in 2020/21. It is anticipated that the revised Code will be put before the Scottish Parliament for approval in 2021/22.

## SECTION 2: KEY PRINCIPLES

The Ethical Standards Act required Scottish Ministers to issue a Code of Conduct for councillors and a Model Code of Conduct for members of devolved public bodies. The Codes as issued are based around nine key principles, which underpin the standards expected of those in public life.



### DUTY

Holders of public office should uphold the law and act in accordance with the law and the public trust placed in them. They should act in the interests of the council or public body.



### SELFLESSNESS

Holders of public office have a duty to act solely in terms of the public interest. They must not act in order to gain financial or other material benefit for themselves, family or friends.



### INTEGRITY

Holders of public office must not place themselves under any financial, or other, obligation to any individual or organisation that might reasonably be thought to influence them in the performance of their duties.



### OBJECTIVITY

Holders of public office must make decisions solely on merit when carrying out public business.



### ACCOUNTABILITY AND STEWARDSHIP

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public. They have a duty to consider issues on their merits, taking account of the views of others and must ensure that the council or public body uses its resources prudently and in accordance with the law.



### OPENNESS

Holders of public office have a duty to be as open as possible about decisions and actions they take, giving reasons for their decisions and restricting information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.



### HONESTY

Holders of public office have a duty to act honestly. They must declare any private interests relating to their public duties and take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.



### LEADERSHIP

Holders of public office have a duty to promote and support these principles by leadership and example, to maintain and strengthen the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of the council and its councillors or the public body and its members in conducting public business.



### RESPECT

Holders of public office must respect all other holders of public office and employees of the council or public body and the role they play, treating them with courtesy at all times.

## SECTION 2: ABOUT US

### Who We Are

The Standards Commission is an independent body separate from both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Our purpose is to encourage high ethical standards in public life through the promotion and enforcement of Codes of Conduct for Councillors and those appointed to the Boards of devolved public bodies.

The Commission consists of a Convener and four Commission Members who are appointed by the Scottish Parliament, supported by a team of three members of staff.



### Why We Exist

We are a statutory body established under the Ethical Standards Act.

This legislation provides a framework to encourage and, where necessary, enforce high ethical standards in public life.

The Ethical Standards Act created a framework whereby councillors and members of devolved public bodies are required to comply with Codes of Conduct. It provides that complaints about breaches of these Codes are to be investigated by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland (ESC) and adjudicated upon by the Standards Commission.

### What We Do

We have two key strands of work:

- ▶ A proactive role in developing and promoting the ethical standards framework, including producing Guidance and Advice Notes to help councillors and members of devolved public bodies comply with their respective Codes of Conduct; and
- ▶ An adjudicatory role in determining whether there has been a contravention of a Code of Conduct, and where a breach is found, to then determine the appropriate sanction.

### What We Do Not Do

We do not investigate complaints. Complaints are received and investigated by the ESC, which is a separate organisation.

A breakdown of the separate roles undertaken by the ESC and Standards Commission is provided on the following page.

We do not determine, or deal with, complaints about Members of Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament or officers of councils and devolved public bodies. We also do not determine, or deal with, complaints about councils and devolved public bodies as entities.

### Contact Us

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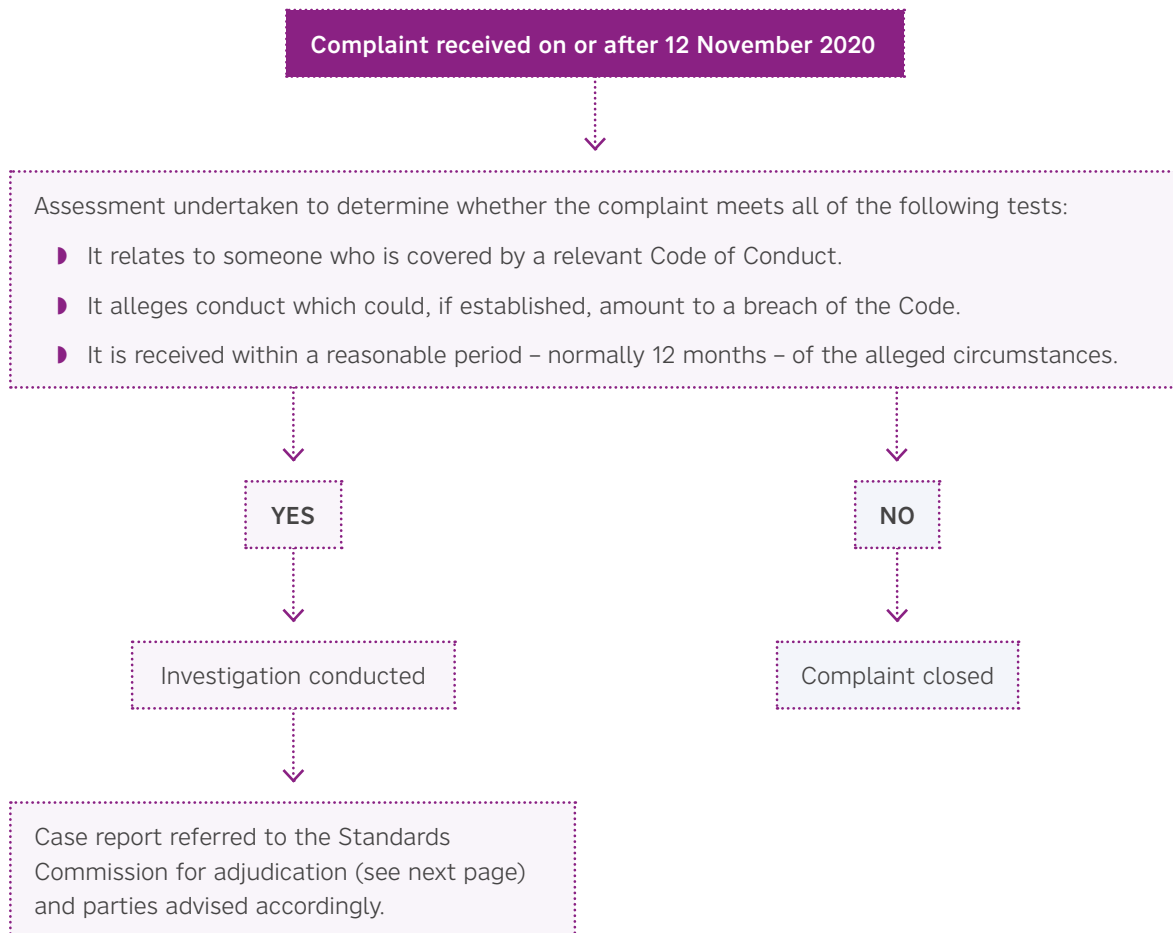
Facebook: [facebook.com/StandardsCommission](https://facebook.com/StandardsCommission)

## SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF COMPLAINTS INVESTIGATION AND ADJUDICATION PROCESSES

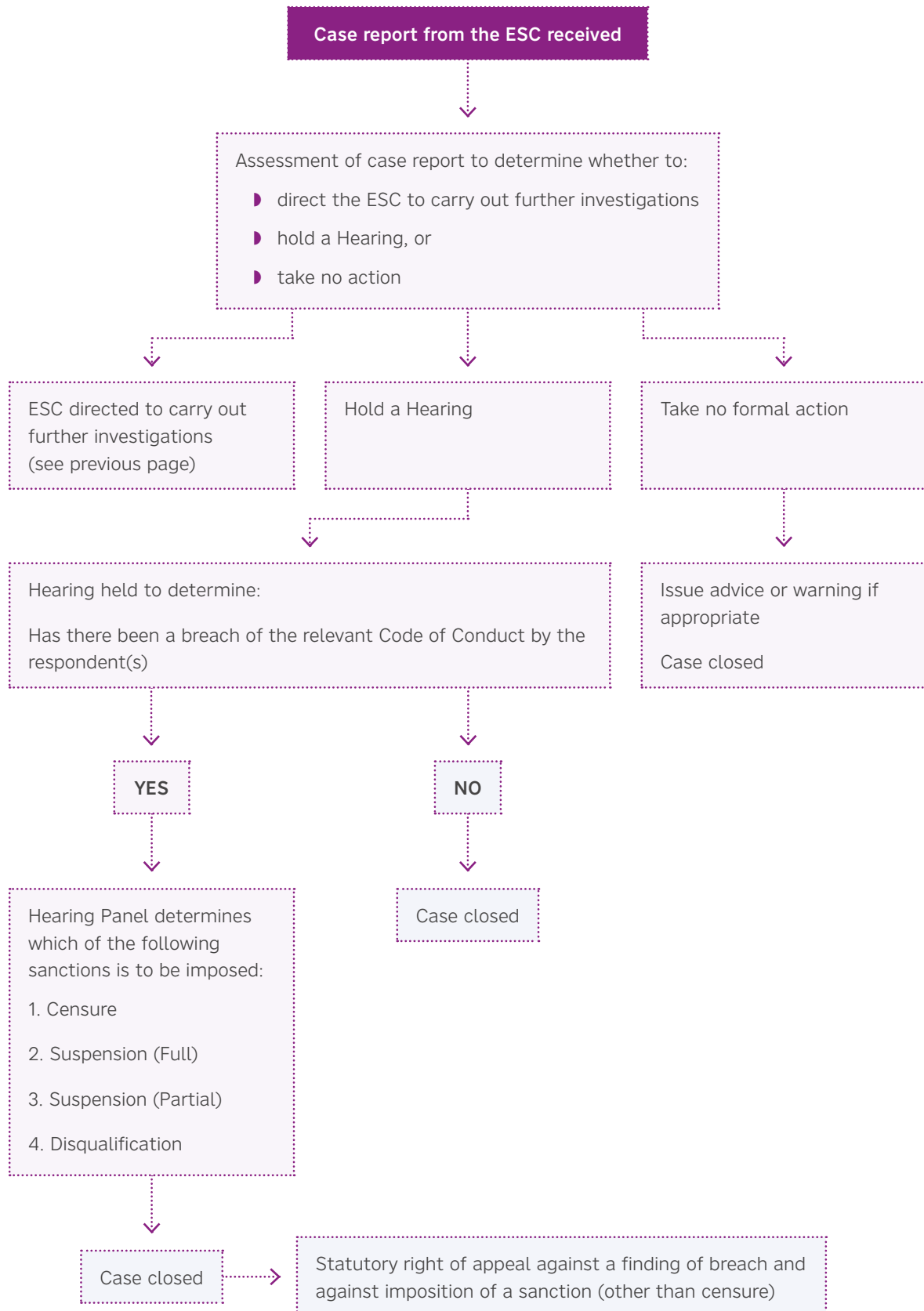
The Investigation and Adjudication Processes changed on 12 November 2020 after the Standards Commission issued a direction to the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC) under Section 10 of the Ethical Standards Act. The direction required the ESC to send all eligible complaints received on or after 12 November 2020 to the Standards Commission for adjudication.

### Current Overview Of Process

#### 1. Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland)

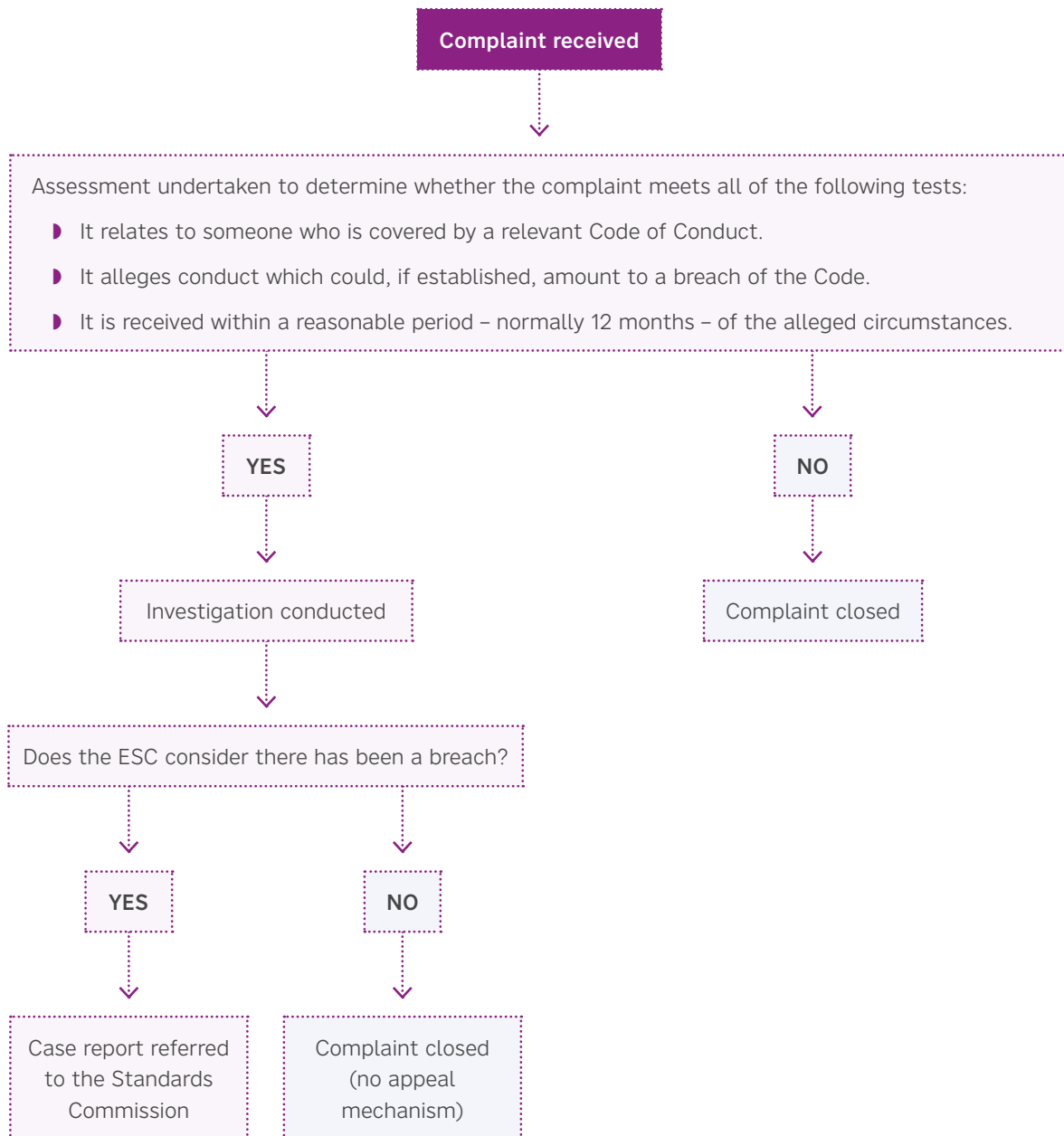


## 2. Standards Commission for Scotland



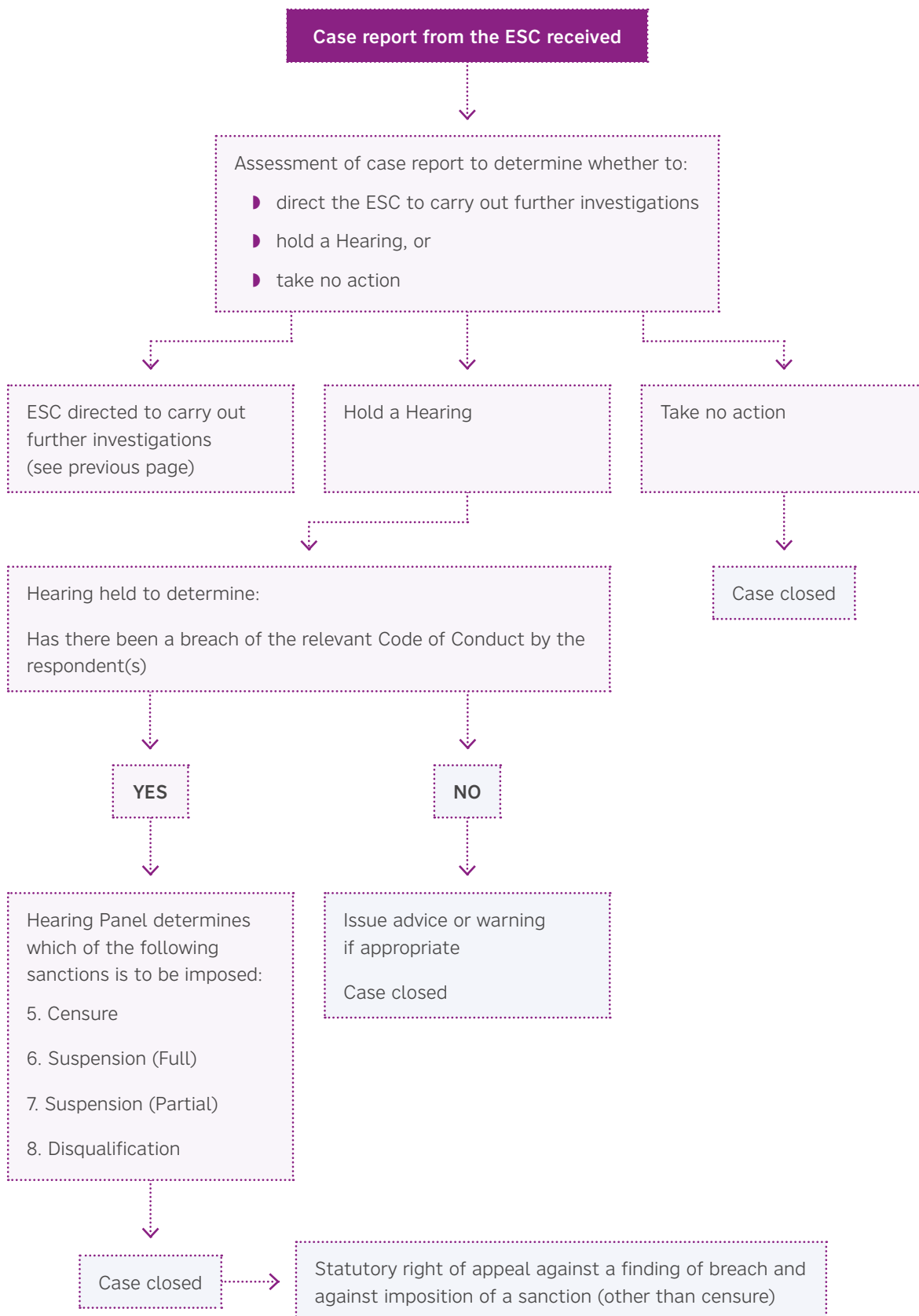
## Overview of Former Process (For Complaints Received Before 12 November 2020)

### 1. Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland)

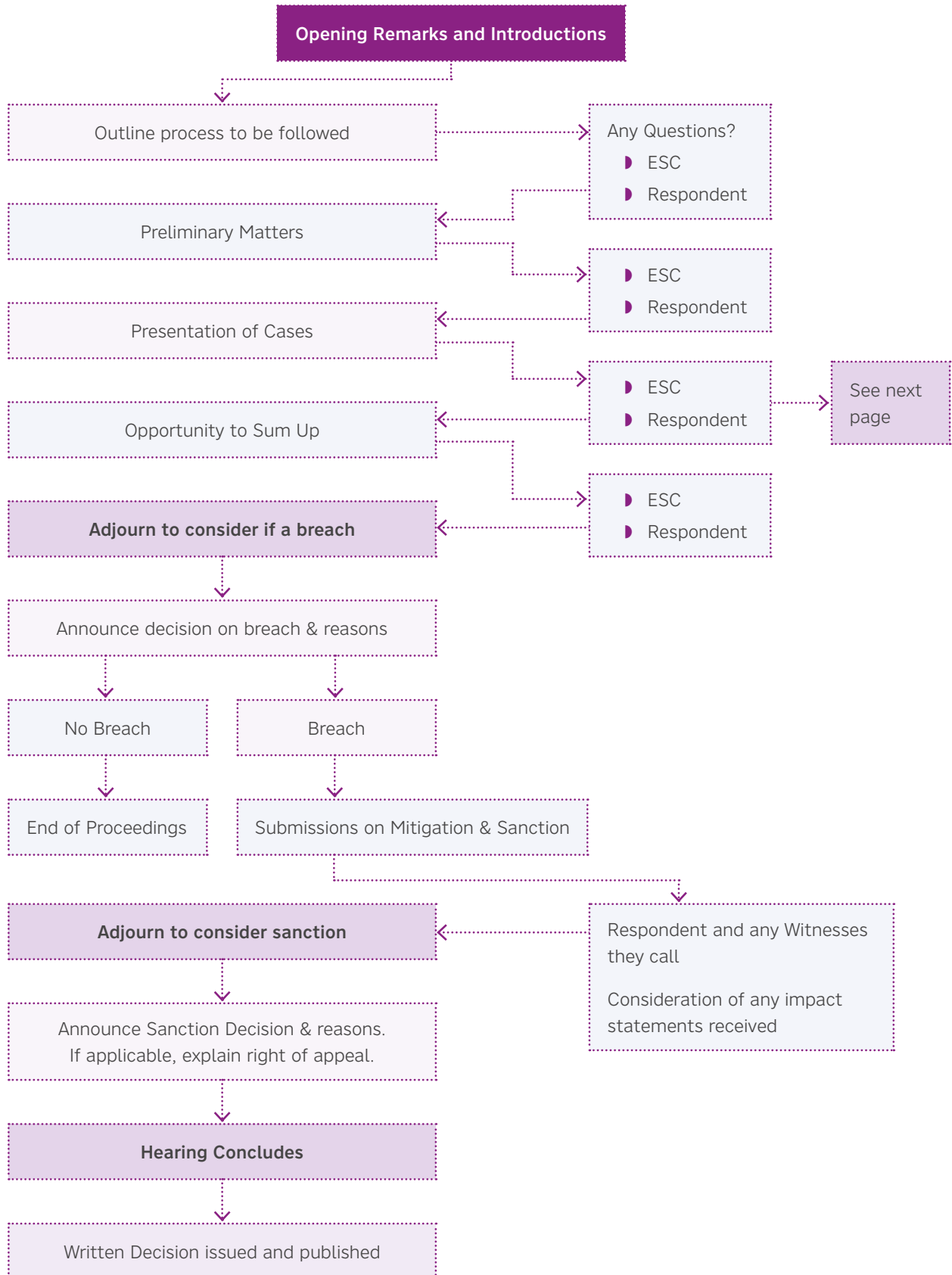




## 2. Standards Commission for Scotland



## Hearing Process



## Presentation of Cases

**ESC:** Outline background to complaint and outcome of investigation

Lead any witnesses

Opportunity to cross examine witnesses by respondent/respondent's representative

Opportunity to re-examine by ESC

Any questions from Hearing Panel

Submissions as to whether there was a breach of the Code

**Panel:** Question any witnesses Standards Commission has cited, opportunity to cross examine by respondent/respondent's representative



### **Respondent:**

Outline background

Lead any witnesses

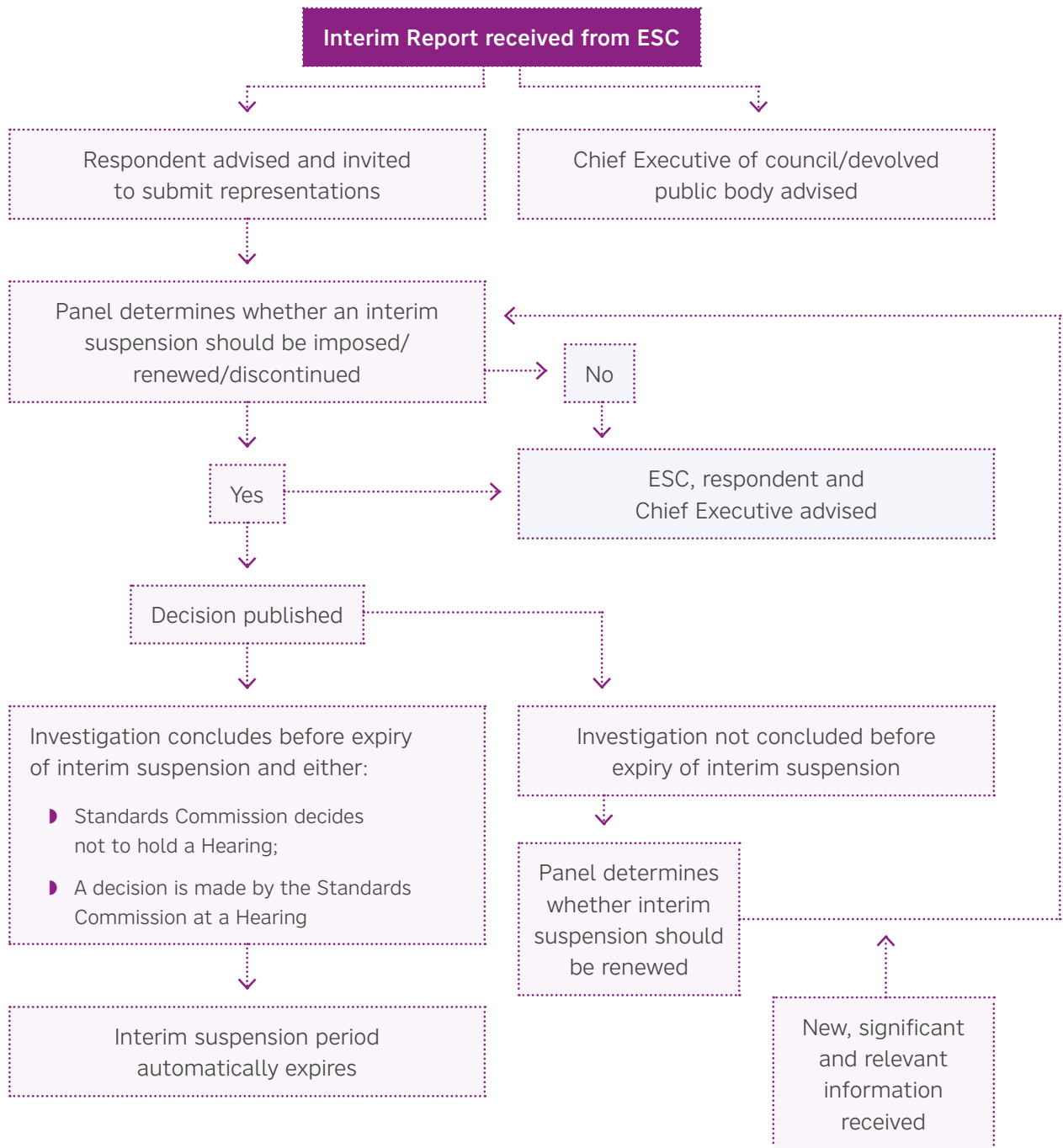
Opportunity to cross examine witnesses by ESC

Opportunity to re-examine by respondent/respondent's representative

Any questions from Hearing Panel

Submissions as to whether there was a breach of the Code

## Interim Suspension Process



## SECTION 3: PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

This section highlights the work undertaken in 2020/2021 towards our strategic objectives, as outlined in our Strategic Plan for 2020 to 2024.

### Progress Against Strategic Objectives

Holding and concluding 14 Hearings to determine whether 14 respondents had contravened the Councillors' Code of Conduct. In those cases where the Hearing Panel found that a breach of the Code had been committed, appropriate sanctions were then applied.

Promoting the Scottish Government's consultation on the review of the Councillors' Code of Conduct and Model Code of Conduct for Members of Devolved Public Bodies.

Using our powers of direction under the Ethical Standards Act to oversee how the investigation of complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies were conducted.

Developing policies and procedures that enabled us to hold 12 of the 14 Hearings online, in accordance with legislative requirements and the Standard Commission's Hearing Rules, when travel restrictions arising from the coronavirus pandemic were in place.

Producing, issuing and publishing Guidance for the public on the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

Holding four online training sessions, on the Councillors' Code of Conduct, for elected members and senior officers of Angus, Borders, Highland and Stirling Councils.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1 – ‘IMPACT’



**We will have a positive impact on ethical standards in public life by:**

- ▶ Providing thought leadership by establishing and promoting a network to drive collaboration between all organisations who seek to ensure integrity in public life.
- ▶ Improving our profile and developing an effective communications strategy so that we can take all opportunities to be a strong and consistent voice for the importance of the ethical standards framework and compliance with the Codes of Conduct.
- ▶ Facilitating research, and assisting with programmes to train and educate on best practice, to drive up standards.
- ▶ Obtaining and undertaking detailed analysis of qualitative and quantitative evidence on our work to promote the Codes of Conduct so that we evaluate our impact in a meaningful way.

In working to meet this objective in the past year, we:

- ▶ Held and concluded 14 Hearings to determine whether 14 councillors had contravened the Councillors’ Code of Conduct. In all those cases where the Hearing Panel found that a breach of the Code had been committed, appropriate sanctions were then applied. Further details can be found in Sections 4 and 5 of this Report.
- ▶ Developed policies and procedures that enabled us to hold 12 of the 14 Hearings online, in accordance with legislative requirements and the Standard Commission’s Hearing Rules, when travel restrictions arising from the coronavirus pandemic were in place.
- ▶ Issued and published written decisions of all Hearings, which included the reasons why a breach had or had not been found and, if applicable, why a specific sanction had been applied, within an average of five working days of the conclusion of the Hearing.
- ▶ Conducted all Hearings within an average of 15 weeks from receipt of a report from the ESC. This was despite receiving 14 referrals in a seven-month period, with three cases referred in one week and five cases referred in one month (June 2020), and despite four Hearings being adjourned at the respondent’s request.
- ▶ Renewed an interim suspension imposed on a councillor, under Section 21 of the Ethical Standards Act, following receipt of an interim report from the ESC about an ongoing investigation into complaints about their conduct. The interim suspension remained in place until the Hearing was held, breach of the Code found and a sanction applied.
- ▶ Held four online training sessions, on the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, for elected members and senior officers of Angus, Borders, Highland and Stirling Councils.
- ▶ Responded to enquiries received from councillors, members of devolved public bodies, the media, the public and officers of councils and devolved public bodies on the ethical standards framework and how the Codes of Conduct should be interpreted. We provided a substantive response to all enquiries within the timescales outlined in our Service Charter.
- ▶ Produced, issued and published Guidance for the public on the Councillors’ Code of Conduct. The Guidance explains what the Code does and does not cover, so that members of the public can see what is expected of a councillor and what could constitute a potential breach of the Code. It also outlines how members of the public can raise concerns about a potential breach of the Code and provides information about the complaint process.
- ▶ Issued and published a response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life’s consultation “Standards Matter 2”, being a landscape review of the institutions, processes and structures in place to support high standards of conduct. The response contained the Standards Commission’s views on the UK’s arrangements for regulating ethical standards and how the key principles of public life can best be embedded within a public sector organisation’s working culture.
- ▶ Created and published blogs on our website in respect of topical ethical standards issues.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2 – ‘IMPROVEMENT’



**We will pursue continuous improvement in the ethical standards framework and the way we do our work by:**

- ▶ Making recommendations to amend the governing legislation so that we can deal with breaches of the Codes of Conduct in the most effective and proportionate manner.
- ▶ Working with others to ensure there is consistency in terms of the standards expected of all individuals in public life.
- ▶ Helping to resolve, or mitigate, any tensions in the ethical standards framework arising from the design of public bodies, including any inherent conflicts of interest.
- ▶ Influencing the content and format of the Codes of Conduct to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are as accessible and user-friendly as possible
- ▶ Reviewing and revising our Guidance, Advice Notes and other educational material to ensure they continue to add value and assist councillors and members to adhere to the provisions in the Codes.

While the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC), being an independent officeholder, is responsible for conducting investigations into eligible complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies, the Standards Commission has an oversight role and powers of Direction under the Ethical Standards Act. The Standards Commission has been required to use these powers in the past year, in order to be able to undertake its oversight role effectively. Our work in 2020/21 in respect of this objective included:

- ▶ Issuing a Direction requiring the ESC to provide a report to the Standards Commission, at the conclusion of every investigation into a complaint about a councillor or member of a devolved public body received on or after 12 November 2020, outlining her findings and conclusions as to whether or not there has been a contravention of the relevant Code. The Direction means that the Standards Commission will make the final decision, under Section 16 of the Ethical Standards Act, on all complaints that have been investigated. It ensures there is a clear separation of functions between the investigatory and adjudicatory functions of the two organisations and helps reduce any concerns about fairness of process or inconsistencies between the two organisations as to how the Codes should be interpreted. The Direction allows any disputed

evidence or representations on how the provisions of the Codes should be interpreted to be tested fully at a Hearing (if one is to be held), where evidence is taken on oath or affirmation and where the participants and the Panel can question witnesses and respond to submissions made. It also makes the procedures for the adjudication of complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies more consistent with the approach taken in respect of complaints about MSPs.

- ▶ Issuing a Direction to the ESC requiring her to carry out an investigation into every complaint about a councillor and member of a devolved public body received, unless:
  - the conduct referred to in the complaint would not, even if it could be established to have occurred, constitute a contravention of the relevant Code of Conduct;
  - the individual who is the subject of the complaint has passed away prior to it having been made or is an incapable adult within the meaning of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000; and/or
  - the conduct that has or is alleged to have contravened the relevant Code occurred (or in the case of a course of conduct ended) more than one year before the complaint was received.

The aim of the Direction is to ensure there is clarity and consistency in respect of the criteria the ESC uses to assess whether complaints are eligible/admissible for investigation.

- ▶ Issuing a Direction requiring the ESC to provide interim reports for investigations on all complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies for which a period of three months had already expired, to include:
  - a summary of the investigative work undertaken;
  - an explanation as to what requires to be done to complete the investigation; and
  - an indication of when it is expected that a final report will be issued.

The purpose of the Direction is to provide the Standards Commission with assurance that investigations into complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies are being progressed without any undue delays and that the parties to any complaint are provided with regular progress updates in order to ensure confidence in the overall ethical standards framework is maintained.

- ▶ Continuing to participate in a Working Group established by the Scottish Government to review the Councillors' Code of Conduct and Model Code of Conduct for Members of Devolved Public Bodies and, in particular, leading on the drafting of the amended version of the general conduct section and annexes to the Codes. We assisted the Government in preparing the documents for the public consultation on the revised Codes by drafting explanatory notes outlining the key changes and the reasons for them.
- ▶ Establishing a process under which Hearing Panels can consider an impact statement provided by anyone who has been affected by the respondent's conduct, when determining the sanction to be applied in cases where a breach of the respect or bullying and harassment provisions in a Code of Conduct has been found.
- ▶ Holding a strategic and development day to review and decide how to evaluate the impact of the Standards Commission's promotional

and adjudicatory work. We thereafter agreed an evaluation framework and associated timetable.

- ▶ Amending the Standards Commission's section 16 policy to make it clear that no action will be taken if it is satisfied that any admitted breaches of a Code referred to it for adjudication are inadvertent and technical in nature.
- ▶ Revising our Advice Notes for councillors on Distinguishing between Strategic and Operational Matters, the Application of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and Bullying and Harassment to ensure these remained relevant and fit for purpose.
- ▶ Reviewing and revising the Standards Commission's Hearing Rules to provide for the possibility of holding the Hearing online (regardless of whether any travel restrictions in place), in cases where little or no facts are in dispute. Changes were also made to clarify the nature and timing of information to be provided by and to the Standards Commission.
- ▶ Updating the Standards Commission's policy on the Application of Sanctions to include references to impact statements and to additional factors a Hearing Panel will consider in cases where a respondent has been convicted of a criminal offence while acting in the capacity of a councillor or member of a devolved public body (or where they could reasonably be perceived as acting as such).
- ▶ Increasing our engagement with respondents before Hearings to ensure all information is provided and any queries and procedural issues are resolved timeously.
- ▶ Reviewing and updating various governance arrangements, including our Service Standards; Equalities Impact, Risk Management, Finance and Procurement policies; and the Terms of Reference for our Human Resources and Audit and Risk Committees.
- ▶ Undertook a full staffing review and subsequent recruitment exercise.



## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3 – ‘STAKEHOLDERS’



**We will pursue and develop strong relationships with our stakeholders by:**

- ▶ Identifying and seeking ways of working with all individuals and organisations who are potentially affected by the ethical standards framework
- ▶ Improving our engagement with devolved public bodies to help them to increase awareness amongst their members of the provisions in the Codes of Conduct and how to complain about any failure to adhere to these
- ▶ Working with chairs and conveners of devolved public bodies and local authority committees to try to prevent issues and breaches of the Codes from arising at meetings
- ▶ Actively seeking feedback on our educational material, policies and procedures and collaborating with other regulators and partner bodies across the UK to share experiences and inform best practice
- ▶ Seeking to share services, where possible, to ensure best value

The Standards Commission identified that actions to achieve this objective included developing the skills and competencies of its Members and staff; identifying and taking forward opportunities to work jointly or in partnership with other public bodies; and making good use of resources and striving for operational efficiency, best value and continuous improvement.

Our work to achieve this objective in the past year included:

- ▶ Consulting with COSLA, SOLACE, SOLAR and the ESC on the oversight Directions issued under the Ethical Standards Act.
- ▶ Holding online workshops with Monitoring and Standards Officers to discuss:
  - the proposed changes to Codes of Conduct for councillors and members of devolved public bodies;
  - any ongoing conduct related issues and trends; and
  - how the Standards Commission can best add value in terms of assisting with training and promoting awareness of, and adherence to, the Codes.
- ▶ Using our social media platforms to promote awareness of the ethical standards framework, the provisions in the Codes of Conduct and the Standards Commission’s role, remit and work (including any forthcoming events and decisions made at Hearings). We increased our followers on Twitter by a further 25%.
- ▶ Following a request from a stakeholder to do so, we extended an existing dispensation for both councillor and health board members of health and social care integration joint boards to enable them to take part in any review, either by their council or Health Board, of the relevant IJB Scheme.
- ▶ Promoting the Scottish Government’s consultation on the review of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct and Model Code of Conduct for Members of Devolved Public Bodies.
- ▶ Participating in Commissioners and Ombudsman’s Group, FOISA Network Group and Data Protection Officer meetings.
- ▶ Sharing ideas and best practice with Northern Ireland Ombudsman in respect of holding online Hearings.
- ▶ Attending liaison meetings with SOLAR to discuss opportunities for improvement in respect of raising awareness of the provisions in the Codes of Conduct in light of emerging trends and issues.
- ▶ Continuing to work on shared services agreements and approaches with the SPCB in respect of data protection officer, information technology and internal audit services.
- ▶ Agreeing and publishing a Data Sharing Agreement with the ESC.

## STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4 – ‘CLARITY’



**We will ensure that all stakeholders, including members of the public, have easy access to high quality information about the organisation, its work and any initiatives it is undertaking by:**

- ▶ Promoting the ethical standards framework, the Codes of Conduct and how to make a complaint so that everyone is aware of the standards expected of those in public life, and are able and confident to report poor behaviour
- ▶ Ensuring all case related decisions are clearly explained and well-reasoned
- ▶ Using digital technology to ensure all educational material and information about good practice and Hearings are published and disseminated as widely as possible
- ▶ Promoting the importance of good behaviour and integrity in decision-making to help attract and encourage the highest quality candidates to apply for public appointments and to seek election as local government councillors

In 2020/21, the Standards Commission identified that actions to achieve this objective would include publishing information on current issues arising in respect of the ethical standard framework and how provisions in the Code have been interpreted at Hearings in Standards Updates or via standalone communications, and promoting Hearings to be held and Hearings decisions in the media, on our website and on social media platforms.

In meeting this objective in 2020/21, we:

- ▶ Published and issued quarterly Standards Updates, which included news about the work of the Standards Commission and future events, along with information about decisions made at Hearings.
- ▶ Disseminated and published media releases in respect of all Hearings held and any scheduled, and on an interim suspension decision.
- ▶ Published news articles on our website and regular posts on our social media sites in respect of issues affecting the ethical standards framework, work being undertaken by the Standards Commission and our educational material.
- ▶ Reviewed and further developed our British Sign Language Plan, which was developed in accordance with the requirements of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015.
- ▶ Produced and published a British Sign Language video on the Councillors’ Code of Conduct and the complaint process to follow if there are concerns it has been contravened.
- ▶ Undertook a full internal annual review of the management of Hearings and the decisions made (including the clarity of the final written determination). This included conducting surveys of participants and attendees on how Hearings are organised, run and managed. We used the review, any suggestions made and any other feedback obtained, to improve processes and decision-making procedures and templates. This included making revisions to the Hearing Rules and our public information literature, to ensure that they all continued to be accessible and fit for purpose.
- ▶ Held pre-Hearing meetings when appropriate and proportionate to do so, in order to resolve any procedural issues in advance of Hearings. Doing so helped to ensure that the focus of the Hearings remained on the production and analysis of relevant evidence and that they were conducted in as fair, impartial and efficient a manner as possible. It also meant the parties had the opportunity to raise questions and ensure they understood the process that would be followed.
- ▶ Completed work to ensure our website is fully compatible with the accessibility requirements specified in the Public Sector Bodies (Website and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018.
- ▶ Responded to all Freedom of Information requests within statutory time limits. We attended data protection and FOISA network meetings with other Officeholders to discuss and share best practice.
- ▶ Completed a review of our Records Management Plan, which was subsequently approved, following assessment, by the National Records of Scotland as being fully compliant with statutory requirements.

## SECTION 4: CASE STATISTICS

### Introduction

Complaints that a councillor or a member of a devolved public body (the respondent) has contravened their Code of Conduct are made to, and considered by, the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland (the ESC).

Before 13 November 2020, if the ESC concluded, at the end of her investigation, there has not been a breach of the Code, she would advise the respondent and complainer accordingly. The Standards Commission did not have the power to challenge or ask the ESC to review any finding that there has not been a breach of a Code. If, following an investigation, the ESC concluded there may have been a breach of a Code, she would refer the matter to the Standards Commission for adjudication.

Having consulted with the ESC, SOLAR, SOLACE and COSLA, a Direction on the Outcome of Investigations was issued to the ESC, under Section 10 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, ('the Ethical Standards Act'), on 12 November 2020. The Direction required the ESC to send reports on all complaints that had been investigated to the Standards Commission for it to make a final decision, regardless of whether or not she considered there had been a breach of the Code. The Direction required the ESC to advise the parties that the Standards Commission would determine the complaint. The Direction ensures there is a clear separation of functions between the investigatory and adjudicatory functions of the two organisations and reduces any concerns about fairness of process or that there are inconsistencies in how the Codes are being interpreted. The Direction also allows any disputed evidence or representations on how the provisions of the Codes should be interpreted to be tested fully at a Hearing (if one is to be held), where evidence is taken on oath or affirmation and

where the participants and the Panel can question witnesses and respond to submissions made. The implementation of the Direction should also make the procedures for the adjudication of complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies more consistent with the approach taken in respect of complaints about MSPs.

On receipt of the case report, the Standards Commission has three options, under Section 16 of the Ethical Standards Act, which are:

- ▶ to direct the ESC to carry out further investigations;
- ▶ to hold a Hearing; or
- ▶ to do neither (take no action).

The Standards Commission has published a policy outlining the factors it will consider when making such a decision on a report referred by the ESC. A copy of the policy can be found on the Standards Commission's website at:

[www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases)

The Standards Commission will write to the respondent, the ESC, the Chief Executive of the relevant council or devolved public body (copied to the Monitoring Officer or Standards Officer), and the individual or individuals who made the complaint to advise them of its decision in respect of the report.

### Decisions on Case Reports

The ESC referred 14 reports to the Standards Commission between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 where she determined that a breach of a Code of Conduct may have occurred. The Standards Commission held Hearings in respect of each of these reports. The table below shows the decisions taken by the Standards Commission in respect of reports referred by the ESC.

**Table 1: Decisions taken by Standards Commission on Reports received between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021**

| Decision   | No. of Reports | No. of Councillors or Members involved in the Reports |          |
|--|----------------|---|----------|
|  |                | Councillors   | Members  |
| Hold a Hearing                                     | 14             | 14  | 0        |
| Direct the ESC to carry out further investigations | 0              | 0   | 0        |
| Do neither   | 0              | 0   | 0        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                       | <b>14</b>      | <b>14</b>   | <b>0</b> |

## Hearings held in 2020/2021

Two of the reports referred by the ESC concerned the same respondent and were, therefore considered at a conjoined Hearing. A further Hearing was held in 2020/21 in respect of a breach report received from the ESC before 1 April 2020. As a result, the Standards Commission held a total of 14 Hearings between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. Two of these Hearings were held in person at a council venue in the respondent's local authority area. The remaining 12 Hearings were held online due to the existence, at the time, of coronavirus related travel restrictions. The online Hearings were livestreamed on the Standards Commission's website.

## Decisions made at Hearings

Table 2 outlines the decisions made at the 14 Hearings held in 2020/21.

**Table 2: Outcomes of Hearings conducted and concluded by the Standards Commission between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021**

| Decisions            | No. of Hearings | No. of respondents involved in Hearing |
|----------------------|-----------------|--|
| Finding of breach    | 13              | 13                                     |
| Finding of no breach | 1               | 1                                      |
| <b>TOTAL</b>         | <b>14</b>       | <b>14</b>                              |

## Sanctions Imposed at Hearings

The sanctions available to the Standards Commission if it determines, at a Hearing, that a breach of a Code of Conduct has occurred are:

- ▶ Censure;
- ▶ Suspension; and
- ▶ Disqualification

Having found a breach, the Standards Commission is obliged, under Section 19 of the Ethical Standards Act, to impose a sanction. The Standards Commission has published a policy outlining the factors it will consider when deciding the sanction to be imposed. A copy of the policy can be found on the Standards Commission's website at: [www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/hearing-rules](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/hearing-rules).

A **censure** means the Standards Commission recognises the respondent has breached the Code and formally records the Standards Commission's severe and public disapproval of the respondent's conduct.

A **suspension** can be full or partial, and can be for a period of up to one year. A full suspension means that the respondent is not entitled to attend any meetings of the council or devolved public body, any of its committees and sub-committees, and also any meetings of any other body of which the respondent is a representative or nominee of the council or devolved public body. The Standards Commission has produced guidance to provide clarity on the extent of the activities in which a councillor can engage while they are subject to a period of full suspension (either on the finding of a breach of the Councillors' Code of Conduct at a Hearing or as an interim measure while an investigation about their conduct is ongoing). This guidance can be found on the Standards Commission's website at: [www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings).

A partial suspension means that the respondent is not entitled to attend certain specified meetings or committee of the council or devolved public body. For example, they may be suspended from

meetings of a council's licensing committee for a period of three months.

**Disqualification** means that the respondent, if a councillor, is prohibited, for a period not exceeding five years, from being a councillor and from being nominated for election or being elected, as a councillor. This has the effect of vacating that councillor's office.

In cases where the respondent is a member of a devolved public body, disqualification means they are removed from membership of the body and are prohibited from being a member of the body for a period not exceeding five years. The Standards Commission, on removing and disqualifying a member from one specific devolved public body, can also direct that the individual is removed and disqualified from any other devolved public body of which they are a member.

The table below outlines the sanctions imposed by the Standards Commission at the Hearings held between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

**Table 4: Sanction decisions made at Hearings between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021**

| Sanction                              | No. of Hearings | No. of respondents involved in the Hearings |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Censure                               | 6               | 6   |
| Suspension – full                     | 1               | 1   |
| Suspension – partial                  | 5               | 5   |
| Disqualification                      | 1               | 1   |
| No breach and, therefore, no sanction | 1               | 1   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                          | <b>14</b>       | <b>14</b>                                   |

## Decisions on Interim Reports and Interim Suspensions

Section 21 of the Ethical Standards Act provides the Standards Commission with the power to impose an interim suspension on a councillor or member of a devolved public body following receipt of an interim report from the ESC about an ongoing investigation.

In determining whether to impose an interim suspension, a Panel of the Standards Commission will consider the following:

- ▶ whether the allegations being investigated by the ESC could potentially amount, if established, to a breach of the applicable Code of Conduct; and
- ▶ whether the further conduct of the ESC's investigation is likely to be prejudiced if such an action is not taken; or
- ▶ that it is otherwise in the public interest to take such a measure.

Any decision by the Standards Commission to impose an interim suspension is not, and should not be seen as, a finding on the merits of any complaint or the validity of any allegations against a councillor or member of a devolved public body, nor should it be viewed as a disciplinary measure. Information about any decisions, made under Section 21 of the Act and the policy outlining how the Standards Commission makes any decision under section can be found on the Standards Commission website at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/details-of-alleged-breach>

Any period of interim suspension imposed will automatically end if:

- ▶ the issuing of a finding that there has not been a breach of the Code;
- ▶ the Standards Commission receives an investigation report but decides not to hold a Hearing; or
- ▶ the Standards Commission receives an investigation report and holds a Hearing (and either finds a breach and imposes a sanction or finds no breach has occurred).

A Panel of the Standards Commission can choose to discontinue an interim suspension at any time on receipt of any new and relevant information, if it is no longer satisfied that it is proportionate and in the public interest for it to be in place.

The Standards Commission received no new interim reports from the ESC in 2020/21. The Standards Commission renewed an interim suspension imposed on a councillor in 2019/20, however, while the ESC's investigation remained ongoing. The ESC concluded the investigation and referred the case to the Standards Commission in 2020/21. The interim suspension remained in place until a Hearing was held.

## Appeals

Appeals can be made, under Section 21 of the Ethical Standards Act, to the sheriff principal of the sheriffdom in which the relevant council or devolved public body has its principal office against any decision by the Standards Commission to:

- ▶ find a breach of a Code of Conduct;
- ▶ to impose a suspension or disqualification, as a result of the finding of breach; and
- ▶ to impose an interim suspension.

One appeal was made in 2020/21 by a respondent against a decision made by a Panel of the Standards Commission, at a Hearing on 10 September 2020, to find him in breach of the Councillors' Code of Conduct and to disqualify him. At a hearing on 4 February 2021, a Sheriff Principal determined that the Panel should not have proceeded with the Hearing in the absence of the respondent, who was self-isolating (having been in close contact with an individual who had tested positive for Covid-19). The Sheriff Principal did not consider, or make any finding, on the Panel's decisions on breach and sanction, but remitted the matter back to the Standards Commission to consider at a new Hearing. The new Hearing will be held in early 2021/22.

## Timescales

The Standards Commission usually aims to hold Hearings no earlier than six weeks and no later than 12 weeks after the date on which the decision to hold a Hearing is made. This timescale allows sufficient notice to be given to the parties (being the ESC and the respondent) and anyone else who wishes to attend or observe the Hearing (including the media and members of the public). It also allows the parties time to prepare, which includes submitting any relevant and material evidence, and asking witnesses to appear.

The Standards Commission has to consider, and balance, a number of factors when scheduling Hearings. These include the availability of its part-time Members (who form the Hearing Panels), the parties and suitable premises (if the Hearing is to be held in person). In addition, as the Standards Commission only employs three members of staff (full-time equivalent 2.8), it has to allow a sufficient gap between Hearings in order for the team to prepare fully for each.

The Rules provide that a Panel may, at its own discretion or on the application of any of the parties, postpone or adjourn a Hearing. Before any postponement or adjournment is granted,

the Panel will consider both the public interest in the expeditious disposal of the case; and any inconvenience or prejudice to the parties and to witnesses. In making such a decision, the Panel will also be mindful of the fact that delays to Hearings can lead to the quality of available evidence being eroded, as memories can fade with time.

## Standards Commission's Timescales 2020/21

Information about the timescales involved in the Hearings held to date in 2020/21 is outlined in the table below. It should be noted that the ESC made 14 referrals between 1 April and 30 October 2020 in a seven-month period, with three cases referred in one week (the week commencing 27 April 2020) and five cases referred in one month (June 2020). For the reasons outlined above, the Standards Commission has to schedule gaps between Hearings and, as such, some were held more than 12 weeks after the decision to hold a Hearing was made. In addition, the existence of coronavirus related travel restrictions meant a number of Hearings were deferred or adjourned while alternative arrangements were made.

The number of referrals made, by month, is outlined in the graph below.

**Number of cases referred to Standards Commission by ESC  
April 2019 – March 2021**



Table 5: Standards Commission's Timescales 2020/21

| Report Reference(s) | Date report received | Date of decision to hold a Hearing | Hearing Date  |                     | Time between date of decision to hold a Hearing and start of the Hearing (in weeks) |
|---------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------|---|
|                     |                      |                                    | Date originally identified for Hearing  | Actual Hearing Date |   |
| LA/Fi/2268          | <b>25/03/20</b>      | 31/03/20                           | n/a*  | 24/08/20            | 21  |
| LA/R/2257           | <b>27/04/20</b>      | 29/04/20                           | 19/08/20<br>Adjourned at respondent's request and to conjoin with LA/R/3262 (same respondent) | 10/09/20            | 20  |
| LA/SL/2252          | <b>28/04/20</b>      | 29/04/20                           | 23/07/20  | 23/07/20            | 13  |
| LA/H/3003           | <b>30/04/20</b>      | 04/05/20                           | 08/07/20  | 08/07/20            | 10  |
| LA/AC/2276          | <b>08/06/20</b>      | 10/06/20                           | 08/09/20<br>Adjourned at respondent's request   | 22/10/20            | 20  |
| LA/WD/3016          | <b>10/06/20</b>      | 15/06/20                           | 14/09/20  | 14/09/20            | 14  |
| LA/AC/3199          | <b>16/06/20</b>      | 23/06/20                           | 06/10/20<br>Adjourned at respondent's request   | 20/11/20            | 22  |
| LA/Mo/3132          | <b>26/06/20</b>      | 02/07/20                           | 12/10/20  | 12/10/20            | 15  |
| LA/Fi/3125          | <b>29/06/20</b>      | 02/07/20                           | 15/10/20<br>Adjourned at respondent's request   | 09/11/20            | 19  |
| LA/R/3262           | <b>16/07/20</b>      | 17/07/20                           | 19/08/20  | 10/09/20            | 8   |
| LA/Fi/3039 & 3075   | <b>22/07/20</b>      | 27/07/20                           | 23/11/20  | 23/11/20            | 18  |
| LA/ER/3271          | <b>10/08/20</b>      | 12/08/20                           | 13/11/20  | 13/11/20            | 14  |
| LA/Fi/3278          | <b>28/09/20</b>      | 01/10/20                           | 16/12/20  | 16/12/20            | 11  |
| LA/SI/3305          | <b>08/10/20</b>      | 12/10/20                           | 17/12/20  | 17/12/20            | 10  |
| LA/OI/3265          | <b>30/10/20</b>      | 01/11/20                           | 18/01/21  | 18/01/21            | 12  |

**KEY**

Report received before 31 March 2020

\*No initial date scheduled as Standards Commission waiting to see if Coronavirus restrictions would be lifted to determine whether it could accommodate respondent's preference for a Hearing in person.




# SECTION 5: SUMMARY OF CASES

## Hearings

Summaries of all Hearings conducted by the Standards Commission in 2020/21 can be found below. The full written decisions are published online at:

[www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/case-list](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/case-list)

| CASE                         |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| LA/H/3003 – Highland Council |   |
| Date of Hearing              | 8 July 2020 (online)  |
| Complaint                    | The complaint alleged that the respondent had failed to declare a non-financial interest at a meeting of the Council's Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee.   |
| Decision                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the respondent moved, and voted on, a motion to approve additional funds for work relating to Skye Airport/Aerodrome; and for him, as Committee Chair, to write to the Transport Secretary on behalf of the Council and also on behalf of Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (HITRANS), requesting support.</li> <li>2. The Panel noted that HITRANS was a member of a working group established for the purpose of developing Skye Aerodrome into an airport and that the respondent had been Chair of HITRANS since June 2017. The Panel noted that the post was unremunerated.</li> <li>3. The Panel considered that, having applied the objective test under paragraph 5.3, the respondent should have reached the view, in terms of paragraph 5.7, that his interest in HITRANS, as a member of the Working Group, would not be perceived as being so remote and insignificant that it could not influence him.</li> <li>4. The Panel noted the terms of the specific exclusion under paragraph 5.18 of the Code that allows councillors who were members of regional transport partnerships, such as HITRANS, to take part in the consideration and discussion of, and to vote upon, a matter relating to that regional transport partnership. The Panel noted however, that the specific exclusion only applies if the councillor declares his or her interest at all meetings where such matters are to be discussed. In this case, despite confirming that he was aware of the specific exclusion, the Panel found that the respondent had failed to declare an interest at the Committee meeting before taking part in the discussion and decision-making.</li> <li>5. The Panel concluded, therefore, that the respondent had breached paragraphs 5.3, 5.7 and 5.18 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| Sanction                     | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes and offered an unreserved apology in respect of the failure to declare the interest.</li> <li>2. Accepted the respondent's submission that the failure to comply with the Code was inadvertent and an oversight.</li> <li>3. Was of the view that the respondent's conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction as there was no evidence that he had attempted to conceal his interest or that there was any personal gain. The Panel further noted that while it had found that the respondent had not declared the interest as required, had he done so, he would still have been allowed to take part in the discussion and decision-making under the specific exclusion in the Code for members of regional transport partnerships.</li> </ol>   |



| CASE            | LA/SL/2252 – South Lanarkshire Council  |
|-----------------|---|
| Date of Hearing | 23 July 2020 (online)   |
| Complaint       | The complaint alleged that the respondent had failed to declare the interest of a close relative in a matter being considered at a special meeting of the Council's Housing and Technical Resources Committee.  |
| Decision        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that a report proposing a budget saving through the redesign of the Council's Housing Repairs Standby (Out of Hours) service was considered at a meeting of the Council's Housing and Technical Resources Committee.</li> <li>2. The Panel noted that the respondent did not declare an interest and took part in the decision-making on the matter. This was despite being aware that his son participated voluntarily in the Out of Hours service as part of his employment with the Council and was also a local representative of a trade union that had expressed concerns about the budget savings proposal, and its potential impact on service delivery and the employees' earnings.</li> <li>3. The Panel was of the view that, having erred on the side of caution (as he was advised to do under paragraph 5.2 of the Code), and having applied the objective test under paragraph 5.3, the respondent should have concluded, in terms of paragraphs 5.10 and 5.12, that the financial and non-financial interest of his son (being a close relative) in the matter would not be perceived as being so remote and insignificant, or unclear and unsubstantial, that it could not influence him.</li> <li>4. The Panel concluded that the respondent's failure to declare an interest at the meeting on question amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 5.2, 5.3, 5.10 and 5.12 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| Sanction        | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes.</li> <li>2. Accepted that the respondent's decision-making and voting had not been influenced, in any way, by his son's interests in the matter.</li> <li>3. Emphasised that the requirement for councillors to declare certain interests is a fundamental requirement of the Code. A failure to do so removes the opportunity for openness and transparency in a councillor's role and denies members of the public the opportunity to consider whether a councillor's interests may or may not influence their discussion, decision-making and voting.</li> <li>4. Was nevertheless of the view that the respondent's conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction as there was no evidence that there was any personal gain or that the respondent had attempted to conceal his son's employment or connection to the matter.</li> </ol>  |




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| <b>CASE</b>            | LA/Fi/2268 – Fife Council  |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | 24 August 2020 (online)  |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint alleged that the respondent had failed to declare an interest at a meeting of the Council's Community and Housing Services Committee.  |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the respondent attended a meeting of Fife Council's Community &amp; Housing Services Committee when a report relating to a request by Benarty Community Council to change its boundary was considered. After the Committee agreed to a review, the Council conducted a consultation on a proposed change to the boundary.</li> <li>2. The Panel noted that, during the consultation period, the respondent sent a private message about the consultation via Facebook Messenger to five recipients, in which she stated that she was contacting them to make sure they "have voted against any change to the Community Council Boundary" and asking them to ensure that members of their families also voted 'no' to any change. The Panel further noted that it was accepted that the respondent also sent six emails to members of her family in similar terms. The Panel noted that the messages had entered the public domain.</li> <li>3. The Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the Committee agreed to confirm a change to the boundary, as detailed in the report that was the subject of the consultation. The Panel further noted that the respondent accepted that she had not declared an interest at the Committee meeting in respect of the matter and had not left the room while it was being considered.</li> <li>4. The Panel noted that councillors are required to refrain from making public statements about pending quasi-judicial and regulatory matters, in order to avoid any perception that they have pre-judged a decision. In this case, however, the Panel was satisfied that the matter being considered by the Committee was not quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature.</li> <li>5. The Panel was satisfied that the restriction on pre-judging matters did not apply to other decisions councillors were asked to make. This was because councillors are entitled to have, and publicly express, views and opinions on policy matters and matters of local interest (which are not of a quasi-judicial or regulatory nature). The Panel considered that the requirements of the Code should not limit councillors from discussing or debating matters of policy or strategy. In this case, the Panel was satisfied that the respondent was entitled to contact her friends and family to express an opinion and to encourage them to support her preferred option.</li> <li>6. The Panel considered that, generally, to constitute an 'interest', a councillor's personal circumstances would have to be capable of being advantaged to a greater extent than other members of the public by the decision to be taken on the matter in question. In this case, the Panel determined that there was no evidence or suggestion of such a benefit or advantage to the respondent or to any person or organisation connected to her.</li> <li>7. The Panel concluded that the respondent's failure to declare an interest at the meeting in question did not amount to a contravention of paragraphs 5.3 and 5.7 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | Not applicable.  |

| CASE                                    |   |
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| LA/R/2257 & 3262 – Renfrewshire Council |   |
| Date of Hearing                         | 10 September 2020   |
| Complaint                               | The complaints alleged that the respondent had bullied, and behaved in a disrespectful manner towards, colleagues and officers.   |
| Preliminary Matters                     | <p>The Hearing was scheduled for 09:30 on 10 September 2020, having been rescheduled at the respondent's request. Having waited for the respondent who had failed to attend, the Panel started the Hearing at 09:40. The Panel was satisfied it could do so in terms of the Hearing Rules as it had evidence before it that the respondent had been provided with adequate notice of the Hearing. The Panel noted that the respondent had attended an online pre-Hearing meeting.</p> <p>The Panel proceeded to hear submissions from the Ethical Standards Commissioner's representative and evidence from the two complainers, being two other Renfrewshire councillors.</p> <p>It was only after having heard evidence from two witnesses and submissions from the ESC's representative and having retired to deliberate, that the Panel discovered that the respondent had sent the Standards Commission an email late the previous day advising that he had been in contact with someone who had tested positive for Covid-19 and therefore felt he had to self-isolate. The Panel considered whether it should continue with the Hearing in the respondent's absence.</p> <p>The Panel did not consider that the respondent had taken all reasonable steps to advise it that he would not be attending. The Panel noted that, despite being required to do so, the respondent had not submitted a statement of case to the Standards Commission and had not cooperated fully with the ESC's investigation. The Panel noted that he had not disputed that he had sent the emails that were the subject of the complaints or that he disputed the video evidence of the Council meeting, that was also the subject of one of the complaints.</p> <p>Having weighed up a number of options on how best to proceed in the circumstances, the Panel was satisfied that it had sufficient evidence before it to make a decision on breach. The Panel was further satisfied that, given the opportunities previously provided, but not taken, by the respondent to make submissions on the complaint it considered that it was reasonable to proceed to make the decision in his absence.</p> <p>Having made a decision on breach, the Panel adjourned to provide the respondent with an opportunity to submit any comments he wished to make in respect of mitigation before it made a decision on sanction. A decision on sanction was then issued on 28 September 2020.</p> |
| Decision                                | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In respect of the first complaint, the Hearing Panel noted that the respondent was unhappy about the allocation of a council property to the family member of another elected member. The allocation was the subject of a review by the Council's Chief Auditor and then Audit Scotland, who concluded that the Council property was appropriately let and that there was no influence, or opportunity for influence, over the selection process, by any elected member.</li> <li>2. The Panel accepted that the respondent was entitled to raise concerns about the allocation of council housing, particularly if he was doing so on behalf of a constituent. The Panel noted, however, that it was the manner in which he had pursued the matter, via a number of emails sent to other councillors, senior officers and a journalist over a period of some seven months, and via comments made in public at a Council meeting, that was unacceptable.</li> <li>3. The Panel found that the respondent had embarked upon a course of conduct in which he accused the complainer of lying, corruption, cronyism and covering up criminal activity. He had further accused senior officers of covering up the housing allocation matter, of bullying and intimidating staff and of engaging in conduct that was bordering on the criminal.</li> <li>4. The Panel was satisfied that the respondent's accusations, made in his emails, and at the Council meeting, amounted to unjustified personal attacks which were offensive and abusive.</li> <li>5. Turning to the second complaint, the Panel found that the respondent had breached the Code by making a number of gratuitous personal comments and offensive, demeaning remarks about a fellow councillor in an email sent to the other councillor and circulated to other parties. In addition, the Panel found that the respondent made remarks about someone going round to the other councillor's house and inflicting personal harm on him. The Panel considered that the contents of the email were disrespectful, demeaning and, further, amounted to harassment towards the other councillor.</li> <li>6. The Panel concluded that the respondent's behaviour amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and paragraphs 2 and 20 of Annex C of the Code.</li> </ol>   |




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| <p><b>Sanction</b></p> | <p>The Panel disqualified the respondent from being, or being nominated for election as, or from being elected, a councillor for a period of 17 months. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that despite being provided with an opportunity to do so, the respondent declined to offer any submissions in mitigation.</li> <li>2. Was particularly concerned that the respondent had continued to subject senior officers to repeated and unmerited abuse, despite them having agreed to review the housing allocation matter. The Panel was also concerned about the scale and seriousness of the allegations made, particularly in the context of the respondent having not provided any evidence to support his accusations and the officers having no right of public reply.</li> <li>3. Noted that the Standards Commission had previously suspended the respondent for breaches of the respect provisions in the Code at Hearings on 17 October 2016 and 23 October 2017, with the latter suspension being for a period of seven months. While the Panel was aware that the previous Hearings had taken place, and the suspensions imposed had expired, before the events in respect of the complaints that were the subject of this Hearing had occurred, it nevertheless considered that it was apparent the respondent had not learnt from the previous suspensions. In particular, there was no evidence that the respondent had made any attempt to moderate his behaviour or consider how it could impact others.</li> <li>4. Determined that the respondent's behaviour was persistent, deliberate and serious in nature. The Panel considered that the manner in which the respondent had raised his concerns was completely unacceptable and that amounted to personal attacks on officers and fellow councillors. The Panel considered that, as such, it was likely that the respondent's behaviour could seriously undermine public confidence in local government and the role of a councillor and could also have a significantly detrimental impact on working relationships within the Council.</li> <li>5. Given the repeated breaches of the Code's respect provisions conveyed by email to councillors, council officers and the press, the Panel was of the view that simply suspending the respondent from future Council meetings was insufficient and would not prevent the conduct from recurring. It determined, therefore, that disqualification was necessary and appropriate in the circumstances.</li> </ol> |
| <p><b>Appeal</b></p>   | <p>The respondent lodged an appeal against both the Panel's decision on breach and sanction. The Sheriff Principal heard the appeal on 4 February 2021. While the Sheriff Principal did not consider the merits of the decision, he found that the Panel had not exercised its discretion reasonably in deciding to proceed in the respondent's absence. As such, the Sheriff Principal quashed the decision and remitted the matter back to the Standards Commission for reconsideration at another Hearing.</p> <p>A new Hearing was scheduled to be held on 7 April 2021.</p>  |



| CASE                                     |  |
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| LA/WD/3016 – West Dunbartonshire Council |  |
| Date of Hearing                          | 14 September 2020  |
| Complaint                                | The complaint alleged that the respondent behaved disrespectfully towards a council officer and had disclosed confidential information at a Special Council Meeting.   |
| Decision                                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel found that the respondent breached the Code when he spoke to a Council employee, in what witnesses described as an aggressive and demeaning manner, prior to a Special Council meeting.</li> <li>2. The Panel further found that, at the Council meeting that same day, the respondent disclosed confidential information which had been redacted from an Internal Audit report. This referred to the name of an individual, company and contractor who had been awarded Council contracts.</li> <li>3. The Panel found that while the respondent may have considered it was in the public interest for the information to be disclosed, the fact that the information had been redacted from the report meant that it was apparent the information was confidential and was to be treated as such.</li> <li>4. The Panel concluded that the respondent's behaviour amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 3.3 and 3.17 of the Code.</li> </ol>   |
| Sanction                                 | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent's entitlement to attend the next two ordinary council meetings of the Council. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes.</li> <li>2. Noted that the respondent had offered an apology to the Standards Commission in respect of his conduct towards the council officer, after the matter had been referred to it.</li> <li>3. Considered that the requirement for councillors to behave in a respectful manner towards officers, and to maintain confidentiality, are important parts of the Code, as a failure to do so can undermine the effective running of the Council. The Panel noted that councillors should be able to undertake their scrutiny role in a constructive, respectful, courteous and appropriate manner without resorting to personal attacks or being offensive or demeaning. In this case, the respondent had failed to conduct himself in a courteous and respectful manner.</li> <li>4. Was of the view that the Code made it clear that confidential information should not be disclosed, even if a councillor held a personal view that it was in the public interest to disclose it. The Panel considered that the disclosure had not been inadvertent. The Panel was of the view that the deliberate nature of the second breach and the fact that there had been two contraventions (albeit in respect of different provisions in the Code), meant that a censure was not appropriate and that a suspension should be imposed.</li> <li>5. Was nevertheless of the view that the respondent's conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction. This was because there was no personal benefit to the respondent and the events in question had been confined to one day.</li> </ol> |



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| <b>CASE</b>            | <b>LA/Mo/3132 – Moray Council</b>   |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | <b>12 October 2020 (online)</b>   |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint alleged that the respondent had failed to register a remunerated position with the Board of NHS Grampian and failed to declare the interest at a meeting of the Council.  |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the respondent had failed to include her remunerated position as a member of the board of NHS Grampian on her register of interests. The Panel further noted that the respondent had taken steps immediately to rectify the omission when it was brought to her attention and had apologised for her oversight.</li> <li>2. The Panel was satisfied that it was the respondent's personal responsibility to ensure the interest had been included timeously in her Register of Interests and that a failure to do so amounted to a breach of the Code.</li> <li>3. The Panel noted that it was also not in dispute that at a meeting of the Council, the respondent did not declare a formal interest when an item of business on the agenda relating to a formal response from the Council, which was to be sent to the Chief Executive and the Chair of NHS Grampian, regarding a consultation on the future of children's services at a local hospital, was to be discussed. While the respondent stood down as Chair while the item was being discussed, she did not leave the Chamber.</li> <li>4. The Panel considered that, having erred on the side of caution and having applied the objective test, the respondent should have reached the view that her interest would not be perceived as being so remote and insignificant that it could not influence her potential discussion and decision-making on the matter under consideration.</li> <li>5. The Panel noted the terms of a specific exclusion under paragraph 5.18 of the Code that allows councillors who are also members or directors of certain other devolved public bodies (including NHS Grampian Board), to take part in the consideration and discussion of, and to vote upon, a matter relating to that body. The Panel noted, however, that the specific exclusion only applies if the councillor has declared his or her interest at the meeting where the matter is to be discussed. The Panel determined that the specific exclusion did not apply, and the respondent should have left the room and made it clear she was not taking part in the discussion and decision-making.</li> <li>6. The Panel concluded that the respondent's failure to register her interest in NHS Grampian and her failure to declare it at the meeting in question amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 4.1, 4.2, 4.11, 5.2, 5.3, 5.5, 5.6 and 5.13 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted the evidence presented in respect of the respondent's good character and public service.</li> <li>2. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes and had offered an unreserved apology in respect of the failure to register and declare the interest.</li> <li>3. Accepted the respondent's submission that the failure to comply with the Code was inadvertent and an oversight.</li> <li>4. Emphasised that the requirement for councillors to register and declare certain interests is a fundamental requirement of the Code. A failure to do so removes the opportunity for openness and transparency in a councillor's role and denies members of the public the opportunity to consider whether a councillor's interests may or may not influence their discussion and decision-making. The Panel noted that, while advice can be sought from officers, it remains a councillor's personal responsibility to be aware of the provisions in the Code and to ensure that he or she complies with them.</li> <li>5. Noted that while it had found that the respondent had not declared the interest as required, had she done so, she would still have been allowed to take part in the discussion and decision-making under the specific exclusion in the Code for councillors who have been approved as a member or director of certain devolved public bodies.</li> </ol>   |




| CASE                               |  |
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| LA/AC/2276 – Aberdeen City Council |  |
| Date of Hearing                    | 22 October 2020 (online)   |
| Complaint                          | The complaint alleged that the respondent disclosed confidential information concerning the Council’s budget at a Community Council meeting.   |
| Decision                           | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the respondent was sent papers labelled “Aberdeen City Council Preparation of Budget 2019/20 Councillor Pack” ahead of the Council’s budget meeting. Each page of the budget pack contained a header, in blue, with the text “CONFIDENTIAL”. The Panel noted that the covering sheet contained text, in red, to the effect that the folder contained confidential information that “must not” be disclosed to any third party.</li> <li>2. The Panel noted that the overview section of the budget pack referred to a budget gap of £45 million, relating to rising costs and falling service income. The Panel noted, however, that the covering sheet to the folder advised councillors that further information continued to be provided and, as such, “uncertainty remains”.</li> <li>3. The Panel further noted that it was also not in dispute that the respondent attended a public meeting of Cults, Bieldside and Milltimber Community Council, in her capacity as an Aberdeen City councillor and that while the respondent did not intend to disclose the figure of £45 million, she had done so under scrutiny from the Community Council members.</li> <li>4. The Panel accepted the respondent’s position that certain matters in the budget pack were already in the public domain. The Panel considered, however, that it was evident that the budget gap of £45 million was an essential element of the matters to be discussed at the forthcoming budget meeting. As such, the Panel was of the view that this sum should be kept confidential.</li> <li>5. The Panel concluded that the respondent’s actions, in disclosing confidential information at the Community Council meeting amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 3.16 and 3.17 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| Sanction                           | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes.</li> <li>2. Heard that the respondent had been a councillor for some 13 years, with an unblemished record. The Panel further heard that the respondent took her position as a councillor very seriously and that she worked hard to serve her community.</li> <li>3. Agreed that it is legitimate and important for officers to be able to consult, in confidence, with elected members in respect of a council’s finance and budget, in order to manage internal and external communications, and avoid causing any undue concern or alarm to those potentially affected (staff and service users) before expenditure and any savings options are finalised. The Panel found that the respondent had failed to maintain confidentiality as required by the Code</li> <li>4. Was nevertheless of the view that the respondent’s conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction as the Panel had no reason to doubt the respondent’s position that the disclosure was unintentional and that it had not been made for personal or party-political reasons. The Panel further noted that the contravention had been a one-off incident and that the respondent had herself highlighted the circumstances to the Council’s co-leaders and Monitoring Officer shortly afterwards.</li> </ol>  |






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| <b>CASE</b>            | <b>LA/Fi/3125 – Fife Council</b>  |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | <b>9 November 2020 (online)</b>   |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint alleged that the respondent failed to declare a non-financial interest at a special meeting of the Council’s North East Fife Area Committee.  |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that it was not in dispute that the respondent had been appointed by the Council as a member of the St Andrews Links Management Committee. The respondent’s membership was recorded, as a non-financial interest, on his Register of Interests.</li> <li>2. The Panel heard that it was not in dispute that an application by the St Andrews Rail Link Campaign for funding from the Local Community Planning Budget to pay for VAT on a transport feasibility study was being considered at a meeting of the North East Fife Area Committee. The Panel noted that the study would include considering a potential rail link that may require to be routed through the grounds of the hotel linked to one of the golf courses, the golf practice centre and the Links Trust’s building. It also would require the diversion of holes on two golf courses. The Panel heard that the respondent failed to declare an interest and moved a motion to refuse the funding application.</li> <li>3. The Panel considered that a member of the public, with knowledge of the respondent’s membership of the St Andrews Links Management Committee membership, would reasonably regard it as an interest that was sufficiently significant to be likely to prejudice his discussion and decision-making on an application for funding in respect of a feasibility study that could help facilitate the creation of a rail link, being something that could have a detrimental impact on the golf courses and recreational areas run by the St Andrews Links Trust.</li> <li>4. The Panel concluded that the respondent’s failure to declare his interest at the meeting in question amounted to a contravention of paragraphs of 5.3, 5.7 and 5.8 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes and had offered a sincere and unreserved apology in respect of the failure to declare the interest.</li> <li>2. Further noted the positive character references made and submitted on the respondent’s behalf, confirming that he was a committed, diligent and conscientious local representative, who actively sought to assist the communities he served and who worked hard in their interests.</li> <li>3. Considered that the respondent should have erred on the side of caution when applying the objective test and should, therefore, have declared an interest in the matter before the Committee and withdrawn from the room while it was being discussed.</li> <li>4. Was nevertheless of the view that the respondent’s conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction. This was because there was no evidence that the respondent had attempted to conceal his interest or that there was any personal gain. The Panel accepted the respondent’s submission that the failure to comply with the Code was inadvertent and that his decision-making at the committee meeting had been influenced by a number of factors other than his membership of the St Andrews Links Management Committee.</li> </ol>   |



| CASE                                   |   |
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| LA/ER/3271 – East Renfrewshire Council |   |
| Date of Hearing                        | 13 November 2020 (online)   |
| Complaint                              | The complaint alleged that the respondent failed to conduct himself in an appropriate manner during an exchange with a fellow councillor in Council offices.  |
| Decision                               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that the exchange stemmed from a previous difference of opinion between the two councillors (the respondent and the complainer), relating to the health and social care budget. The Council's overall budget had been discussed at a full Council meeting held on the previous day.</li> <li>2. Having viewed footage of the Council meeting, the Panel was satisfied that the complainer had repeated a remark she claimed had been made by another individual, that 'the word eugenics comes to mind' in respect of the respondent's position in relation to a savings proposal. The complainer had also commented that the respondent had a "vested interest" as a drug sales representative. While the Panel noted that the complainer may have believed these remarks to be true, it accepted the respondent's position that they were not.</li> <li>3. The Panel found that the respondent had called the councillor a "wee fat ugly liar", and in doing so, had been discourteous and disrespectful towards her. The Panel further found that the respondent had shouted at the councillor during the exchange and that his demeanour, tone and body language were aggressive and intimidating.</li> <li>4. The Panel was satisfied that the respondent's conduct was unwelcome and would have left the councillor feeling humiliated and intimidated and concluded that his behaviour also amounted to harassment.</li> <li>5. The Panel found the respondent had breached paragraphs 3.2 and 3.6 of the Code.</li> </ol>             |
| Sanction                               | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent from attending full Council meeting for one month. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigatory and adjudicatory processes.</li> <li>2. Considered that it was understandable that that respondent would have been frustrated and upset about the remarks made by the councillor about him at the public Council meeting the previous day and, in particular, the inference that he was a supporter of eugenics, being an accusation that he strongly denied. The Panel accepted that the exchange was the first time the respondent had seen the complainer since the meeting, and that he had been motivated by a desire to seek an apology and an admission that her remarks had no basis.</li> <li>3. Was satisfied that the incident was a one-off, was of limited duration and that there was no evidence of any previous transgressions by the respondent.</li> <li>4. Considered that the requirement for councillors to refrain from conduct that is discourteous, disrespectful and that could amount to harassment, is an important feature of the Code, as a failure to do so can undermine relationships and public confidence in the role of a councillor and the Council itself.</li> <li>5. Noted that councillors should be able to make points and engage with each other in a constructive, respectful, courteous and appropriate manner, without resorting to personal attacks or being offensive, threatening and demeaning.</li> </ol> |




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| <b>CASE</b>            | <b>LA/AC/3199 – Aberdeen City Council</b>   |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | <b>20 November 2020 (online)</b>  |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint concerned the respondent's conviction for sexual assault.   |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel was satisfied that the respondent had sexually assaulted an individual at an event being held by the Seven Incorporated Trades Association.</li> <li>2. The Panel was of the view that it would have been reasonable for an informed member of the public to have perceived that the respondent was acting as a councillor at the event. This was for a variety of reasons, including that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the invitations had been sent to group leaders, as elected members in the expectation that councillors would be attending;</li> <li>• there was a long-established relationship between the Seven Incorporated Trades organisation and the Council; and</li> <li>• other attendees at the event would have known the respondent as being a councillor, as well as being the Deputy Provost (at the time).</li> </ul> <p>As such, the Panel was satisfied that the Code applied to the respondent at the time of the incident that resulted in the conviction.</p> </li> <li>3. The Panel was satisfied that, by sexually assaulting an individual at the event, the respondent had failed to treat that individual with courtesy and respect.</li> <li>4. The Panel noted the offence was committed at the individual's workplace and had no legitimate workplace purpose. The Panel was of the view that it was reasonable to conclude that the fact a complaint had been made to the police meant that the individual had not consented and was likely to have made to feel offended, humiliated and uncomfortable at work. As such, the Panel was satisfied that the respondent had harassed the individual.</li> <li>5. The Panel concluded that the respondent's conduct amounted to a contravention of paragraphs 3.2 and 3.6 of the Code.</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent for a period of 12 months. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated with the investigative and adjudicatory processes, albeit he had not been able to attend the Hearing.</li> <li>2. Was of the view that, in order to reflect how wholly inappropriate the respondent's behaviour had been, the maximum suspension of one year should be imposed.</li> <li>3. Was satisfied that the imposition of the maximum suspension would reflect the potential damage the respondent's conduct had inflicted on the public's confidence on the role of a councillor and the reputation of the Council.</li> <li>4. The Panel considered whether a sanction of disqualification should be imposed. The Panel noted that only a conviction giving rise to a period of custody of three months or more precludes the holding of the office of councillor in terms of Section 31 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. The Panel noted that the Sentencing Sheriff in the respondent's case, having heard the full account of the circumstances and its impact, had not considered the events in question that led to the conviction necessitated a custodial sentence. The Panel was of the view that, while the respondent's conduct was entirely unacceptable and would have been distressing and disturbing for the victim, there was no evidence before it to show that the respondent's conduct had been repeated or had extended beyond the incident in question. The Panel noted that the respondent had been a councillor since 2007 and that he had not previously been the subject of a referral to the Standards Commission. The Panel accepted that the respondent had already been punished by a criminal Court in respect of the incident that was the subject of the complaint. The Panel noted that the supervision period imposed on the respondent had ended and, further, he was no longer on the Sex Offenders' Register. In the circumstances, the Panel did not consider that disqualification was an appropriate sanction.</li> </ol> |



| CASE            | LA/Fi/3039 & 3075 – Fife Council   |
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| Date of Hearing | 23 November 2020 (online)  |
| Complaint       | The complaint alleged that the respondent had failed to treat two members of the public with courtesy and respect and had engaged in behaviour towards them that amounted to harassment.   |
| Decision        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that the matters before it concerned a dispute between a residents' group and the owners of a country house (the complainers), which was used as a wedding venue.</li> <li>2. The Panel noted the first matter concerned a message the respondent posted on the Residents' Facebook page. The Panel was of the view that it was evident to anyone reading the post, who had knowledge of the Residents' dispute, would have inferred that the respondent was blaming the owners of the country house or their staff of the acts of vandalism he had described. The Panel considered that the accusation was unfounded. The Panel further considered that, in making unfounded and serious allegations about the owners, on a public forum, the respondent had failed to treat them with courtesy and respect and had also engaged in behaviour towards the owners that amounted to harassment.</li> <li>3. The Panel found that, in the second matter, the respondent had responded to an email from a wedding guest in which he supplied incorrect and unverified information about whether a specific wedding had been held in contravention of an enforcement order. The Panel further found that the email had the potential to damage the complainers' business relationships, and in presenting it as a factual situation, the respondent had again failed to treat them with respect.</li> <li>4. The Panel found the respondent had breached paragraphs 3.2 and 3.6 of the Code.</li> <li>5. The Panel noted that the Ethical Standards Commission had referred a third matter, involving an incident where members of the residents' group had blocked the complainers' access to their property, to the Standards Commission as a breach of the Code. Having watched the video footage of the incident carefully, the Panel was satisfied that while the respondent was present, it was clearly evident that he had made some attempts to diffuse the situation and to usher others away from the access road. The Panel was not satisfied, therefore, that the respondent had failed to treat the complainers with courtesy and respect or that he had harassed them in respect of the third incident.</li> </ol> |
| Sanction        | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent from attending two full council meetings. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and adjudicatory processes.</li> <li>2. Noted the respondent's service and contribution to public life. The Panel accepted that the respondent was relatively inexperienced as a councillor at the time and that he now accepted that he may have become too personally vested in the dispute between the complainers and residents' group.</li> <li>3. Considered that councillors should be able to make points and engage with members of the public in a constructive, respectful, courteous and appropriate manner, without providing misleading information or resorting to personal attacks and being offensive. The panel found that the respondent had failed to conduct himself in a courteous and respectful manner and, instead, had behaved in a manner that amounted to harassment.</li> <li>4. Was concerned that the respondent had not considered the potential impact of his actions on the complainers and others.</li> <li>5. Was nevertheless of the view that the respondent's conduct did not warrant a more severe sanction. This was because the contraventions found were restricted to one social media post and an email, and there had been no personal gain.</li> </ol>  |



|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>CASE</b>            | <b>LA/Fi/3278 – Fife Council</b>   |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | <b>16 December 2020 (online)</b>   |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint alleged that the respondent disclosed confidential information on the re-opening of recycling centres following the first coronavirus lockdown.  |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that the respondent was appointed as a Director of Sustainability Fife Ltd and by Fife Council to the Board of Fife Resource Solutions (FRS). Both the Council and Sustainability Fife Ltd are members of FRS, being a limited liability partnership and arms-length external organisation established to provide recycling and waste disposal services on behalf of the Council.</li> <li>2. The Panel found that the respondent disclosed, firstly, in a Fife Conservative press release and later, on Facebook, information that had been discussed in the papers for, and at, a special meeting of the FRS Board. This was despite knowing the information was to remain confidential until such a time as the Council had agreed to the proposals, that full arrangements for their implementation had been put in place, and for communications to be managed accordingly.</li> <li>3. The Panel heard evidence that it was important for arrangements to be put in place including a booking system for the public so that traffic could be managed safely, staff could be notified of the re-opening of the sites and given appropriate safety training, and decisions could be made and implemented about what items could and could not be disposed of, in conjunction with proposed bulky uplift arrangements. The Panel found that the respondent, in disclosing the information before these arrangements were made, and contrary to the decision made at the meeting, had failed to act in the best interests of FRS, as required by the Councillors' Code of Conduct.</li> <li>4. The Panel concluded that the respondent had breached paragraph 3.19 of the Code.</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent from attending all meetings of Fife Council, and all meetings of any other body on which he was a representative or nominee of the council, for two months. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes.</li> <li>2. Reviewed various character references submitted on behalf of the respondent and noted that these indicated he took his position as a councillor very seriously and that he worked hard to assist his constituents and improve communities within his ward.</li> <li>3. Noted that, as a result of him having disclosed the information, the respondent was no longer a Director of Sustainability Fife Ltd or a member of the Board of FRS.</li> <li>4. Emphasised that the requirement for councillors to abide by the rules of conduct of any partner organisations they are appointed to is an important requirement of the Code. This includes acting in good faith and refraining from disclosing confidential information. The Panel noted that a failure to do so can damage the reputation and integrity of a Council and, further, can impede discussions and decision-making at meetings of the partner organisation.</li> <li>5. Was concerned that the respondent did not seem to recognise that divulging confidential information was not in the best interest of FRS and was, therefore, a breach of his duty to act in good faith. Instead, the respondent appeared to have chosen to act in the interests of his party and his role as a constituency representative.</li> <li>6. Noted that the question of when the information was to be disclosed was simply one of timing and did not, therefore, accept the respondent's argument that his overriding aim was to be transparent. It nevertheless noted that the contravention had been limited to the one incident.</li> </ol> |



|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>CASE</b>            | LA/SI/3305 – Shetland Islands Council   |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b> | 17 December 2020 (online)   |
| <b>Complaint</b>       | The complaint alleged that the respondent failed to register properly an interest and shareholding in a company.  |
| <b>Decision</b>        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel noted that the respondent had registered that he was a director of, and received remuneration from, a company. The Panel noted, however, that when the company changed its registered name, the respondent failed to record this in his Register of Interests, despite continuing to be a director.</li> <li>2. The Panel further noted that the respondent had failed to register his shareholding in the company.</li> <li>3. The Panel concluded that the respondent had breached paragraphs 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.11 and 4.21 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct dated July 2018, which concern the registration of certain interests. The failure to register the interests pre-dated the introduction of the current version of the Code. The Panel found, therefore, that the respondent had also breached the corresponding paragraphs in the version of the Code that was in place before July 2018; being paragraphs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.10 and 4.20.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Sanction</b>        | <p>The Panel censured the respondent. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes and had offered an unreserved apology to both the Panel and complainer in respect of the failure to register the interests.</li> <li>2. Had no reason to doubt the respondent's submission that the failure to comply with the Code was inadvertent and an oversight.</li> <li>3. Emphasised a failure to ensure a register is kept up to date, as required by the Code, removes the opportunity for openness and transparency in a councillor's role and denies members of the public the opportunity to consider whether the councillor's interests may or may not influence their discussion and decision-making.</li> </ol>   |

|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <b>CASE</b>                         |   |
| LA/OI/3265 – Orkney Islands Council |   |
| <b>Date of Hearing</b>              | 18 January 2021 (online)  |
| <b>Complaint</b>                    | The complaint alleged that the respondent disclosed confidential information and failed to show courtesy or respect towards members of the public.  |
| <b>Decision</b>                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Hearing Panel found that the respondent, in two Facebook posts published in March 2020, disclosed sensitive information about the Council’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. This was despite the information having been provided by officers to elected members at private briefings.</li> <li>2. The Panel was satisfied that it was evident to all that information provided at the briefings was to remain confidential until officers had time to prepare its public communications. The Panel noted that sometimes confidentiality and privacy is a matter of timing, in that information may eventually be released into the public domain. In this case, while the Panel noted that the respondent may have been trying to be open and transparent, so that members of the public were informed about decisions that had been and were to be made, it did not consider that he was entitled to disclose the information contained in when he did.</li> <li>3. The Panel was satisfied, from the witness evidence and submissions made, that it was clear that the briefings were intended to be private and to act as a safe space for elected members to receive information and discuss ideas. The Panel was satisfied that, as such, it should have been evident that discussions and information provided at them was not to be disclosed, even if this had not been explicitly stated at each and every one.</li> <li>4. The Panel agreed that there were legitimate reasons as to why the Senior Management Team would wish to ensure the information being shared at the briefings was kept confidential at that time, which included that proposals discussed may be adjusted or deferred prior to implementation, and the need to ensure that officers had sufficient time to prepare and manage communications to ensure that the Council’s position and response were represented fully, and that messages were drafted in a way that provided some reassurance and did not cause undue fear or alarm. The Panel noted that there was no evidence or suggestion that the respondent had taken issue with the Council’s proposed approach at any of the briefings or that he had sought advice about whether any information he intended to disclose was confidential.</li> <li>5. The Panel also found that the respondent disclosed, in another Facebook post in April 2020, that another councillor had passed away, despite having been told that the news was to be kept private until confirmation had been received that all family members had been advised of the news.</li> <li>6. The Panel found that the respondent had breached the privacy and confidentiality provisions in the Code in respect of all three posts. In addition, the Panel agreed that in sharing the news of the other councillor’s death, the respondent had also failed to demonstrate courtesy and respect towards the councillor’s family as required by the Code.</li> <li>7. The Panel concluded that the respondent had breached paragraphs 3.1, 3.2, 3.16 and 3.17 of the Code.</li> </ol> |
| <b>Sanction</b>                     | <p>The Panel suspended the respondent from attending meetings of the full council for three months. In reaching its decision, the Panel:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Noted that the respondent had co-operated fully with the investigative and Hearing processes.</li> <li>2. Noted that the respondent had served faithfully for some 35 years in public life and, throughout, has been committed to openness and transparency, being two of the key principles of public life.</li> <li>3. Further noted, from the numerous positive character references submitted on his behalf, that the respondent took his position as a councillor very seriously and worked hard to assist his constituents and improve communities within his ward.</li> <li>4. Was concerned about the respondent’s failure to understand the need to keep elected members briefings private and to maintain confidentiality, in order for them to be a safe space for discussion and information-sharing. The Panel noted this was despite it being clear, from the witness evidence, that other councillors had clearly understood this.</li> <li>5. Was further concerned that the respondent had failed to understand the importance of managing communications about sensitive topics and difficult decisions in a controlled and sensitive manner, in order to avoid causing undue alarm or anxiety. The Panel noted that the Code had been breached on more than one occasion and considered that the contraventions would have had a negative impact on officers, fellow councillors, the family of the deceased councillor and potentially the public.</li> </ol>  |

## Interim Suspensions

Section 21 of the Ethical Standards Act provides the Standards Commission with the power to impose an interim suspension on a councillor or member of a devolved public body on receipt of an interim report from the ESC about an ongoing investigation. The full written decisions in respect of any interim suspensions in place are published online at: [www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/details-of-alleged-breach](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/details-of-alleged-breach)

The decision to impose an interim suspension is not, and should not be seen as, a finding on the

merits of any complaint or the validity of any allegations against a councillor or member of a devolved public body.

Any period of interim suspension imposed will automatically end in any of the following circumstances:

- ▶ if the Standards Commission receives an investigation report but decides not to hold a Hearing; or
- ▶ if the Standards Commission receives an investigation report, holds a Hearing and imposes a sanction.

| CASE                                |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| LA/AC/3199 – Aberdeen City Council  |  |
| <b>Date</b>                         | Interim suspension initially imposed on 4 March 2020.<br>Renewed for a further 3 months on 2 June 2020 and renewed on 2 September 2020 until 6 October 2020, being the original date of the Hearing.<br>Following an adjournment, renewed on 2 October 2020 until 20 November 2020, being the date of the rescheduled Hearing (see details of Hearing above).  |
| <b>Background</b>                   | The ESC sent the Standards Commission an interim report concerning a councillor being convicted for a sexual assault, for it to consider imposing an interim sanction while the investigation was ongoing. The ESC's investigation concluded, and the case was referred to the Standards Commission, on 16 June 2020.  |
| <b>Interim Suspension Decisions</b> | The Panel noted that it appeared that the conduct complained of had taken place while the councillor attended an event in his capacity as a councillor and that it had resulted in him being convicted for a sexual assault and placed on the sex offenders register (being a further ground of complaint).<br>The Panel was satisfied that there was prima facie evidence of a serious contravention of the Councillors' Code, which, if upheld, was likely to attract a more severe sanction than a censure.<br>The Panel considered that public confidence in the ethical standards framework would be adversely affected if the councillor was allowed to continue to act while complaints of such a serious nature, involving criminal conduct, were outstanding against him. The Panel further considered that the Council's reputation could be adversely affected if an interim suspension was not imposed. The Panel noted that there could also be a risk to others if the conduct that was the subject of the conviction was repeated.<br>The Panel concluded, therefore, that it was satisfied that it was both proportionate and in public interest for it to impose an interim suspension until the complaint was considered at a Hearing. |



## SECTION 6: GOVERNANCE & FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2020/21

This section provides an overview of the Standards Commission's governance arrangements in 2020/21 and its financial performance.

### External Audit

Audit Scotland reported on its review of the Standards Commission's governance arrangements and audit of the Standards Commission's 2020/21 annual report and accounts. Audit Scotland's review identified the three key audit risks, which required specific audit testing. The first was the consideration of the risk of management override of controls in order to change the position disclosed in the financial statements. The second was the risk of fraud over expenditure, which applied to the Standards Commission as the small number of staff employed meant that there was a low degree of segregation of duties. The third was the impact of the retirement of the Business Manager at the end of 2020/21 (the size of the organisation means there is a high reliance on key individuals), particularly in respect of the preparation of the annual report and accounts.

Audit Scotland's main findings were that the Standards Commission had appropriate and proportionate financial planning arrangements in place, which aligned with its strategic plan. It further found that governance arrangements had continued as normal throughout 2020/21 and there were no specific issues arising as a result of Covid-19.

The Audit Report confirmed that the audit procedures did not uncover evidence of management override of controls or of fraud over expenditure and that the draft financial statements and working papers were prepared to a good standard. The Audit Report further confirmed that the financial statements give a true and fair view and were properly prepared in accordance with the financial reporting framework.

The 2020/21 Audit Report will be incorporated in the Standards Commission's audited Annual Accounts, which require to be laid before the Scottish Parliament no later than 31 December 2021.

### Internal Audit

The Standards Commission's internal auditor, the SPCB's Head of Internal Audit, reviewed the Standards Commission's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The overall aim of the review was to provide assurance to the Executive Director (as the Accountable Officer) and the Standards Commission, via its Audit & Risk Committee, that the arrangements and measures to respond to Government Regulations and Guidance are robust and have operated effectively, thereby ensuring risk is maintained at an acceptable level.

The Internal Auditor provided a report to the Standards Commission's Audit & Risk Committee confirming that, based on detailed testing, he was satisfied that a substantial level of assurance could be offered over the governance arrangements, controls and process developed and implemented by the Standards Commission in its responses to the Covid-19 global health emergency. In particular, the Internal Auditor noted that the Standards Commission responded effectively to the Covid-19 global health emergency by the early identification and managed implementation of alternative ways of working and holding Hearings. Key decisions were taken at an appropriate level by the full Standards Commission and were transparently and accurately recorded in publicly available minutes.

## Risk Management

The Standards Commission identifies and proactively manages risks that could impact on its ability to meet its strategic and business objectives. The Standards Commission's Risk Management Policy provides details of the organisation's approach to the management of risk and notes that the aim of the risk management framework is to:

- ▶ Provide the Standards Commission and others with assurance that threats are constrained and managed and that opportunities are appropriately exploited to the benefit of the organisation;
- ▶ Give confidence to those who scrutinise the Standards Commission about the robustness of its corporate governance arrangements; and
- ▶ Enable the Standards Commission to make informed decisions across its functions.

The Standards Commission agreed its Risk Register at the start of the operational year to ensure that risks to the implementation of the strategic and operational objectives were identified going forward. The Risk Register contained a score for each risk, which reflected the likelihood of it occurring and the impact should it occur, in light of the controls in place and actions taken.

The Standards Commission's Audit & Risk Committee reviewed the Risk Register, including the rating value for each risk and the risk tolerance level at each of its three meetings in 2020/21. A report of the review was thereafter provided for consideration by Members at the next available meeting of the Standards Commission.

During 2020/21, the Standards Commission identified the principle risks and uncertainties for the organisation as being, firstly, a loss of confidence in the overall ethical standards framework as a result of:

- ▶ The Standards Commission being unable to hold Hearings in a timely, fair and appropriate manner due to restrictions in place as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.
- ▶ Delays at the investigation stage.

- ▶ A lack of engagement between the Standards Commission and the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC); and/or a lack of consistency between Standards Commission and ESC in their respective approaches to interpreting the Codes and dealing with complaints.

- ▶ A failure by the Standards Commission to adhere to the timescales outlined in its Service Standards and Hearing Rules.

Work the Standards Commission undertook to mitigate this included developing policies and procedures that enabled it to hold and livestream Hearings online, when travel restrictions relating to the coronavirus pandemic were in place. As a result, the Standards Commission was able to conduct all Hearings in accordance with legislative requirements and its Hearing Rules within an average of 15 weeks from receipt of a report from the ESC. The Standards Commission also mitigated the risk by exercising its oversight role and issuing Directions to the ESC under Sections 10 and 11 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, ('the Ethical Standards Act'). The Directions required the ESC to:

- ▶ Provide interim reports on investigations into complaints about councillors and members of devolved public bodies where a period of three months had already expired. The purpose of this direction is to provide the Standards Commission with assurance that investigations into such complaints are being progressed without any undue delays and that the parties to any complaint are provided with regular progress updates, in order to ensure confidence in the overall ethical standards framework is maintained.
- ▶ Provide a report to the Standards Commission, at the conclusion of every investigation into a complaint about a councillor or member of a devolved public body received on or after 12 November 2020, outlining the findings and conclusions as to whether or not there has been a contravention of the relevant Code. The Direction means that the Standards Commission will make the final decision, under Section 16 of the Ethical Standards Act, on all complaints that have been investigated.

- Undertake an investigation into every complaint about a councillor and member of a devolved public body received, unless the conduct referred to in the complaint would not, even if it could be established to have occurred, constitute a contravention of the relevant Code of Conduct; the councillor or member has passed away or is an incapable adult within the meaning of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000; and/or the conduct that has or is alleged to have contravened relevant Code occurred (or in the case of a course of conduct ended) more than one year before the complaint was received. The aim of this Direction was to ensure there was clarity and consistency in respect of the criteria the ESC uses to assess whether complaints are eligible/admissible for investigation.

The Standards Commission further recognised that the size of the organisation meant that there remained an ongoing risk that the organisation would not be able to deliver its business effectively if Members or staff were unavailable for any reason (including as a result of having a conflict of interest), or if there was an influx of cases referred to it at any time and timely Hearing Panels could not be convened due to Members only working for the Standards Commission on a part-time basis. The Standards Commission acknowledged that the size of the organisation meant that there would always be an ongoing risk of disruption to business due to unplanned absences and staff turnover. It further recognised that its own timescales may have to be adjusted if fluctuations in the number of cases being referred to the Standards Commission at any time meant that it was unable to convene Hearing Panels as quickly as normal. Controls in place and specific actions taken in 2020/21 to mitigate these risks included:

- Conducting a full staffing review, with funding sought for a new Caseworker role as a result. Recruitment for the role was undertaken at the end of the year, with the successful candidate due to commence in post at the year-end.

- Monitoring of staffing performance and attendance by the Human Resources Committee to ensure the Standards Commission had sufficient capacity and capability to meet operational requirements. A full review of the policies and procedures in place to support staff during the coronavirus pandemic (including the arrangements for working from home), was also undertaken.
- Seeking and reviewing information about Member and staff availability before any Hearings were scheduled and before the composition of Hearing Panels was agreed.
- Holding Hearings, workshops and training events online while travel restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic were in place.

The number of complaints made and the consequent number of cases referred to the Standards Commission by the ESC is outwith the control of the Standards Commission; however the volume of referrals by the ESC impacts on the resources required to enable the Standards Commission to undertake its statutory functions. While the Standards Commission puts in place controls and identifies actions to mitigate the risks associated with this, it acknowledges that this will always have the potential to impact on its operational effectiveness and its ability to predict the operating budget.

The Audit & Risk Committee was, therefore, able to assure the Standards Commission that all risks had been effectively managed.

## Financial Performance

The financial information provided is a summary extracted from the Standards Commission for Scotland's Annual Accounts 2020/21. For further information about the Standards Commission's financial position, a full copy of the Annual Accounts 2020/21 can be found on its website at [www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/corporate-info/annual-accounts](http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/corporate-info/annual-accounts)

The Standards Commission's net expenditure on operating activities for the year ending 31 March 2021 amounted to £307,000 (2019/20, £248,000). The expenditure was divided between staff costs of £243,000 (2019/20, £229,000) and other administrative costs of £64,000 (2019/20, £30,000).

Staff costs include all remuneration paid to both staff and Members. Movement up the incremental payscales and the implementation of the SPCB's pay awards meant staff costs increased by £14,000 (compared to 2019/20).

Additional contingency funding of £19,260 was provided by the Scottish Government in respect of legal costs associated with an appeal. Actual expenditure in 2020/21 on the legal costs of the appeal was £14,772.

The overspend of £4,195 against the agreed budget (including contingency funding) of £302,000 largely arose from the costs incurred for legal advice in respect of the extent of the Standards Commission's oversight role and how directions issued to the ESC under Sections 10 and 11 of the Ethical Standards Act could be enforced. In addition, a provision of £5,500 in respect of expenses to be reimbursed to a pursuer following an appeal against a decision made by the Standards Commission in 2020/21 was recognised in the year. The overspend was partly offset by lower than expected Hearing related costs (including Member and staff travel and expenses), as the majority of hearings were held online rather than in person across the country.

In 2019/20, the Standards Commission recovered the sum of £10,871 in respect of expenses from an unsuccessful appeal lodged in 2018 against a decision by one of its Hearing Panels. No similar sums were recovered in 2020/21.

## Statement of Comprehensive Net Expenditure

|                                   | 2020-21    | 2019-20     |
|-----------------------------------|------------|-------------|
|                                   | £'000      | £'000       |
| <b>Administration costs</b>       |            |             |
| Staff costs                       | 243        | 229         |
| Other Administration costs        | 64         | 30          |
| <b>Gross Administration costs</b> | <b>307</b> | <b>259</b>  |
| <b>Operating Income</b>           | <b>-</b>   | <b>(11)</b> |
| <b>Net Operating costs</b>        | <b>307</b> | <b>248</b>  |

All amounts relate to continuing activities. There have been no gains or losses other than those recognised in the Statement of Comprehensive Net Expenditure.

## Other Administration Costs

|  | 2020-21   | 2019-20   |
|--|-----------|-----------|
|  | £'000     | £'000     |
| Fees for legal advice and representation                         | 42        | -         |
| Audit Fee  | 3         | 3         |
| Hearing costs accommodation                                      | -         | 1         |
| Information technology costs                                     | 2         | 2         |
| Printing and promotion costs                                     | 10        | 8         |
| General administration costs                                     | 2         | 4         |
| Recruitment  | 2         | -         |
| Members' travel and expenses                                     | 1         | 6         |
| Staff travel and expenses, and staff and Members' training costs | 2         | 6         |
|  | <b>64</b> | <b>30</b> |



INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

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# **Code of Conduct for Councillors**

**[This version of the Code of Conduct is not yet in force. It has been laid before the Scottish Parliament by the Scottish Ministers and will come into force after it has been approved by the Parliament.]**

# CODE OF CONDUCT FOR COUNCILLORS

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE CODE OF CONDUCT

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1.1 This Code has been issued by the Scottish Ministers, with the approval of the Scottish Parliament, as required by the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 (the “Act”).

1.2 The purpose of the Code is to set out the conduct expected of every elected member of a local authority in Scotland.

1.3 The Code is also directed at co-opted members of committees and sub-committees who are not elected councillors, including religious representatives on Education Committees.

1.4 The Code has been developed in line with the nine key principles of public life in Scotland. The principles are listed in Section 2 and set out how the provisions of the Code should be interpreted and applied in practice.

### **My Responsibilities**

1.5 I understand that the public has a high expectation of councillors and the way in which they should conduct themselves in undertaking their duties. I will always seek to meet those expectations by ensuring that I conduct myself in accordance with the Code.

1.6 I will comply with the substantive provisions of this Code, being sections 3 to 7 inclusive and Annex A, in all situations and at all times where I am acting as a councillor, have referred to myself as a councillor or could objectively be considered to be acting as a councillor.

1.7 I will comply with the substantive provisions of this Code, being sections 3 to 7 inclusive and Annex A, in all my dealings with the public, employees and fellow councillors, whether formal or informal.

1.8 I understand that it is my personal responsibility to be familiar with the provisions of the Code and that I must also comply with the law and my council’s rules, standing orders and regulations. I will also ensure that I am familiar with any guidance or advice notes issued by the Standards Commission for Scotland (“Standards Commission”) and my council, and endeavour to take part in any training offered on the Code.

1.9 I will not, at any time, advocate or encourage any action contrary to the Code.

1.10 I understand that no written information, whether in the Code itself or the associated Guidance or Advice Notes issued by the Standards Commission, can provide for all circumstances. If I am uncertain about how the Code applies, I will seek advice from my council’s Monitoring Officer or other senior council employees. I note that I may also choose to seek external legal advice on how to interpret the provisions of the Code.

## **Enforcement**

1.11 Part 2 of the Act sets out the provisions for dealing with alleged breaches of the Code, including the sanctions that can be applied if the Standards Commission finds that there has been a breach of the Code. More information on how complaints are dealt with and the sanctions available can be found at Annex C.

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## SECTION 2: KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT

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2.1 The Code has been based on the following key principles of public life. I will behave in accordance with these principles and understand that they should be used for guidance and interpreting the provisions in the Code.

2.2 I note that a breach of one or more of the key principles does not in itself amount to a breach of the Code. I note that, for a breach of the Code to be found, there must also be a contravention of one or more of the provisions in sections 3 to 7 inclusive and Annex A of the Code.

The key principles are:

### **Duty**

I have a duty to uphold the law and act in accordance with the law and the public trust placed in me. I have a duty to act in the interests of my council as a whole and all the communities served by it and a duty to be accessible to all the people of the area for which I have been elected to serve, and to represent their interests conscientiously.

### **Selflessness**

I have a duty to take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. I must not act in order to gain financial or other material benefit for myself, family or friends.

### **Integrity**

I must not place myself under any financial or other obligation to any individual or organisation that might reasonably be thought to influence me in the performance of my duties.

### **Objectivity**

I must make decisions solely on merit when carrying out public business including making appointments, awarding contracts or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits.

### **Accountability and Stewardship**

I am accountable to the public for my decisions and actions. I have a duty to consider issues on their merits, taking account of the views of others, and I must ensure that my council uses its resources prudently and in accordance with the law.

### **Openness**

I have a duty to be as open as possible about my decisions and actions, giving reasons for my decisions and restricting information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

**Honesty**

I have a duty to act honestly. I must declare any private interests relating to my public duties and take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

**Leadership**

I have a duty to promote and support these principles by leadership and example, and to maintain and strengthen the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of my council and its councillors in conducting public business.

**Respect**

I must respect all other councillors and all council employees and the role they play, treating them with courtesy at all times. Similarly, I must respect members of the public when performing my duties as a councillor.

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## SECTION 3: GENERAL CONDUCT

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### **Respect and Courtesy**

3.1 I will treat everyone with courtesy and respect. This includes in person, in writing, at meetings, when I am online and when I am using social media.

3.2 I will not discriminate unlawfully on the basis of race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, religion or belief, marital status or pregnancy/maternity; I will advance equality of opportunity and seek to foster good relations between different people.

3.3 I will not engage in any conduct that could amount to bullying or harassment (which includes sexual harassment). I accept that such conduct is completely unacceptable and will be considered to be a breach of this Code.

3.4 I accept that disrespect, bullying and harassment can be:

- a) a one-off incident,
- b) part of a cumulative course of conduct; or
- c) a pattern of behaviour.

3.5 I understand that how, and in what context, I exhibit certain behaviours can be as important as what I communicate, given that disrespect, bullying and harassment can be physical, verbal and non-verbal conduct.

3.6 I accept that it is my responsibility to understand what constitutes bullying and harassment and I will utilise resources, including the Standards Commission's guidance and advice notes, council policies and training material (where appropriate) to ensure that my knowledge and understanding is up to date.

3.7 I will not become involved in operational management of my council's services as I acknowledge and understand that is the responsibility of its employees.

3.8 I will not undermine any individual employee or group of employees, or raise concerns about their performance, conduct or capability in public.

3.9 I will not take, or seek to take, unfair advantage of my position in my dealings with employees or bring any undue influence to bear on employees to take a certain action. I will not ask or direct employees to do something which I know, or should reasonably know, could compromise them or prevent them from undertaking their duties properly and appropriately.

3.10 I will follow the Protocol for Relations between Councillors and Employees at Annex A and note that a breach of the Protocol will be

considered a breach of this Code. I will also comply with any internal protocol the Council has on councillor / employee relations.

3.11 I will respect and comply with rulings from the chair or convener during meetings of:

- a) the Council, its committees or sub-committees; and
- b) any outside organisations that I have been appointed or nominated to by the Council or that I represent my council on.

### **Remuneration, Allowances and Expenses**

3.12 I will comply with the rules, and my council's policies, on the payment of remuneration, allowances and expenses.

### **Gifts and Hospitality**

3.13 I understand that I may be offered gifts (including money raised via crowdfunding or sponsorship), hospitality, material benefits or services ("gift or hospitality") that may be reasonably regarded by a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts as placing me under an improper obligation or being capable of influencing my judgement.

3.14 I will never **ask for** or **seek** any gift or hospitality.

3.15 I will refuse any gift or hospitality, unless it is:

- a) a minor item or token of modest intrinsic value offered on an infrequent basis;
- b) a civic gift being offered to the Council;
- c) hospitality which would reasonably be associated with my duties as a councillor or as a member of an arm's length external organisation to which I have been appointed or nominated by my council ("ALEO"); or
- d) hospitality which has been approved in advance by my council or the ALEO.

3.16 I will consider whether there could be a reasonable perception that any gift or hospitality received by a person or body connected to me could or would influence my judgement.

3.17 I will not allow the promise of money or other financial advantage to induce me to act improperly in my role as a councillor. I accept that the money or advantage (including any gift or hospitality) does not have to be given to me directly. The offer of monies or advantages to others, including community groups, may amount to bribery, if the intention is to induce me to improperly perform a function.

3.18 I will never accept any gift or hospitality from any individual or applicant who is awaiting a decision from, or seeking to do business with, my council.

3.19 If I consider that declining an offer of a gift would cause offence, I will accept it and hand it over to the Council at the earliest possible opportunity and ask for it to be registered.

3.20 I will promptly advise my council's Monitoring Officer if I am offered (but refuse) any gift or hospitality of any significant value and / or if I am offered any gift or hospitality from the same source on a repeated basis, so that my council can monitor this.

### **Confidentiality**

3.21 I will not disclose confidential information or information which should reasonably be regarded as being of a confidential or private nature, without the express consent of a person or body authorised to give such consent, or unless required to do so by law. I note that if I cannot obtain such express consent, I will assume it is not given.

3.22 I accept that confidential information can include discussions, documents, information which is not yet public or never intended to be public, and information deemed confidential by statute.

3.23 I will only use confidential information to undertake my duties as a councillor. I will not use it in any way for personal or party-political advantage or to discredit my council (even if my personal view is that the information should be publicly available).

### **Use of Council Resources**

3.24 I will only use council resources, including employee assistance, facilities, stationery and IT equipment, for carrying out council duties in accordance with all my council's relevant policies.

3.25 I will not use, or in any way enable others to use, council resources:

- a) imprudently (without thinking about the implications or consequences);
- b) unlawfully;
- c) for any party political or campaigning activities or matters relating to these;  
or
- d) improperly.

### **Dealings with my council and Preferential Treatment**

3.26 I will not use, or attempt to use, my position or influence as a councillor to:

- a) improperly confer on or secure for myself, or others, an advantage;
- b) avoid a disadvantage for myself, or create a disadvantage for others; or
- c) improperly seek preferential treatment or access for myself or others.

3.27 I will avoid any action which could lead members of the public to believe that preferential treatment or access is being sought.



3.28 I will advise employees of any connection, as defined at Section 5, I may have to a matter, when seeking information or advice or responding to a request for information or advice from them.

3.29 I will not participate in certain decisions concerning Council Tax if I am in arrears of two months or more in respect of the payment of Council Tax.

### **Appointments to Outside Organisations**

3.30 If I am appointed or nominated by the Council as a member of another body or organisation, I will abide by the rules of conduct and will act in the best interests of that body or organisation while acting as a member of it. I will also continue to observe the rules of this Code when carrying out the duties of that body or organisation.

3.31 I accept that if I am a director or trustee (or equivalent) of a company or a charity, as a nominee of my Council, I will be responsible for identifying, and taking advice on, any conflicts of interest that may arise between the company or charity and my council.

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## SECTION 4: REGISTRATION OF INTERESTS

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4.1 The following paragraphs set out what I have to register, when I am elected and whenever my circumstances change. The register will cover the period commencing from 12 months prior to, and including, my current term of office.

4.2 I understand that regulations made by the Scottish Ministers describe the detail and timescale for registering interests, including a requirement that a councillor must register their registrable interests within one month of becoming a councillor, and register any changes to those interests within one month of those changes having occurred.

4.3 The interests which I am required to register are those set out in the following paragraphs. Other than as required by paragraph 4.23, I understand it is not necessary to register the interests of my spouse or cohabitee.

### **Category One: Remuneration**

4.4 I will register any work for which I receive, or expect to receive, payment or reward. I have a registrable interest where I receive remuneration by virtue of being:

- a) employed;
- b) self-employed;
- c) the holder of an office;
- d) a director of an undertaking;
- e) a partner in a firm;
- f) appointed or nominated by my council to another body; or
- g) engaged in a trade, profession or vocation, or any other work.

4.5 I do not have to register any sums I receive in expenses, allowances or remuneration from my council for work I undertake in my capacity as a councillor.

4.6 I understand that if a position is not remunerated it does not need to be registered under this category. However, unremunerated directorships may need to be registered under Category Two "Other Roles".

4.7 I must register any allowances I receive in relation to membership of any organisation under Category One.

4.8 When registering employment as an employee, I must give the full name of my employer, the nature of its business and the nature of the post I hold in the organisation.

4.9 When registering remuneration from the categories listed in paragraph 4.4 (b) to (g) above, I must provide the full name and give details of the nature of the business, organisation, undertaking, partnership or other body, as appropriate.

4.10 Where I otherwise undertake a trade, profession or vocation, or any other work, I must include information about the nature of the work and how often it is undertaken.

4.11 When registering a directorship, I must provide the registered name and registered number of the undertaking in which the directorship is held and provide information about the nature of its business.

4.12 I understand that registration of a pension is not required as this falls outside the scope of the category.

### **Category Two: Other Roles**

4.13 I will register any unremunerated directorships where the body in question is a subsidiary or parent company of an undertaking in which I hold a remunerated directorship.

4.14 I will register the registered name and registered number of the subsidiary or parent company or other undertaking and the nature of its business, and its relationship to the company or other undertaking in which I am a director and for which I receive remuneration.

### **Category Three: Contracts**

4.15 I have a registrable interest where I (or a firm in which I am a partner, or an undertaking in which I am a director or in which I have shares of a value as described in paragraph [4.20](#) below) have made a contract with my council:

- a) under which goods or services are to be provided, or works are to be executed; and
- b) which has not been fully discharged.

4.16 I will register a description of the contract, including its duration, but excluding the value.

### **Category Four: Election Expenses**

4.17 I will register any single donation of more than £50, or any donations from the same source that together amount to more than £50, towards election expenses received by me, or on my behalf within the period commencing from 12 months prior to, and including, my current term of office.

### **Category Five: Houses, Land and Buildings**

4.18 I have a registrable interest where I own or have any other right or interest in houses, land and buildings in Scotland, such as being an owner or a tenant, including a council tenant.

4.19 I understand I am only required to provide details of the council ward in which the property is located for the publicly available Register of Interests. I will, however,

provide the full address of the property to my council's Monitoring Officer (or their nominee), but understand this will be kept confidential.

### **Category Six: Interest in Shares and Securities**

4.20 I have a registrable interest where:

- a) I own or have an interest in more than 1% of the issued share capital of the company or body; or
- b) Where, at the relevant date, the market value of any shares and securities (in any one specific company or body) that I own or have an interest in is greater than £25,000.

### **Category Seven: Gifts and Hospitality**

4.21 I understand the requirements of paragraphs 3.13 to 3.20 regarding gifts and hospitality. As I will not accept any gifts or hospitality, other than under the limited circumstances allowed, I understand there is no longer the need to register any.

### **Category Eight: Non-Financial Interests**

4.22 I may also have other interests and I understand it is equally important that relevant interests such as membership or holding office in public bodies, companies, clubs, societies and organisations such as trades unions and voluntary organisations, are registered and described. In this context, I understand non-financial interests are those which members of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts might reasonably think could influence my actions, speeches, votes or decision-making in my council (this includes its Committees and memberships of other organisations to which I have been appointed or nominated by my council).

### **Category Nine: Close Family Members**

4.23 I will register the interests of any close family member who has transactions with my Council or is likely to have transactions or do business with it.

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## SECTION 5: DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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### Stage 1: Connection

5.1 For each particular matter I am involved in as a councillor, I will first consider whether I have a connection to that matter.

5.2 I understand that a connection is any link between the matter being considered and me, or a person or body I am associated with. This could be a family relationship or a social or professional contact.

5.3 A connection includes anything that I have registered as an interest.

5.4 A connection does not include:

- a) being a Council Tax or rate payer or a council house tenant or in general when services delivered to members of the public are being considered, including the setting of budgets, taxes and rates and fixing of council house rents;
- b) being a councillor when councillors' remuneration, allowances, expenses, support services or pensions are being considered; or
- c) being a member of an outside body to which I have been appointed or nominated by my council as a councillor representative unless:
  - (1) the matter being considered by my council is quasi-judicial or regulatory; or
  - (2) I have a personal conflict by reason of my actions, my connections or my legal obligations.

### Stage 2: Interest

5.5 I understand my connection is an interest that requires to be declared where the objective test is met – that is where a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts would reasonably regard my connection to a particular matter as being so significant that it would be considered as being likely to influence the discussion or decision-making.

### Stage 3: Participation

5.6 I will declare my interest as early as possible in meetings. I will not remain in the meeting nor participate in any way in those parts of meetings where I have declared an interest.

5.7 I will consider whether it is appropriate for transparency reasons to state publicly where I have a connection, which I do not consider amounts to an interest.

5.8 I note that I can apply to the Standards Commission and ask it to grant a dispensation to allow me to take part in the discussion and decision-making on a matter where I would otherwise have to declare an interest and withdraw (as a result of having a connection to the matter that would fall within the objective test). I note that such an application must be made in advance of any meetings where the

dispensation is sought and that I cannot take part in any discussion or decision-making on the matter in question unless, and until, the application is granted.

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## SECTION 6: LOBBYING AND ACCESS

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6.1 I understand that a wide range of people will seek access to me as a councillor and will try to lobby me, including individuals, organisations, companies and developers. I must distinguish between:

- a) my representative role in dealing with constituent enquiries;
- b) any community engagement where I am working with individuals and organisations to encourage their participation and involvement; and
- c) lobbying, which is where I am approached by any individual or organisation who is seeking to influence me for financial gain or advantage, particularly those who are seeking to do business with my council (for example contracts/procurement) or who are applying for a consent from my council.

### **Constituent enquiries**

6.2 I will comply with data protection legislation, which includes keeping the personal information of any constituent secure and only, in general, using it for the purpose of assisting with the enquiry. I will seek the constituent's consent in advance if I am in a multi-member ward and feel it is more appropriate for another councillor to handle the enquiry. I note that there may be circumstances in which it is best not to respond to a constituent, and that I am not obliged by the Code to respond to every contact.

### **Community engagement**

6.3 I will undertake such work in an open and transparent manner. I will not express an opinion on a quasi-judicial or regulatory application that I might later be asked to determine. I accept that if I do express such an opinion, I will have to declare an interest and will not be able to take part in the decision-making.

### **Lobbying**

6.4 In deciding whether, and if so how, to respond to such lobbying, I will always have regard to the objective test, which is whether a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard my conduct as being likely to influence my, or my council's, decisions.

### **Lobbying in Quasi-judicial or Regulatory Matters**

6.5 If I am approached directly by an individual or organisation who is seeking to do business with my council or who is involved in a quasi-judicial or regulatory matter (such as an applicant or an objector),

#### I WILL:

- a) have regard to Section 7 of this Code;
- b) advise that individual or organisation that I cannot formulate an opinion or support their position if I am going to take part in the decision-making on the matter; and
- c) direct any representations I receive to the appropriate council employee or department.

I WILL NOT:

- d) lobby or otherwise exert pressure or influence on employees, other councillors, or members of a quasi-judicial or regulatory committee, to recommend or make a specific decision in respect of a quasi-judicial or regulatory matter. I understand that I am entitled to seek information from employees but that I must not lobby them, to either make or recommend a particular decision.
- e) use political group meetings to decide how I and other councillors should vote on such matters or on individual staffing issues, such as the appointment or discipline of an employee.
- f) comply with political group decisions on such matters if these differ from my own views.



## Introduction

7.1 I need to be especially vigilant when I am making a decision on a quasi-judicial or regulatory application. For these applications, I need to ensure there is a proper and fair hearing of the application and I must avoid any impression of bias in the whole decision-making process.

7.2 I will deal with many types of quasi-judicial or regulatory applications. Depending on the type of application that is made, there will be often be a formal, statutory decision-making process for its consideration and outcome. There may also be formal legal routes to challenge decisions made on these applications and for this reason I must be aware that my own personal responsibility to ensure a proper and fair hearing has wider consequences for my council's reputation and financial liabilities in the event of any challenge.

7.3 Quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions typically involve:

- a) Planning or other applications in terms of planning legislation;
- b) Applications for alcohol licensing matters;
- c) Applications for betting and gaming premises;
- d) Applications for taxi licences and all other forms of civic licensing;
- e) Actions where my council is involved in any form of statutory enforcement procedure;
- f) Any actions where my council is an employer and is involved in any disciplinary issues that I may have a remit to deal with;
- g) Any procedures for statutory approval or consent involving my Council and where I have a remit to deal with the matter;
- h) Any appeal procedure where my council has a role and where I am expected to adjudicate on applications, for example an Education Appeals Committee for school placements or school exclusions.

The above list is provided to me only for guidance and is not exhaustive. If I have any doubt as to whether or not my involvement involves a quasi-judicial or regulatory matter I will seek the advice of my council's Monitoring Officer.

## Quasi-Judicial and Regulatory Matters

7.4 In dealing with these applications,

I WILL:

- a) throughout my involvement with the entire application process act fairly and be seen to act fairly;
- b) declare interests where required in terms of Section 5 of this Code and leave the meeting until the matter has been determined;
- c) deal fairly and impartially with all parties involved in the application;

- d) tell those who may be seeking to influence me out with the proper decision-making process that I will not formulate an opinion on any particular application until all information is available to all decision-makers and has been duly considered at the relevant meeting;
- e) take into account professional advice given to me by council employees; and
- f) seek advice from the relevant council employee if I am in doubt as to any material or relevant considerations.

7.5 In dealing with such applications,

I WILL NOT:

- a) pre-judge or demonstrate bias or be seen to pre-judge or demonstrate bias;
- b) indicate or imply support for or opposition to an application nor indicate my voting intention prior to the appropriate meeting where the application will be considered;
- c) in advance of the decision-making meeting, attempt to influence employees to adopt a particular position as that would imply that I am prejudiced in my decision-making;
- d) lobby other councillors who may be dealing with the application;
- e) express any view on the application before the appropriate meeting where the application will be considered. If I do so I will not participate in any aspect of the decision-making nor vote on the application;
- f) formulate my conclusions on an application until all available information is to hand and has been duly considered by me at the meeting where the application will be considered;
- g) express any indicative or provisional views in the course of my involvement in any aspect of the application; or
- h) otherwise act improperly or do anything which could reasonably create a perception that I have acted improperly.

**Policy and Strategy**

7.6 My role in policy and strategic issues may have a very wide relevance to my council area. For example, I have a key role in establishing policies for the benefit of my council's area and I am fully entitled to express my genuinely held views or to advocate proposals for the adoption of key guidance. It is entirely appropriate that I can express my views on matters of such general importance to my council area.

7.7 When I am being asked to develop a policy and set a strategy that forms the framework under which individual applications may subsequently be decided, I understand that I can discuss or debate these items of policy or strategy. However, I will only take into account material considerations affecting the policy or strategic issue and will have regard to the requirement for the adoption of the policy or strategy to be based on facts and evidence.

7.8 For policy and strategic issues under which individual applications may subsequently be decided,

I WILL:

- a) be able to express my views;
- b) be able to advocate proposals that I consider to be of benefit to my council area;
- c) have regard to the evidence-base behind the formulation of the policy or strategy in question.

I WILL NOT:

- d) do anything or be motivated to do anything that is connected or linked in any way with my personal involvement in a policy or strategic issue;
- e) express any view that suggests I have a closed mind on the policy or strategic issue regardless of any material considerations affecting that issue.

**Representation**

7.9 If I intend to be involved in the decision-making for any quasi-judicial or regulatory application,

I WILL NOT:

- a) organise support for or opposition to the application in any way;
- b) represent or appear to represent individuals or groups who are seeking to make representations for or against an application; or
- c) compromise myself or my Council by creating a perception of a conflict of interest.

7.10 In circumstances where I am a member of a Committee as a decision-maker but have been involved in organising support for or opposition to an application,

I WILL:

- a) declare an interest in the matter, and
- b) withdraw from the meeting without participating in the consideration of the matter.

7.11 In circumstances where I am a member of a Committee as a decision-maker but wish to represent individuals or groups who are seeking to make representations for or against an application,

I WILL:

- a) follow procedures agreed by my council which afford equal opportunity to any parties wishing to make representations to do so;

- b) declare an interest in the matter; and
- c) only remain in the meeting, while that item is being discussed, for the purposes of acting as the representative of the individual or group throughout the duration of their participation.

I WILL NOT:

- d) participate or attempt to participate as a decision-maker in that application;
- e) attempt to influence employees to adopt any particular position relative to the matter; or
- f) lobby other councillors who may be involved in the decision-making process.

7.12 In circumstances where I am **not** a member of any Committee which is making a decision on an application, but wish to represent individuals or groups who are seeking to make representations for or against it,

I WILL:

- a) follow procedures agreed by my council which afford equal opportunity to any parties wishing to make representations to do so; and
- b) only remain in the meeting for that item for the purposes of acting as the representative of the individual or group throughout the duration of their participation.

I WILL NOT:

- c) participate or attempt to participate as a decision-maker in that application;
- d) attempt to influence employees to adopt any particular position relative to the matter; or
- e) lobby other councillors who may be involved in the decision-making process.

**Site Visits**

7.13 In respect of any site visits that have been decided upon or agreed by the Committee as a stage in the consideration of the application,

I WILL:

- a) follow my council's procedures for such visits as set out by my council and that with regard to any legislative requirements or notes of guidance or practice;
- b) remember that such site visits are part of the decision-making process and as such are formal in nature and may have procedures as set out by my council.

## **Enforcement**

7.14 In my role, I may become aware whether by complaint or by direct knowledge of the need for council intervention by way of appropriate enforcement action. In this event, I will refer the matter for investigation to the appropriate service of my council.

### I WILL ALSO:

- a) advise all subsequent enquirers to deal directly with the relevant employee of the Council department;
- b) be able to request factual information about the progress of the matter from the relevant employee.

### I WILL NOT:

- c) lobby for a particular outcome;
- d) get involved in the operational detail of any enforcement actions which are subsequently taken by my council.

## **ANNEX A**

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### **PROTOCOL FOR RELATIONS BETWEEN COUNCILLORS AND EMPLOYEES**

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#### **Definitions**

The reference to 'employees' below covers all employees and officers of councils and all officers and employees of any other body or organisation to which a councillor is appointed or nominated by the Council.

The reference to 'Convener' below covers all committee chairs and portfolio leads.

The reference to 'chief officers' covers all Chief Executives, Directors and Heads of Service.

The reference to 'committee' also covers all forms of executive and scrutiny operating models.

#### **Principles**

1. This protocol outlines the way in which councillors and employees should behave towards one another. It should be noted that while some scenarios are included, these are not exhaustive. The protocol should be treated, therefore, as applying in all situations where there is interaction between councillors and employees.
2. Councillors and employees should work in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, with neither party seeking to take unfair advantage of their position or influence.

#### **Roles**

3. Councillors are required to provide strategic leadership and oversight. This involves setting strategy and policy, scrutinising and making major, complex decisions that concern the Council as a whole. Councillors are not, however, responsible for operational management (being the planning, organising and execution involved in day to day activities) as this is the role of employees. Chief Executives and senior employees have ultimate responsibility to ensure that the Council meets its responsibilities.
4. Legally, employees are employed by the Council / other body and are accountable to it as an entity. Employees are responsible for serving the Council / other body as a whole, and not any particular political group, combination of groups or individual councillor. It is nevertheless appropriate for employees to be called upon to assist any political group in its deliberations or to help individual councillors fulfil their different roles (see the section on political groups below).

#### **Office bearers**

5. For the Council to perform effectively, it is important that there is a close professional working relationship between a committee convener and the director

and other senior employees of any service reporting to that committee. However, such relationships should never be allowed to become so close, or appear to be so close, as to bring into question an employee's ability to deal with other councillors impartially, or the ability of a convener to deal with other employees impartially.

6. Conveners will have many dealings with employees. While employees should always seek to assist committee chairs, they are ultimately responsible to the relevant chief officer and not to any convener.
7. Conveners will often be consulted on the preparation of agendas and reports. Employees will always be fully responsible, however, for the contents of any report submitted in their name and will always have the right to submit reports to councillors on their areas of professional competence. The Convener does not have a right to veto this course of action.
8. Conveners are recognised as the legitimate elected spokesperson on their committee's area of responsibility. Where authority is delegated to employees, they may choose to consult the relevant convener about any action they propose to take. The employee nevertheless retains responsibility for the final decision (as long as the delegated authority remains in place).

### **Political groups**

9. Most councils operate through a system of groups of councillors, many of them based on political affiliation. All employees must treat all political groups and individual councillors in a fair and even-handed manner and must maintain political neutrality at all times.
10. Employees can provide political groups with support (such as discussing matters with the convener and vice-convener before a committee meeting or presenting information to a group meeting). While, in practice, such support is likely to be most in demand from whichever political group is in control of the Council, it nevertheless should be available to all political groups. The advice given by employees to different party or political groups should be consistent.
11. Councillors and employees must act in accordance with the council's rules about the access and support to be provided to political groups (for example, that all requests must be approved by the Chief Executive).
12. Employee support for political groups must not extend beyond providing information and advice in relation to matters of council business. Employees should not be asked, or be expected, to be present at meetings or parts of meetings when matters concerning party business are being discussed. It is the responsibility of the convener of the political group meeting to ensure that all attending are clear on the status of the meeting and the basis on which any employees are present.
13. Councillors and employees must note that while political group meetings may form part of the preliminaries to council decision-making, political groups are not

empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Council. Conclusions reached at such meetings are not council decisions and it is essential that they are not interpreted or treated as such.

14. Employees can provide information and advice in relation to matters of council business to political groups. Employees are nevertheless responsible for ensuring that all necessary information and advice is still provided to the relevant committee or sub-committee when the matter in question is considered.
15. Political groups must recognise that information and advice given by employees should be used to enhance discussion and debate at council and committee meetings. Such information or advice should not be used for political advantage (for example by issuing media briefings before a decision is made), as doing so could devalue the decision-making process and can place employees in a difficult position.
16. Employees should take special care when providing information and advice to a meeting of a political group where other individuals who are not elected members of the Council are in attendance, as such individuals will not be bound by the Councillors' Code (and, in particular, the provisions concerning the declaration of interests and confidentiality).
17. Employees must treat any discussions with a political group or individual councillor as being strictly confidential.
18. Any difficulties or uncertainty about the extent of advice and information that can be provided to political groups should be raised with the Chief Executive (who should then discuss the matter with the group leader).

### **Councillors as local representatives**

19. Councillors should ensure they act in accordance with the provisions of the Councillors' Code and this protocol when performing such a role. Elected members must recognise that, when performing their local representative role, they are representing the Council. Employees must treat all councillors fairly and openly in their role as local representatives.

### **Communications**

20. Employees should not normally copy any communications they have with an individual councillor to any other councillor, unless they have been clear in advance that they intend to do so (or this has been agreed).

### **Human resource issues**

21. Where councillors are involved in the appointments of employees they must act fairly and openly, and make decisions solely on merit.



22. Councillors should not become involved in issues relating to any individual employee's pay or terms and conditions of appointment, except while serving on a committee tasked with dealing with such matters.

### **Social relationships**

23. The relationship between councillors and employees depends upon trust, which will be enhanced by the development of positive and professional relationships. While councillors and employees may often find themselves in the same social situations, they should take care to avoid close personal familiarity as this can damage the relationship of mutual respect and the belief that employees can undertake their role in an impartial and objective manner. Councillors and employees should, therefore, be cautious in developing close personal friendships while they have an official relationship.

### **Public comment**

24. Councillors and employees both have a responsibility to project a positive image of the Council and should avoid making any public comments that could bring it into disrepute.
25. Councillors should not raise any adverse matters relating to the performance, conduct or capability of employees in public. Employees must ensure they treat councillors with similar respect and courtesy.

### **Employees supporting councillors**

26. Where councils arrange for employees to provide direct administrative or practical support for individual councillors to help them undertake their duties, particular considerations will apply. While councillors may ask employees to provide such support in a particular way, they must nevertheless remember that the employee is accountable to their line manager. Any issues about conflicting priorities, conduct or performance must be referred to the line manager.

## ANNEX B

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### DEFINITIONS

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“**ALEO**” means an arm's-length external organisation (ALEO), that is formally separate from the Council but is subject to the Council’s control or influence. ALEOs can take many forms including companies, community enterprises, charitable organisations and trusts.

“**Bullying**” is inappropriate and unwelcome behaviour which is offensive and intimidating, and which makes an individual or group feel undermined, humiliated or insulted.

“**Chair**” includes Committee Conveners or any other individual discharging a similar function to that of a Chair or Convener under alternative decision-making structures.

“**Cohabitee**” includes any person who is living with you in a relationship similar to that of a partner, civil partner, or spouse.

“**Committee**” includes all forms of executive and scrutiny operating models.

“**Confidential Information**” includes:

- any information passed on to the Council by a Government department (even if it is not clearly marked as confidential) which does not allow the disclosure of that information to the public;
- information of which the law prohibits disclosure (under statute or by the order of a Court);
- any legal advice provided to the Council; or
- any other information which would reasonably be considered a breach of confidence should it be made public.

“**Election expenses**” means expenses incurred, whether before, during or after the election, on account of, or in respect of, the conduct or management of the election.

“**Employee**” includes individuals employed:

- directly by the Council;
- by any of the Council's arms' length external organisations;
- as contractors by the Council, any of the Council’s arms’ length external organisations; or
- by a contractor to work on any of the Council's premises.

“**Gifts**” a gift can include any item or service received free of charge, or which may be offered or promised at a discounted rate or on terms not available to the general public. Gifts include benefits such as relief from indebtedness, loan concessions, or provision of property, services or facilities at a cost below that generally charged to members of the public. It can also include gifts received directly or gifts received

by any company in which the recipient holds a controlling interest in, or by a partnership of which the recipient is a partner.

**“Harassment”** is any unwelcome behaviour or conduct which makes someone feel offended, humiliated, intimidated, frightened and / or uncomfortable. Harassment can be experienced directly or indirectly and can occur as an isolated incident or as a course of persistent behaviour.

**“Hospitality”** includes the offer or promise of food, drink, accommodation, entertainment or the opportunity to attend any cultural or sporting event on terms not available to the general public.

**“Relevant Date”** Where a councillor had an interest in shares at the date on which they were elected, the relevant date is – (a) that date; and (b) the 5th April immediately following that date and in each succeeding year, where the interest is retained on that 5th April.

**“Remuneration”** includes any salary, wage, share of profits, fee, other monetary benefit or benefit in kind.

**“Securities”** a security is a certificate or other financial instrument that has monetary value and can be traded. Securities includes equity and debt securities, such as stocks bonds and debentures.

**“Undertaking”** means:

- a body corporate or partnership; or
- an unincorporated association carrying on a trade or business, with or without a view to a profit.

## ANNEX C

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### BREACHES OF THE CODE

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#### Introduction

1. The Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 (“the Act”) provided for a framework to encourage, and where necessary enforce, high ethical standards in public life.
2. The Act provided for the introduction of new codes of conduct for local authority councillors and members of relevant public bodies, imposing on councils and relevant public bodies a duty to help their members comply with the relevant code.
3. The Act and the subsequent Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc. Act 2010 established the Standards Commission for Scotland (“Standards Commission”) and the post of Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland (“ESC”).
4. The Standards Commission and ESC are separate and independent, each with distinct functions. Complaints of breaches of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct are investigated by the ESC and adjudicated upon by the Standards Commission.
5. The first Councillors’ Code of Conduct came into force in 2003. The Code has since been reviewed, and re-issued in 2010 to reflect legislative changes. The 2021 Code has been issued by the Scottish Ministers following consultation, and with the approval of the Scottish Parliament, as required by the Act.

#### Investigation of Complaints

6. The ESC is responsible for investigating complaints about councillors. It is not, however, mandatory to report a complaint about a potential breach of the Code to the ESC. It may be more appropriate in some circumstances for attempts to be made to resolve the matter informally at a local level.
7. On conclusion of the investigation, the ESC will send a report to the Standards Commission.

#### Hearings

8. On receipt of a report from the ESC, the Standards Commission can choose to:
  - Do nothing;
  - Direct the ESC to carry out further investigations; or
  - Hold a Hearing.

9. Hearings are held (usually in public) to determine whether the councillor concerned has breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct. The Hearing Panel comprises of three members of the Standards Commission. The ESC will present evidence and/or make submissions at the Hearing about the investigation and any conclusions as to whether the councillor has contravened the Code. The councillor is entitled to attend or be represented at the Hearing and can also present evidence and make submissions. Both parties can call witnesses. Once it has heard all the evidence and submissions, the Hearing Panel will make a determination about whether or not it is satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that there has been a contravention of the Code by the councillor. If the Hearing Panel decides that a councillor has breached the Councillors' Code of Conduct, it is obliged to impose a sanction.

## Sanctions

10. The sanctions that can be imposed following a finding of a breach of the Councillors' Code of Conduct are as follows:
- **Censure:** A censure is a formal record of the Standards Commission's severe and public disapproval of the councillor concerned.
  - **Suspension:** This can be a full or partial suspension (for up to one year). A full suspension means that the councillor is suspended from attending all meetings of the Council. Partial suspension means that the councillor is suspended from attending some of the meetings of the Council.
  - **Disqualification:** Disqualification means that the councillor is disqualified for the period determined (of up to 5 years) from being a councillor (which has the effect of removing them from office. Where a councillor is also a member of a devolved public body (as defined in the Act), other than as a representative or nominee of the Council, the Commission may also remove or disqualify that person in respect of that membership. Full details of the sanctions are set out in Section 19 of the Act.

## Interim Suspensions

11. Section 21 of the Act provides the Standards Commission with the power to impose an interim suspension on a councillor on receipt of an interim report from the ESC about an ongoing investigation. In making a decision about whether or not to impose an interim suspension, a Panel comprising of three Members of the Standards Commission will review the interim report and any representations received from the councillor and will consider whether it is satisfied:
- That the further conduct of the ESC's investigation is likely to be prejudiced if such an action is not taken (for example if there are concerns that the councillor may try to interfere with evidence or witnesses); or
  - That it is otherwise in the public interest to take such a measure. A policy outlining how the Standards Commission makes any decision under Section 21 and the procedures it will follow in doing so, should any such a report be received from the ESC can be found on the Standards Commission's website.

12. The decision to impose an interim suspension is not, and should not be seen as, a finding on the merits of any complaint or the validity of any allegations against a councillor, nor should it be viewed as a disciplinary measure.



INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

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# COUNCILLORS' CODE OF CONDUCT GUIDANCE

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# GUIDANCE ON THE COUNCILLORS' CODE OF CONDUCT

## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE CODE OF CONDUCT

The Councillors' Code of Conduct (Code) required by the [Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#) was initially issued in 2003, and was most recently reviewed and re-issued in 2021. A copy of the Code can be found at:

<https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/codes-of-conduct/councillors-code-of-conduct>

This Guidance has been produced by the Standards Commission for Scotland (Standards Commission) and contains case illustrations (some of which are based on cases from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and some of which are hypothetical), along with examples of factors councillors may wish to consider when applying the requirements of the Code.

Councillors should be mindful, when seeking to apply the Code to their own situation or circumstances, that the lists of factors in the Guidance and examples provided are not exhaustive. All councillors have a personal responsibility to ensure that they comply with the provisions of the Code.

While councillors should observe any guidance from the Standards Commission, it is not a substitute for the Code. The purpose of the Guidance is to provide supplementary information to aid councillors in interpreting the Code. **Councillors are, therefore, obliged to ensure they have read and understood the provisions of the Code itself. Reading the Guidance should, in no way, be considered a substitute for doing so.**

This document is a standalone version of the Guidance, without the Code embedded. It is intended to provide easy access to the Guidance itself.

The Standards Commission will continue to review the Guidance on a regular basis to ensure it is relevant and fit for purpose. As such, any feedback, comments, suggestions for improvements and further hypothetical cases are welcome.

### Guidance

- 1 The revised Code was approved by the Scottish Parliament and is effective from 7 December 2021.
- 2 This Guidance is also effective from 7 December 2021 and replaces the previous version, which was issued on 18 December 2018.
- 3 This Guidance is for Councils and councillors. By accepting office as a councillor, you have accepted you are obliged to comply with the Code. The aim of this Guidance is to provide supplementary information to help you do so.
- 4 The Code is not designed to restrict you; its purpose is to help you meet the required standards of conduct.
- 5 This Guidance is also directed at co-opted members of committees and sub-committees who are not elected councillors. All references to 'I' in the Code, and to 'I' and 'you' in the Guidance are directed specifically at councillors and co-opted members of committees and sub-committees. However, it should be noted that the Standards Commission has no legal powers to enforce the provisions of the Code against anyone other than elected councillors.

- 6 Councils should make arrangements to deliver training and induction sessions on the ethical standards framework and should encourage all their councillors and senior employees to attend. Subject to resource limitations, the Standards Commission can support any such training and induction programme. Any request for assistance or support should be directed to the Executive Director.

## **Your Responsibilities**

- 7 The Scottish public has an expectation that councillors will conduct themselves in accordance with the Code and the nine key principles of public life, as outlined in Section 2. You must, therefore, comply with the provisions of the Code in all situations and at all times where you are acting as a councillor, have identified yourself as a councillor, or could objectively be considered to be acting as a councillor.
- 8 The Code does not apply to your private and family life. In determining whether the Code applies, the Standards Commission will consider whether a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably consider that you were acting as a councillor at the time of the events in question. It should be noted that this can include when you are engaging in online activity.
- 9 The Code does not prevent you from expressing views (including making political comment) provided you do so in a way that is compatible with the substantive provisions of the Code, being Sections 3-7 and Annex A inclusive. This includes the requirements to behave with courtesy and respect and to maintain confidentiality.
- 10 You should attend any training and induction sessions on ethical standards and should ensure you are familiar with, and understand, the provisions and principles of the Code, this Guidance, and any other guidance and advice notes issued by the Standards Commission.
- 11 You may also find it helpful to refer to the Improvement Service's guidance and induction material, which can be found on their website at:  
<https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/products-and-services/skills-and-development/elected-members-development/elected-member-induction-materials>.
- 12 It should be noted, in terms of the Standards Commission's Policy on the Application of Sanctions, <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/hearing-rules>, that ignoring advice and / or training opportunities that could have prevented a contravention of the Code may be considered an aggravating factor by the Standards Commission when deciding on the appropriate sanction to be applied, following a breach finding.
- 13 Although it is ultimately your personal responsibility to comply with the Code, paragraph 1.10 of the Code makes it clear that if you are uncertain about how the Code should be interpreted and applied, you should seek advice. Your Council is obliged by law to appoint a Monitoring Officer. They and their deputies will have experience of dealing with queries relating to the Code and can give you advice.
- 14 As it is your personal responsibility to comply with the Code, the fact that you may have sought, and then followed such advice would not be a defence to a breach of the Code; however a discussion with the relevant employee may help to clarify your own thinking. If you are found to be in breach of the Code, the fact you sought advice may be taken into account by the Standards Commission as a mitigating factor when deciding on the appropriate sanction. Conversely, a failure to seek and / or follow advice may be considered as an aggravating factor.

- 15** You should always try to seek advice at the first opportunity. You should be mindful that the person from whom you are seeking advice may not have full knowledge of the matter, or your personal circumstances. On rare occasions, for example when an alleged breach is to be considered by the Standards Commission at a Hearing, you may wish to seek external legal advice. You will be responsible for the cost of any external legal advice you have chosen to obtain, either to assist you with interpreting the Code, or in responding to any complaint about your conduct.
- 16** You are encouraged to promote and support the Code at all times and to encourage others to follow your example in doing so. Experienced councillors should consider whether they can act as a mentor to others to help them to understand the Code.
- 17** The Code should be read as a whole. It may be necessary to cross-reference different provisions.
- 18** It should be noted that all references to 'Monitoring Officer' in this Guidance should be taken as including a Monitoring Officer's nominee or deputy, as appropriate.

## **SECTION 2: KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

- 19** The Code is underpinned by the nine key principles of public life in Scotland, namely: Duty, Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability & Stewardship, Openness, Honesty, Leadership and Respect.
- 20** The key principles are for guidance and you should ensure that you always have regard to, and follow, these principles. You should not persuade others to act in a way that would be contrary to the key principles.
- 21** A breach of one or more of the key principles does not in itself constitute evidence of a breach of the Code. However, the key principles can be used by the Ethical Standards Commissioner's office (in its investigatory role) and the Standards Commission (in its adjudicatory role) to assist with interpretation of alleged breaches of the substantive sections of the Code, being Sections 3 to 7 and Annex A inclusive.
- 22** It is your personal responsibility to ensure you are complying with the provisions of the Code. In doing so, you may need to exercise your judgement and consider how a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard your actions or decision-making in your role as a councillor. This is not the same as members of the public not liking a decision you have made or an opinion you have expressed legitimately in the course of your work; it is about whether you have acted properly and in accordance with the Code.

## SECTION 3: GENERAL CONDUCT

### Respect and Courtesy: General

- 23 You must treat everyone you come into contact with in your role as a councillor with courtesy and respect, even if you disagree with their views. This can include employees, members of the public and fellow councillors.
- 24 It should be noted, in the context of paragraph 3.1 of the Code, that meetings can include virtual meetings or other forms of remote working via platforms such as MS Teams, Skype and Zoom.
- 25 While you are entitled to express your views and to disagree with others, you must do so in a respectful way. It is usually better to try to focus on the issue itself, rather than making any personal comments about an individual.
- 26 You should always be mindful about how others could reasonably perceive your conduct, and that even if it is not your intention to be disrespectful or discourteous, your behaviour could be interpreted as such.
- 27 If you make a comment in the heat of the moment, which you do not mean and then regret, you should consider retracting it and / or apologising. Bear in mind, however, that comments made on social media may have been circulated widely by the time you seek to retract them or apologise.
- 28 You should always think ahead. If you have any concerns about a potential problem, speak to your Council's Monitoring Officer or their deputies so that advice can be sought and / or action can be taken before a situation becomes a serious problem. This could avoid or reduce the likelihood of an inadvertent breach of the Code and / or a complaint being made about you. The fact that you have sought advice, or indeed failed to seek advice, may be taken into account at a Hearing. Similarly, evidence of an immediate apology or retraction may be a mitigating factor at a Hearing.
- 29 You should ensure you are familiar with the [Equality Act 2010](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/equality-act-guidance), which provides a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced guidance on the Equality Act, which can be found at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/equality-act-guidance>.

### Respect and Courtesy: Applicability of the Code

- 30 It is very important to note that the rules of good conduct set out in Section 3 of the Code must be observed in all situations where you are acting as a councillor, which includes when you are representing the Council on official business.
- 31 The Code is also applicable in all situations where you have identified yourself as a councillor or where you might objectively be perceived to be acting as a councillor. You should be mindful, therefore, that your perception of when you are carrying out official business and when you are acting privately may be different to how it is viewed by a member of the public. Factors to consider include whether:
  - you are clear about the capacity in which you are acting;
  - you describe yourself as a councillor or are otherwise readily identifiable as a councillor in the situation / circumstances;
  - you are on Council premises or at a Council event;
  - you are using IT equipment and / or an email account supplied by your Council;

- your conduct could reasonably be regarded as bringing your position as a councillor, or your Council, into disrepute;
  - you are engaged in political activity or commenting on political matters, and whether these fall within or outwith the scope of the Council's functions; and
  - you are representing the Council or speaking on behalf of the Council.
- 32** Due to the public nature of social and print media, and your profile as a local authority member, you may wish to consider whether members of the public might automatically assume you are commenting in your capacity as an elected politician in anything you post, publish or share in either forum.
- 33** In making any decision on whether the Code applies, the Standards Commission will consider whether a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, could reasonably perceive you as having been acting as a councillor at the time of the alleged breach of the Code.

*A councillor shared an antisemitic article on a Facebook page set up for his re-election campaign. The Panel accepted the councillor had not referred to himself as a councillor when sharing the article. The Panel nevertheless was of the view that, when considering the councillor's course of conduct, when sharing and encouraging others to read the article and subsequently defending it in the national press, it would have been reasonable for an informed member of the public to have perceived that he been acting as such. This was because he was identified in press coverage of the matter as a councillor, had used council equipment to share the article and had sent an apology email about the article from his council email account. In addition, the councillor had continued to use the campaign Facebook page after being elected and the article purportedly concerned a local authority related issue.*

*A councillor was convicted of sexual assault in respect of an incident that occurred at a Trades Association event. The Panel was satisfied that it would have been reasonable for an informed member of the public to have perceived that the councillor was acting as a councillor at the event, given both the public nature of it and also because the invitation to attend had originally been sent to another councillor, a party group leader, before being passed on. The Panel concluded that the Code applied.*

*A councillor sent and encouraged an employee of the Council with whom he had a personal relationship to send, inappropriate social media messages, including messages of a sexual nature, during office hours. The Panel rejected arguments that the councillor had been acting in an entirely personal capacity. It found that the councillor could not completely separate himself from his role as an elected member of the Council in question, and that, when sending or encouraging the employee to send the messages during working hours, he was acting as an elected member.*

### **Respect and Courtesy: Social Media**

- 34** The rules of good conduct also apply when you are engaging in online activity, including when using social media. Social media is a term used to describe online technologies, platforms, applications and practices that are used to share information, knowledge or opinions. These can include, but are not limited to, social networking sites, blogs, wikis, content sharing sites, photo sharing sites, video sharing sites and customer feedback sites.
- 35** The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note for Councillors on the Use of Social Media. This can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

- 36** The conduct expected of you in a digital medium is no different to the conduct you should employ in other methods of communication, such as face to face meetings and letters. Before commenting or posting, you should consider very carefully whether:
- you understand the immediate and permanent nature of any comment or post you are about to make, and that you will have no control over the extent to which it is shared, and by whom;
  - you would make that comment or post in-person, face to face;
  - you have such conviction in what you are about to share that you would be prepared to justify it if challenged at a later date; and
  - you fully understand that even if you delete your post, it may have been captured by way of a screenshot or otherwise retained in some way (including being automatically cached online), and that fully deleting content once it has been shared online is almost impossible to achieve.
- 37** Other important factors to consider when using social media include whether:
- you are identifiable as a councillor by directly referring to yourself as such or indirectly by referring to the Council, or the functions of your role as a councillor, or through any information or images posted;
  - the account you are using is private and whether you have set your privacy controls accordingly. You should bear in mind that anyone who is able to view your social media content will be able to screenshot and publicly share it, if they choose to do so;
  - the number of ‘followers’ you have any and whether these individuals are following your account because you are a councillor;
  - you have complied with any policy your Council has produced on the use of social media;
  - information you are posting is confidential and you only have access to it because you are a councillor;
  - you are demonstrating bias or pre-determination;
  - you are using Council equipment and / or your Council’s information technology network or your own; and
  - you have complied with the law including defamation, copyright, data protection, employment and equalities or harassment provisions.
- 38** It can be very difficult to persuade people that you can take a different view, or even have an open mind, in your capacity as a councillor from any view you may have expressed in your personal capacity. This is particularly pertinent in respect of using social media, or commenting in the press, where the separation of public and private comments may be unclear to someone reading them, and where information about your status as an elected member may be readily available online or from different sources (including your council’s website).

For example, there could be a scenario in which an individual who is well-known as a councillor posted the following to their Facebook account: *“Personal comment – the council’s provost is corrupt and he’s had his hand in the coffers for years”*. Even though they have stated *“personal comment”* at the beginning of their post, it is likely that a member of the public reading the post would understand it to have been made by the individual in their capacity as a councillor, given the subject matter.

Another example could be where a councillor, who includes reference to their status as a councillor in their Twitter profile, retweets a post which contains a description of the service provided by their council as being substandard and unacceptably poor. While the post in question was not written by the councillor, the fact that they have chosen to retweet in circumstances where they are identifiable as a councillor, could be seen as being supportive of the criticism in their capacity as such.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had set up a Facebook account under a false name in order to post derogatory comments about employees of the council. The owner of the account was identified*



*as the posts contained information about specific employees that could only be known by a councillor. It was therefore established that by posting the messages, the councillor in question had been acting in their capacity as a councillor, regardless of whether or not they had identified themselves as such. It was found that the councillor had breached the respect provisions of the Code.*

## **Respect and Courtesy: Article 10 ECHR – Your Right to Freedom of Expression**

- 39** As a councillor, you have an enhanced right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) when your comments are political in nature or concern matters of public interest.

**You should note, however, that the protection Article 10 affords is not absolute and does not extend to, or excuse, hate speech or egregious offensive and abusive personal attacks.**

Therefore, you may wish to think about:

- whether your comments are likely to bring your office or the local authority itself into disrepute;
  - whether you are treating others with courtesy, respect and consideration;
  - whether making your point in a respectful and constructive manner may have more of an impact in terms of influencing others;
  - the fact that ‘liking’, re-posting and re-tweeting comments or posts, or publishing links to other sites are likely to be perceived as endorsing the original opinion, comment or information, including information on other sites;
  - whether to allow disagreement on your social media pages;
  - the fact that tone can be harder to convey online so consideration should be given to whether humour, irony and sarcasm will be perceived as such;
  - whether you have to respond and / or if it is appropriate or helpful to do so;
  - the stricter rules that apply to election publicity;
  - whether anything you post could be considered obscene.
- 40** The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note that outlines the approach it will take when issues that concern the application of Article 10 of the ECHR and the right to freedom of expression arise. It also suggests issues councillors should consider in order to ensure compliance with the provisions concerning courtesy, respect and confidentiality in the Code. The Advice Note can be found at:  
<https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

## **Respect and Courtesy: Equalities**

- 41** You are expected to advance equality of opportunity and to seek to foster good relations between different people. It is unacceptable for a public figure such as a councillor to express views that indicate a discriminatory attitude towards people on the basis of race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, religion or belief, marital status or pregnancy/maternity.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had shared, on Facebook and Twitter, a blog article which was critical of a union member who had organised an equal pay strike in Glasgow. The article contained references to “Mein Kampf” and of Hitler having accused “The Jew” of gradually assuming membership of the trade union movement. It was found that the article promoted negative stereotypes and was antisemitic in nature. The councillor was found to have breached the respect provisions of the Code.*

*A councillor referred to the complainer as a 'TERF' (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) in a series of tweets and emails. The Panel found that while the term TERF was potentially controversial and could be seen as one of abuse, it could also be used or perceived as simply a descriptor. It was found, however, that it was evident from the Respondent's description, over an extended period of time, of TERFS as being "scum" and "hateful and vile", that the councillor intended it to be one of abuse. It was further found that the councillor had directed the term at the complainer as an individual and that it was about her as a person, rather than simply being a descriptor of her alleged views. As such, it was determined that the reference to the complainer as a TERF, in context, amounted to a personal attack on her and that the councillor had failed to behave in a respectful manner. It was further determined that the councillor had used a highly derogatory profanity about a member of the public in another tweet. It was found that using such a word in a public forum such as a tweet was highly offensive and inappropriate, regardless of whether it had been directed at any individual or identifiable group of individuals. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had posted a homophobic comment on the complainer's Facebook page and that he had accessed his account using a Council issued mobile phone when doing so. It was found that the comment made by the councillor had clearly been intended to insult and demean the complainer. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

## **Respect and Courtesy: Bullying & Harassment**

- 42** Bullying is inappropriate and unwelcome behaviour which is offensive and intimidating, and which makes an individual or group feel undermined, humiliated or insulted. It usually, but not always, arises as a result of an individual misusing their power.
- 43** Harassment is any unwelcome behaviour or conduct which makes someone feel offended, humiliated, intimidated, frightened and / or uncomfortable. It can be experienced directly or indirectly (for example, being in the room which unacceptable conduct is being displayed and being affected by it).
- 44** It should be noted that bullying and harassment (which includes sexual harassment) can be a course of behaviour or a one-off incident.
- 45** Even if the behaviour in question is unintentional, it can still be classed as bullying and / or harassment. It is the impact of the behaviour, not the intent, that is the key. You should therefore at all times be aware of the impact of your conduct on others, and remember that what may seem harmless to you can be offensive to someone else.
- 46** Bullying and harassment can occur through all means of conduct and communication – including social media posts, shares and comments. It can also arise through a lack of communication, such as the deliberate exclusion of an individual from a conversation, work or social activity.
- 47** You are responsible for your own behaviour. You must ensure that you are aware of, and comply with, the provisions concerning bullying and harassment in the Code and also any policy your Council has on ensuring dignity in the workplace.
- 48** The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note for Councillors on Bullying and Harassment. The Advice Note is available on the Standards Commission's website at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had behaved inappropriately towards two female fellow councillors and employees. It was established that the councillor had made unwarranted and inappropriate physical contact with the fellow councillors and employees at an official event and had also made remarks towards the employees which were patronising and demeaning. The councillor was found to be in breach of the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had sent an email to a number of Council members and posted a Twitter message, describing an employee as “arrogant, lazy, mentally challenged” and as having been “useless for years”. The impact of the emails led the employee to seek medical and other support and resulted in him taking sickness absence due to stress. The Panel found the emails and tweet to be completely unwarranted and would have adversely affected the employee’s ability to carry out his role. The Panel found the councillor’s conduct amounted to a breach of the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor made a number of allegations and critical comments on his online blog about the complainer, who was a fellow councillor, which were of a personal and insulting nature. It was found that the comments had been made without factual basis, were disrespectful and were clearly intended to demean the complainer in a public forum. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had made remarks of an abusive, insulting and personal nature to a police officer, and also made a number of unfounded allegations about him during two telephone calls to a Police Station. It was found that the councillor had made the telephone calls in his capacity as a ward councillor and concluded that the provisions of the Code applied to him at the time of the events in question. It was further found that the comments made by the councillor in the telephone conversations amounted to an unacceptable personal attack on the police officer and that he had breached the respect provisions in the Code.*

## **Respect and Courtesy: Council Employees**

- 49** It is understood that in the political environment of local government there may be tensions between individual councillors and between party groups. Factors such as minority administrations, coalitions and multi-member wards may have a bearing on such tensions, but it is nevertheless essential to ensure that the interests of the electorate are represented as effectively as possible. This can only be achieved if councillors behave in a respectful way towards each other and towards Council’s employees.
- 50** The requirement to respect all Council employees includes employees of contractors providing services to the Council; employees of trusts or other arm’s length external organisations; and employees of any other organisations where it might be reasonably perceived that the Council (and by implication the councillor) has an influence over that organisation.
- 51** You have a right to ask Council employees for information. This does not mean, however, that you have a right to receive that information, or that you can demand such information be provided (see the guidance below on confidentiality and data protection). If you are asking employees for information, you are obliged to do so in a courteous and respectful manner.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had sent a series of emails (and made statements in council meetings) over a period of eleven months, to his fellow councillors and to senior council employees, alleging corruption in the allocation of a council property a family member of another councillor. The councillor in question had provided no proof to back up his claims of corruption. A number of internal council investigations, and finally an independent investigation carried out by Audit Scotland, had all concluded that there was no evidence to suggest any corruption in relation to the housing allocation. The Panel considered that by making such serious and unwarranted public*

*accusations about the conduct of council employees, the councillor's conduct was offensive and fell well below the standard to be expected of a councillor, and therefore found that the Code had been breached. It is worth noting that in this case, due to the seriousness of the contravention and two previous breach findings against him, the councillor was disqualified.*

## **Distinguishing between Strategic and Operational Matters**

- 52 The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note for councillors on distinguishing between their strategic role and any operational work, which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>. In general, if a duty is delegated to an employee, then it is likely to be operational in nature. You may wish to represent the views of your constituents on individual matters, such as a housing issue, but you should be aware that employees may feel pressured by a councillor challenging their actions or appearing critical of some aspect of their work. This is particularly the case with junior employees, who may not be used to dealing directly with councillors. Any concerns about performance should be raised in private with the employee's line manager.

## **Respect and Courtesy: Public Comment about Council Employees**

- 53 As a councillor, you are entitled to scrutinise how effective the delivery of services has been. You should be careful, however, not to make public statements which expressly or by implication criticise the actions (or inaction) of an identifiable individual employee or group of employees (where individuals in that group are, or could be, identifiable). You should note that the concept of a public statement is wide and can cover a variety of scenarios such as the published minutes of a meeting, a comment on social media, or being overheard in a public area, such as a corridor or tearoom. Mutual respect and courtesy between councillors and those who work for, or on behalf of, your Council is essential as it helps ensure the efficient and effective running of local government.

For example, in a scenario where you are concerned about the quality of a report before you, you should consider how you raise your concerns. Saying "I note this report does not contain a risk assessment – I would be grateful if a risk assessment could be undertaken" would be respectful, whereas saying "as usual, your report is inadequate and poorly prepared as it does not contain a risk assessment" could be perceived as being personally critical of the report's author.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had become involved in a social care case on behalf of a constituent and had inappropriately sought to influence operational decision-making in respect of an offer of housing and child protection matters. While the Respondent's involvement may not have had any effect on the outcome of decisions, the Hearing Panel considered this had clearly been his intention. The Panel found that the inappropriate level of involvement, enquiries and correspondence from the Respondent could have had an adverse impact on resources, given that officers felt obliged to respond. The councillor had also been discourteous and disrespectful in certain correspondence with Council employees. He was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor engaged in public criticism of the Chief Executive of his Council by posting information and comments on the opposition councillors' Facebook page. The councillor did not give the Chief Executive an opportunity to respond before publishing the comments on the Facebook page. It was found that the councillor had breached the Code.*

*A councillor made comments in the press which were publicly critical of the capability of a newly-appointed Council employee. It was found that the councillor had been disrespectful to the new employee and had breached the Code.*

## Respect and Courtesy: Council and Committee Meetings

- 54 The words 'Chair' and 'Convener' in paragraph 3.11 of the Code, and the word 'Chair' in this Guidance, are not restricted to those specific terms and apply to any individual holding a similar chairing or convening role.
- 55 The role of the Chair in any Council meeting, including a committee meeting or a meeting of a working group or similar forum, is to ensure that the agenda of business is properly dealt with and clear decisions are reached. To do this, the Chair has a responsibility to ensure that the views and opinions of other participants (including the advice of employees) can be expressed. At the same time, the Chair has a responsibility for proper and timely conduct of the meeting and for helping to ensure the meeting is conducted in compliance with the Council's Standing Orders. This includes determining the point at which conclusions should be reached. Chairs are required to adopt a balanced approach to help ensure fairness to participants while at the same time dealing firmly with any attempt to disrupt or unnecessarily delay the meeting. If you are present, you share the responsibility for the proper and expeditious discharge of business. As such, you should ensure you are familiar and comply with your Council's Standing Orders. The role of the Chair in reaching judgements about how the meeting is to be conducted should be supported and respected.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had failed to respect the Chair and other colleagues during a meeting of the Council. Despite the Chair determining that the matter under consideration had been agreed, the councillor continued to shout over the Chair, requiring her to adjourn the meeting. Upon reconvening, the councillor continued to speak and shout over the Chair. A motion was passed in terms of the Council's Standing Orders to suspend the councillor from the meeting. Despite this motion, the councillor initially refused to leave, and it took a further adjournment from the Chair to persuade the councillor to remove himself. The Panel held that the councillor had breached the Code.*

- 56 You are accountable for your own conduct at all times in terms of the Code, irrespective of the conduct of others. Abusive or offensive language and / or unnecessarily disruptive behaviour should not be tolerated. During the course of a meeting, the Chair has the right to rule on and to take appropriate action as necessary, on the acceptability of conduct, and any language used and comments made. This can include requiring the withdrawal of a remark, asking for an apology, or any other action necessary to allow the meeting to proceed properly. Factors you should consider include whether:
- your behaviour, including your body language, is courteous and respectful (even when you hold a different view to that of other participants);
  - you are treating others with courtesy, respect and consideration;
  - your choice of language in meetings is appropriate and meets the high standards expected by the general public;
  - it is appropriate to refer to other councillors by nicknames or to refer to them in the second person, by using terms such as 'you';
  - newspapers, mobile phones, laptops and other devices are being used appropriately or whether their usage could be perceived as you not being engaged in the meeting or listening to what others are saying; and
  - your conduct could diminish the public's opinion of, and trust and confidence in, its elected representatives.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had been disrespectful during a meeting of the Council's Regulation and Licensing Committee towards an applicant who was looking to renew his taxi licence. It was found that the councillor's remarks and questions amounted to a personal attack and were not relevant or appropriate in the context of determining whether the applicant was a fit and proper person to hold the licence. He was found to have breached the Code.*

*A councillor said “sieg heil” when the Chair of a committee curtailed debate on a motion. It was found that the words “sieg heil” are synonymous with the former fascist Nazi regime in Germany and are directly associated with obedience to an oppressive dictatorship. As such, it was found that the councillor’s use of them could only be taken as an unacceptable way of protesting about how the Chair had conducted the meeting in respect of the item under consideration. Although the councillor had retracted the comment when asked to do so, it was found that he had breached the Code by failing to show respect to the Chair.*

*At a meeting of the Council, being a public forum, a councillor had accused a senior employee of collusion with the Council’s Administration and had challenged the employee’s integrity. The Panel found this behaviour particularly egregious given that the employee in question had no right of reply to the accusations. In addition, the accusations had not been raised previously with the employee or their line manager in private. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*At a meeting of a Planning Committee a councillor made inappropriate comments about a planning application in that she made reference to “lining developers’ pockets”. While she had apologised unreservedly both publicly and privately, she was found to have breached the Code.*

## Gifts and Hospitality

- 57 The Standards Commission has produced a separate Advice Note for councillors on Gifts and Hospitality which can be found at:  
<https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.
- 58 In your role as a councillor, you should never **ask for** or **seek** any gifts or hospitality. However, you will be **offered** gifts and hospitality: the Code makes it clear that the default position is you should refuse these, except in the very limited circumstances listed at paragraph 3.15 of the Code – see Notes 65 to 67 below for further information. It should be noted that acceptance can include accepting the *promise* of a gift or hospitality.
- 59 ‘Gifts’ or ‘hospitality’ can come in many forms. Beyond the everyday things like bottles of wine or offers of lunch, they can include benefits such as tickets to sporting or other events; provision of services at a price below that generally charged to the public; incurring personal debts or obligations on your behalf, relief from indebtedness, loan concessions, or other financial inducements.
- 60 **Objective test:** you should always consider whether your acceptance of a gift or hospitality, in the limited circumstances permitted under paragraph 3.15 of the Code, would allow an informed member of the public to think it might lead to your being influenced in your judgement on matters. You should also always consider whether you would have been given the gift or hospitality if you were not a councillor. In doing so, you should think not just of your own perception, but the perception of others.
- 61 You should also not give or offer a gift or hospitality that is intended to induce someone, for example an employee or fellow councillor, to act improperly. You should note that in terms of the [Bribery Act 2010](#), the following cases are offences:  
**Case 1** is where:
- (a) P offers, promises or gives a financial or other advantage to another person, and
  - (b) intends the advantage
    - (i) to induce a person to perform improperly a relevant function or activity, or
    - (ii) to reward a person for the improper performance of such a function or activity.

**Case 2** is where:

- (a) P offers, promises or gives financial or other advantage to another person, and
- (b) P knows or believes that the acceptance of the advantage would itself constitute the improper performance of a relevant function or activity.

- 62** An example of bribery might be where a windfarm operator promises to pay community benefit to an organisation in your ward, provided you grant planning permission in circumstances where it would not otherwise be awarded (i.e. if the proper statutory test of considering the provisions of the development plan and all material planning considerations was not applied or if community benefit was wrongly taken into account in determining a planning application).
- 63** You should, therefore, be aware that irrespective of any of the provisions in the Code, a gift which induces an individual to improperly undertake a statutory duty, such as granting planning permission, is still likely to fall foul of the provisions of the Bribery Act 2010. This is regardless of whether the gift is given directly to the individual, or to someone else. Such an action could result in a criminal prosecution.
- 64** Paragraph 3.18 of the Code makes it clear that where an individual or organisation is awaiting a decision from, or seeking to do business with, the Council, you should not accept any form of gift or hospitality from them, no matter how small in nature or value. This is irrespective of whether you sit on a Committee with an influence on the outcome of such matters, as there could still be a perception that you might be in a position to influence colleagues making the decision one way or another. As you have a personal responsibility to comply with the Code, the onus is on you to ascertain whether the individual or organisation offering you gifts and / or hospitality is awaiting a decision from, or seeking to do business with, the Council.

### **Limited circumstances in which gifts and hospitality may be accepted**

- 65** Provided Paragraph 3.18 of the Code does not apply, paragraph 3.15 sets out the very limited circumstances in which you might accept a gift or hospitality from another person in your role as a councillor. These would be things such as a pen, or a notepad, or hospitality such as tea or coffee at a local event, or a sandwich or buffet lunch included as part of a daily rate charged and provided to all delegates at a training event or conference.
- 66** Similarly, where you are representing the Council in a civic role, you will be expected to accept hospitality normally associated with that role, for example, a dinner to commemorate the anniversary of an event. If you are invited to such events as a result of your civic role, you can accept the invitation.
- 67** Paragraph 3.19 of the Code also recognises that there may be situations where, as a councillor, and in particular if you hold a role as a civic leader of your Council (Convener, Provost, and / or their deputies) you may be expected to accept gifts on the Council's behalf. These could be, for example, from representatives of a twin town or another organisation visiting your area. In those circumstances, if it would cause embarrassment or offence to refuse the gift, you can accept it. You should, however, pass the gift to the appropriate Council employee at the earliest opportunity.

### **Perception and Influence**

- 68** The provisions in the Code on gifts and hospitality are designed to avoid any perception that councillors may be using their role to obtain access to benefits that members of the public would otherwise be expected to pay for, and also to prevent them from being influenced (inadvertently

or otherwise) into making decisions for reasons other than the public interest (for example, by serious organised crime gangs seeking to obtain contracts and licences to facilitate money laundering).

- 69** The requirement for councillors to advise their Council's Monitoring Officer of any offers of any gifts or hospitality from the same source on a repeated basis is important as it ensures the Council can take action if it appears the same individual or organisation is attempting to influence its elected members and decision-making. It is also open to you, in the interests of transparency, to declare any gifts and hospitality you have declined.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had failed to declare hospitality received during a site visit from a recipient of planning permission who was to make further applications for the same development. However, there was no evidence to suggest that any Council representative, including the councillor in question, received any gift or further hospitality other than being provided with light refreshments mid-morning. Evidence suggested that these had been provided by the developers, following a Council request. This was not regarded as inappropriate for the purposes of the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor failed to declare hospitality received from a company that was involved in a tender application to provide waste disposal services to the Council. The hospitality involved a trip to watch the Scottish Cup Final at Hampden. It could not be said that the hospitality in question was minor, or that it would reasonably be associated with the councillor's day to day duties. The Panel held that whether or not the hospitality had indeed influenced the councillor's judgement in respect of the company's tender application, there was a reasonable perception that the hospitality could have influenced the councillor in such a way. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

## **Confidentiality**

- 70** You have a statutory right, subject to certain statutory exemptions (including those covered by data protection legislation), to Council information under the Access to Information provisions of the [Local Government \(Scotland\) Act 1973](#) and the [Freedom of Information \(Scotland\) Act 2002](#). You also have a right to request information where you can show a need to know that information in order to perform your duties as a councillor.
- 71** It is legitimate, however, for your Council to require you to treat certain documents and information, provided to you in your capacity as a councillor, as confidential. Given the potential damage that the unauthorised disclosure of confidential material can do to the standing, reputation and integrity of a Council, it is essential that you respect the provisions at paragraphs 3.21 to 3.23 of the Code.
- 72** Information can become confidential in a number of ways, including in terms of the following examples:
- a Council employee, or a member of the public, has asked you to treat it as confidential;
  - the Council has resolved to treat it as exempt information in terms of the [Access to Information provisions](#) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, or is likely to do so;
  - information which, under the data protection legislation or the General Data Protection Regulation contains personal data, the release of which would lead to a breach under those provisions.
- 73** Sometimes the confidential nature of the material will be explicit, such as if the document is marked 'confidential'. In other cases, it will be clear, from the nature of the information or from the circumstances in which it was provided to you, that it is confidential. This may include the following types of information:



- commercial information, such as information relating to a contract or a contractor's business;
- personal or sensitive information, such as information relating to an individual's employment or health;
- information which is confidential as a result of a statutory provision;
- information discussed in closed or private sections of meetings;
- legal advice obtained by the Council (either provided by employees or external legal advisers). This will be covered by legal privilege and should not be disclosed without the Council's permission;
- information received as a result of a relationship where there is an expectation of confidence, such as between a councillor and a constituent; and
- information about any ongoing investigation being undertaken by the Ethical Standards Commissioner.

*A councillor, during a meeting discussing the appointment of new members to a Council committee, objected to the appointment of one of the proposed members on the grounds that a complaint against them was currently being investigated by the Ethical Standards Commissioner. The Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000 provides that ongoing investigations should be conducted confidentially. The Panel found that the councillor was aware, or should have been aware, of that provision. By disclosing publicly the fact that their fellow councillor was under investigation, the councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

- 74** As a councillor, you are a data user and must comply with data protection legislation and your Council's data protection policies when handling information. Council information provided to you must only be used by you for the purpose for which it was provided.
- 75** You should be aware that a breach of confidentiality could result in you being personally liable under data protection legislation. This may result in a potential criminal prosecution, civil liability for damages and / or a fine being imposed by the Information Commissioner, in addition to any reputational damage being incurred by you and / or the Council.
- 76** Confidential information must not be disclosed or in any way used for personal or party-political advantage or in such a way as to discredit the Council. This applies even in circumstances where you hold the personal view that such information should be publicly available.
- 77** You must not provide the media with 'off the record' briefings on the general contents or 'line' of confidential material or information. Disclosures of this kind can also seriously undermine and devalue the work of the Council and its committees.
- 78** Sometimes confidentiality is a matter of timing, in that information may be released into the public domain at a later stage (either in the short or long term). However, you must respect the requirement for confidentiality even if you do not agree with it or consider that the information should be released at an earlier stage.
- 79** You should seek advice if you are in any doubt as to whether any documents, information or advice are confidential, particularly if you are intending to disclose these to any outside body or individual.
- 80** As a councillor, you are in a position of trust and members of the public (particularly constituents) may provide you with information that could reasonably be regarded as confidential. If the status of any discussion is unclear, you should establish, at the earliest possible opportunity, whether some or all of the matters being discussed are to be treated as being confidential.
- 81** If you are considering disclosing any information which could reasonably be regarded as being

confidential, you should always obtain confirmation (preferably in writing) that you have the authority to do so. However, you must be aware that the person who holds the information may not necessarily have the authority to permit any such disclosure. For example, another councillor may have passed on information to you. The fact that this information has been passed to you by another councillor does not mean that the information in question is not confidential, or that the councillor in question has the authority to permit you to disclose it further.

- 82** You should be aware of the provisions of data protection legislation. If you hold personal information (such as details of constituent enquiries, constituents' personal details or other information such as medical conditions), you are required to be registered as a data controller under data protection legislation. You must abide by the following rules when holding and processing personal data:
- you must only use the information for the purposes for which it was given;
  - you must not share such information with anyone without the consent of the person giving the information, or unless required to do so by law. You should note, however, that you do not need a constituent's consent to share information with Council employees for the purpose of assisting with the resolution of an enquiry or complaint, provided you do not use the constituent's personal data in a way that goes beyond their reasonable expectations in contacting you (unless you are required to do so by law); and
  - you should not keep the information any longer than you need to.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor disclosed confidential information relating to the health of a Council employee to a third party. It was found that the councillor had breached the Code by disclosing to a third-party information about the employee which was private, personal and sensitive and that was, by its very nature, confidential.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor disclosed, in two Facebook posts, sensitive information about his Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The information in question had been provided by council employees at private briefings. The Panel, having heard from a number of witnesses, including other councillors, was satisfied that it was evident the information was intended to remain confidential until the Council had prepared its public communications. This was especially important given the nature of the communications, which could have caused undue fear or alarm. The Panel concluded, therefore, that the councillor had breached the confidentiality provisions of the Code.*

*A councillor who sat on his Council's adoption panel disclosed details of a person who had applied to the panel to adopt a child. The councillor could only have become aware of the information he disclosed as a result of his membership of the adoption panel. The Panel concluded that the councillor had breached the Code by disclosing the confidential information.*

## **Use of Council Resources**

- 83** As a general rule, facilities paid for by the public purse, and provided for use in Council business, should only be used for Council business unless otherwise expressly permitted by the Council itself. It is recognised, however, that some Councils may allow councillors occasional personal use of Council-provided equipment, such as laptops, mobile telephones and tablets. It is likely that your Council will have policies and protocols on related matters, including on the use of IT and other equipment for personal and official purposes, and on employee support for councillors. The Code obliges you to adhere to such policies and protocols and, therefore, you should familiarise yourself with their contents.
- 84** The Code now explicitly forbids the 'imprudent' (i.e. without thinking about the implications or consequences) use of Council facilities. Given the importance of achieving [best value](#), it is

important that councillors are not seen to be using facilities irresponsibly or wastefully. An example of this would be printing documents unnecessarily.

- 85** Facilities must never be used for party-political or campaigning purposes. You are reminded of the relevant provisions of [Section 2 of the Local Government Act 1986](#), which are as follows:

*2. Prohibition of Political Publicity*

*(1) A local authority shall not publish, or arrange for the publication of, any material which, in whole or in part, appears to be designed to affect public support for a political party.*

*(2) In determining whether material falls within the prohibition regard shall be had to the content and style of the material, the time and other circumstances of publication and the likely effect on those to whom it is directed and, in particular, to the following matters -*

*(a) whether the material refers to a political party or to persons identified with a political party or promotes or opposes a point of view on a question of political controversy which is identifiable as the view of one political party and not of another;*

*(b) where the material is part of a campaign, the effect which the campaign appears to be designed to achieve.'*

*3. A local authority shall not give financial or other assistance to a person for the publication of material which the authority are prohibited by this section from publishing themselves.*

- 86** While restrictions on party-political use of facilities are particularly in focus during election campaigns, they apply at all times. Councils and councillors should also take into account and adhere to the terms of the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#) issued in terms of Section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986.

- 87** The provisions under paragraphs 3.24 to 3.25 of the Code apply at all times and not just when you are acting as a councillor. Other factors to consider include:

- whether you are either explicitly or impliedly allowing others to use Council facilities improperly;
- how the resource you are using is funded (for example, who pays for any transport or administrative support); and
- whether the resource is being used solely for you to carry out official Council business or for an activity which has expressly been authorised by the Council, or whether you are using it for something else as well.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had used Council facilities to send an email in relation to an application for planning permission submitted by his own company. He was found to have breached the provision in the Code concerning the improper use of Council facilities.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor used his Council email account and computer to send an email asking for help to deliver party-political campaign leaflets. It was found that the councillor had breached the provisions in the Code prohibiting the use of Council facilities for party-political or campaigning purposes.*

## **Dealings with the Council and Preferential Treatment**

- 88** As a councillor, you must avoid conduct which seeks to further your own personal interests, or the interests of others you are connected to. You must also avoid conduct that may give the impression you are seeking preferential treatment. The test is not only whether it is your intention to seek preferential treatment but also whether a member of the public, with knowledge of all the relevant facts, would reasonably consider that preferential treatment is being sought. You should note that *seeking* preferential treatment can be a breach of the Code, regardless of whether any action is taken as a result. Factors to consider include whether you are asking employees to act in a way:

- that suggests you are seeking preferential treatment for yourself or others; and
  - that would conflict with or call into question their political impartiality, or which could give rise to criticisms that people paid from public funds are being used for party-political purposes.
- 89** Paragraphs 3.26 to 3.28 of the Code are designed to ensure there is transparency in your dealings with employees of the Council. There is an onus on you to advise employees of any connection you may have to a matter when seeking advice, assistance or information whether within or outwith a formal meeting of the Council or its committees. This applies equally in circumstances where employees are seeking advice, assistance or information from you.
- 90** You should not assume that employees will be aware, or will remember, any personal interest you have in a matter, when you are seeking their advice, assistance or information. It is important that you identify any connection as it may be that it is inappropriate for the employee to provide you with advice, assistance or information on the matter, if your connection is one that could amount to declarable interest. For more information on what is meant by ‘connection’ and a ‘declarable interest’ in this paragraph, see the further guidance provided under Section 5 (Declaration of Interests).
- 91** [Section 112 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992](#) provides that, if you are in arrears of two months or more of Council tax or three months of community charge, you cannot vote on certain matters relating to Council tax, including the setting of Council tax. In such circumstances, you would be required to disclose that this legislation applies to you in any meeting where such matters are being considered, and you would not be allowed to vote. It is a breach of the Code to do so, and may also constitute a criminal offence. If you are in any doubt as to whether this section applies to you, you should seek the advice of the Monitoring Officer.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor sought preferential treatment when contacting employees about a planning application his neighbour had submitted and, in particular, had sought information which would not normally be available to members of the public. The councillor had also sought to exert influence in asking that the matter be dealt with urgently. It was found that his actions amounted to attempts to seek preferential treatment in breach of the Code.*

*A firm, in which a councillor was a partner, submitted a planning application for a wind turbine. The Panel heard that the councillor sent two emails from his council email address, signed off by him as a councillor, to members of the planning committee that was due to consider the application. In his emails, the councillor outlined a number of points in favour of the planning application. The Panel determined that members of the public would reasonably conclude that, by sending the emails from his council email address and signing them off as a councillor, he was using his position as a councillor to seek preferential treatment. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

## **Appointments to Outside Organisations**

- 92** Authorities will frequently appoint or nominate councillors to outside bodies. If you are appointed or nominated to an outside body, you are still bound by the Code, but you will also have responsibilities as a member of the outside body. These responsibilities may potentially include personal liabilities and could also give rise to conflicts of interest. Such conflicts may arise through competing personal interests, or the competing interests of the respective organisations of which you are a member. Councils will therefore need to consider this issue carefully when appointing councillors to outside bodies. You need to consider carefully whether you can accept such appointments in each case. The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note for Councillors appointed to Arm’s Length External Organisations (ALEOs) which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

*A complaint alleged that the councillor had disclosed confidential information on the re-opening of recycling centres following the first Covid-19 lockdown. The councillor disclosed information that had been discussed at a special meeting of an ALEO established to provide recycling and waste disposal services on behalf of the Council, firstly in a press release by his party, and later on Facebook. This disclosure occurred despite the councillor knowing that the information was to remain confidential until the Council had agreed the proposals, put the necessary arrangements in place and managed its communication strategy. The Panel considered the requirement for councillors to abide by the rules of conduct of any partner organisations they are appointed to as an important requirement of the Code. The Panel concluded that the councillor, by disclosing the information in question, had failed to act in the best interests of the ALEO, and therefore had breached the Code.*

- 93** You should be aware that you may need to register, in terms of Section 4 of the Code, your membership of another body. That membership could also amount to an interest that would need to be declared in terms of Section 5. However, membership of statutory joint boards or joint committees composed exclusively of councillors does not require to be registered or declared as an interest.
- 94** If you are appointed or nominated by the Council to an outside body, as a director or a trustee, you will assume legal responsibilities as an individual. These legal responsibilities, as a director of a company, arise by virtue of the Companies Acts, and / or as a charity director or trustee by virtue of the [Charities and Trustee Investment \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) (if the outside body is a registered charity). The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator has up to date guidance on the latter scenario at: <https://www.oscr.org.uk/guidance-and-forms/guidance-and-good-practice-for-charity-trustees/>. If appointed or nominated to an outside body, you should ensure that you are clear about the role and the responsibilities you will have to it as an individual. You will also have to act in the outside body's best interests and, as a member, will be bound by the provisions in any code of conduct it has adopted, when acting as such.
- 95** If you have any doubts about your responsibilities or concerns about the impact of an appointment to an outside body on your ability to adhere to the Councillors' Code, you should seek advice before accepting such an appointment or before any meeting at which appointments are to be made. Advice can be sought from Council employees or, if appropriate, from employees of the outside body.

## SECTION 4: REGISTRATION OF INTERESTS

- 96** This section of the Code is intended to give members of the public confidence that decisions are being taken in the best interests of the public and not those of you or your family, friends or personal associates.
- 97** The Register is intended to be a public record of the interests that might, by their nature, be likely to conflict with your role as a councillor.
- 98** The fact that you have subsequently declared a registrable interest at a meeting would not necessarily be a defence to a complaint that you breached Section 4 of the Code by failing to register it. Accordingly, you should be as transparent and careful as possible when considering which interests you are required you register.
- 99** The Register should cover the period from 12 months before your election and your whole term of office. For example, if you were newly elected or re-elected to office in May 2022, your Register should cover the period commencing May 2021 and include the full subsequent term of office. Should an interest no longer apply (for example if you cease to receive remuneration through employed work during your term of office), the entry should still be listed in the Register and retained for the whole term of office. However, you should amend the Register to reflect the change of circumstances, e.g. *“Parliamentary researcher from xx/xx/2017 until xx/xx/2020”*.
- 100** You should be aware that [The Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#) (Register of Interests) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (the 2021 Regulations) state that Council employees must retain the record for a period of five years after the date a councillor ceases to be in office.
- 101** You are required by the 2021 Regulations to update your entries in the Register of Interests within one month of your circumstances changing. While your Council may issue reminders, it is nevertheless your personal responsibility to ensure your entry is updated within one month of a new interest arising or of your circumstances changing. You should also ensure that you review all your entries in the Register at least once a year, even if you think nothing has changed.
- 102** For categories where the Code does not specifically mention the level of detail to be registered, it is for you to decide. In making such a decision, you should observe the key principles and, in particular, those of selflessness, integrity, openness and honesty. You ensure you have provided enough information for a member of the public should be able to understand the nature of the entry in your register without having to undertake any research. A failure to include sufficient information for an entry to be understandable could amount to a breach of the Code. For example, if you are registering employment you should include the full name of your employer, not just an abbreviation.

### Category One: Remuneration

- 103** The level of remuneration, or how much you receive, does not matter in terms of whether an entry needs to be made under this category. The question is only whether you have received remuneration. This means paid work, no matter how casual or trivial in nature, requires to be registered.
- 104** You do not need to state the exact job title of any remunerated post you hold as an employee, but you should provide a description that allows a member of the public to understand the type of role. For example, you could state:

*“Since 2019, receive an ongoing salary as a part-time customer service agent for X+Y Limited, being an IT consultancy firm” or “receive hourly rate payment for one day per week self-employed work for GreenFingers, being the trading name of my landscape gardening business which has operated since 2016” or “received two fixed payments for writing two articles, published in May and September 2021 for Z, a trade magazine”.*

- 105** ‘Undertaking’ is defined in Annex B of the Code as (a) a body corporate or partnership; or (b) an unincorporated association carrying on a trade or business, with or without a view to a profit. ‘Body corporate’ includes entities such as companies, limited liability partnerships and, potentially, Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisations. ‘Unincorporated associations’ includes clubs, societies, and mutual associations. The key as to whether an interest is registrable under this category is whether you carry out work for the undertaking for which you receive some form of ‘remuneration,’ i.e. wage, salary, share of profits, fee, expenses or other monetary benefit or benefit in kind.
- 106** Paragraph 4.5 of the Code confirms you do not have to register any work that you carry out on behalf of the Council in your capacity as councillor, or any remuneration, expenses and allowances you receive for being a councillor (including any paid in terms of the Local Government allowance, expenses and remuneration regulations). This includes any work you carry out in respect of joint boards or joint committees comprising solely of councillors.
- 107** Paragraph 4.10 of the Code indicates that you should register ‘any other work’ besides a trade, profession or vocation. Such work might include freelance work that you undertake for a particular sector, or a paid consultancy, or educational or training courses you provide in return for payment.

### **Category Two: Other Roles**

- 108** Where you have been appointed as a member of an outside body (including where you have been nominated or appointed by the Council), you should ensure that the membership is registered in your Register of Interests either under Category One: Remuneration (if the position is remunerated) or under Category Eight: Non-Financial Interests (if the position is not remunerated).
- 109** There is no need to register being a councillor or a member of a joint board, a joint committee or of COSLA.
- 110** If you hold an unremunerated directorship in an undertaking, and you are remunerated by a parent or subsidiary of that undertaking, you should register the unremunerated directorship under ‘Other Roles.’ For the sake of transparency, you should register the name and registration number of both undertakings, and the relationship between the two. Your remuneration in the parent or subsidiary undertaking should also be registered under Category One: Remuneration.

### **Category Three: Contracts**

- 111** You must register an interest under this category where:
- you as an individual; or
  - an undertaking that you have a substantial interest in either as a partner, director or as a shareholder (where the value of shares you hold is as described under Category Four: Shares and Securities)

has an upcoming or ongoing contract with the Council for the supply of goods or services, or for the execution of works. You do not need to state the value of the contract.

This category may overlap with Category One: Remuneration. If so, you should add an entry under both sections, for transparency. An example of the detail required would be as follows: *Director and shareholder of cleaning company which has a contract with MidScotland Council to valet the council's vehicle fleet. Contract start date: 1 February 2010.*

#### **Category Four: Election Expenses**

- 112** 'Donations' towards election expenses would include those received via crowdfunding, if individual contributions (including any from the same source) amount to more than £50.

#### **Category Five: Houses, Land and Buildings**

- 113** In terms of paragraph 4.18 of the Code, there is no requirement to register residences outwith Scotland although, in exceptional circumstances where such an interest may affect a matter before the Council, you may need to declare such an interest in terms of the requirements under Section 5 of the Code (Declaration of Interests). You must, however, register any interest you have in any houses, land and buildings in Scotland, even if they are located outwith your Council area.

- 114** In terms of paragraph 4.19 of the Code, you are required to provide the Council's Monitoring Officer with the full addresses of any houses, land and buildings you own or have any other right or interest in. However, there is no requirement for any full address you provide to be disclosed on the Council's website or otherwise made publicly available. This means it is sufficient for the purposes of your publicly available register to simply identify the Council ward in which the property is located - for example, it is sufficient for your register to state that you own a residential property in the West End ward, Dundee.

- 115** Examples of other rights you may have in houses, land and buildings may include a right as a tenant, an agricultural tenant, as a trustee or beneficiary of a trust, or through a liferent.

#### **Category Six: Interest in Shares and Securities**

- 116** 'Shares and securities' is intended to cover all types of financial investment models, including stocks, bonds, options, investment trusts, and other forms of part-ownership, including equity and debt ownership.

- 117** You have a registrable interest, in terms of paragraph 4.20(a) of the Code if, at any time, you own, or have an interest in more than 1% of the issued share capital of a specific company or body.

- 118** You have a registrable interest, in terms of paragraph 4.20(b) of the Code if, at the relevant date, the market value of any shares and securities (in any one specific company or body) you own or have an interest in is greater than £25,000. The 'relevant date' is defined in Annex B of the Code as the date you were elected, and on 5 April each year following your election.

- 119** For example, you are elected as a councillor on 7 June 2021. For the purposes of paragraph 4.20(b) of the Code, 7 June 2021 is the first 'relevant date' on which you must consider the market value of your shares and securities. If, on 7 June 2021, the market value of any shares and securities (in any one specific company or body) you own or have an interest in is greater than £25,000, you must register that shareholding. Thereafter, the next 'relevant date' on which you



must consider the market value of your shares and securities is 5 April 2022, and then 5 April each following year.

**120** An interest under shares and securities will also include investments made under self-invested pension plans. However, you do not need to declare an interest in the Council's Pension Fund.

**121** In relation to paragraph 4.21 of the Code you will have a registrable interest as a trustee, (either as an individual or jointly with other trustees), where you have an interest as a beneficiary of the trust and where the benefit is greater than 1% of the trust's value or the value of that benefit is greater than £25,000.

### **Category Seven: Gifts and Hospitality**

**122** The default position is you should refuse gifts and hospitality, except in very limited circumstances (see paragraphs 3.13 to 3.20 of the Code). However, if you have accepted and registered gifts and hospitality under the previous versions of the Code, these should remain on your Register of Interests for the term of office.

### **Category Eight: Non-Financial Interests**

**123** When considering whether you have a registrable non-financial interest, you should bear in mind that the test is whether the interest is one which members of the public might reasonably think could influence your actions, speeches, decision-making or voting in the Council. An example of this might be membership of a society. You should consider whether such membership might lead members of the public to reasonably conclude that it could influence your actions, speeches, decision-making or voting, in terms of paragraph 4.22 of the Code. If so, you should register the interest.

**124** In order to ensure you are being as transparent as possible, you should consider erring on the side of caution. This may mean you register a large number of non-financial interests. If so, you are reminded that any non-financial interest registered under Category Eight of the Code, is a connection in terms of Section 5 of the Code (Declaration of Interests). That means you will have to consider whether it also needs to be declared, if the objective test is met, in terms of paragraph 5.5 of the Code.

**125** You should bear in mind that the examples of possible non-financial interests stated in paragraph 4.22 of the Code are illustrative only and, therefore, are not an exhaustive list of potential non-financial interests.

### **Category Nine: Close Family Members**

**126** Paragraph 4.23 of the Code is intended to help ensure that your Council complies with accounting standards that require a public body's accounts to disclose the possibility that its financial position may have been affected by any related party transactions. Such transactions include contracts for the supply of goods and services, and the execution of works. While you are also required to declare the financial interests of others under paragraph 5.5 of the Code, if the objective test is met, there is a risk that your Council's finance team may not realise that you have done so when preparing the accounts. You are, therefore, required to register the interest of any close family member who has transactions with your Council or is likely to have transactions or do business with it. This is to ensure there is transparency in respect of any potential influence that anyone close to you, in your capacity as a member of the Council, may have over a

transaction the Council has been involved in that, in turn, had an impact on its overall financial position.

- 127** The Code does not define what is meant by ‘close family member’ as this will depend on your individual circumstances, but it is likely that a spouse, cohabitee, partner, parent and child would be considered to fall within this category. You do not need to disclose the family member’s name or any other personal data in the register; it is sufficient for you to identify the relationship and nature of the transaction. For example, *“my son is a partner in a business that has a contract to provide catering services to the Council”*.
- 128** The fact that a close family member may be employed by your Council or one of its ALEOs would not be considered a transaction or business for the purposes of Category Nine. Therefore, while such a connection could amount to a declarable interest under Section 5 of the Code, it would not require to be registered.

*A councillor failed to ensure his one-third shareholding in a company was registered correctly and timeously. While the Hearing Panel accepted that there was no intention to mislead or deceive, and that neither the councillor nor the company had gained any benefit from the oversight, he was nevertheless found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor failed to register a financial interest in respect of her remunerated employment as an office manager with a member of the Scottish Parliament. The Hearing Panel noted that the councillor had publicly announced, via a posting on a social media site, that she would be working for the MSP. While it was accepted that this demonstrated there was no evidence of any deliberate attempt to conceal the employment, the councillor was nevertheless found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor failed to include in her Register of Interests the part-ownership of a property. It was found that while the councillor’s interest in the property was limited until the end of a liferent, the title to the property as registered in Land Register nevertheless demonstrated that she was a part-owner and, as such, she should have registered her interest in it. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

## **SECTION 5: DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

**129** The requirement for councillors to declare certain interests is a fundamental requirement of the Code. A failure to do so removes the opportunity for openness and transparency in a councillor's role and denies members of the public the opportunity to consider whether a councillor's interests may or may not influence their discussion and decision-making.

**130** Should you be in any doubt about the implications of your participation in a Council discussion or decision, you should seek advice from your Council's Monitoring Officer before taking part.

### **Stage 1: Connection**

#### **Paragraph 5.1**

**131** In your work as a councillor, you will have connections with a great number of people and organisations. In the same way, your financial affairs, employment and property holdings - or those of individuals close to you or bodies you are involved with - will sometimes mean that you have a connection to a matter that your Council is considering, in some way.

**132** Such connections will not always amount to an interest that you are required to declare. However, you should always consider whether this is a possibility, in the context of your role as a councillor and in respect of any specific matter you are being asked to consider. You should always err on the side of caution, and if you are in any doubt you should consult your Council's Monitoring Officer.

#### **Paragraph 5.2**

**133** The Code cannot provide for every type of relationship that could result in a connection, as this will depend on the facts and circumstances; for example, how close you are to the individual in question and how often you see them. It should be noted, however, that certain relationships such as spouse, partner, cohabitee, close friend, parent or child are likely to result in a connection.

**134** It is impossible to list every type of connection you could possibly have with a matter involving or to be considered by the Council. However, some common examples would include:

- owning a property that is potentially affected by Council proposals (such as demolition or compulsory purchase), or might be affected by proposals by others (such as an application for a licence or consent);
- the Council considering some form of financial assistance that could have a direct effect on an organisation you, your partner, or someone close to you works for;
- your membership of a club or society that is applying for a grant or some form of licence or consent from the Council;
- some form of personal connection with a person making an application, or a complaint, to the Council, which goes beyond the usual relationship that a councillor would have with a constituent.

#### **Paragraph 5.3**

**135** Paragraph 5.3 of the Code makes it clear that anything you have registered as an interest in terms of Section 4 of the Code (Registration of Interests) would be considered a connection for the purposes of Section 5.

## Paragraph 5.4

- 136** Paragraph 5.4 of the Code outlines matters that are not considered a connection for the purpose of the Code. This includes simply having previous knowledge or experience of a matter.
- 137** Though being a Council tax payer does not need to be considered a connection when the Council tax is being set, s.112 of the [Local Government Finance Act 1992](#) requires you to disclose at the council tax setting meeting if you are in arrears of two months or more of Council tax or three months in the case of community charge. If so, you are not entitled to vote on the matter.
- 138** Similarly, while being a Council house tenant is not automatically a connection, there are circumstances where the law prevents you from voting on Council house matters in your ward. Specifically, s.20(3) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 provides:  
*A member of a local authority shall be excluded from a decision on the allocation of local authority housing, or of housing in respect of which the local authority may nominate the tenant, where—*  
(a) *the house in question is situated; or*  
(b) *the applicant for the house in question resides, in the electoral division or ward for which that member is elected.*
- 139** If you are in any doubt about whether you can take part in such a decision, you should seek advice. You should be aware that even if you are not prevented from taking part under any legislation, you will still have to consider whether you have a connection that amounts to an interest under the Code (having applied the objective test). If so, you will have to declare the interest and leave the room. An example might be if the house in question is not situated in your ward and the applicant does not reside there, but they are nevertheless a close friend or relative.
- 140** You should also be mindful of the specific responsibilities you have to different bodies and be aware of the potential for conflicts of interests between your different roles.
- 141** As stated at paragraph 5.4(c) of the Code, membership of an outside body you have been appointed to by the Council, as its representative, would not normally be a connection. Such outside bodies can include statutory bodies (such as regional transport partnerships and health and social care integration joint boards), joint committees (such as city region deals and Scotland Excel), ALEOs and voluntary organisations.
- 142** However, as stated at paragraph 5.4(c)(1), this does not apply where the matter being discussed by the Council, or at one of its committees or sub-committees you are a member of, is:
- quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature; and
  - where the outside body has an involvement.
- Examples of the types of matters which involve quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions are outlined in Section 7 of the Code (Taking Decisions on Quasi-Judicial or Regulatory Applications), and include planning and licensing applications.
- 143** An example of where you would have a declarable interest arising from your membership of an outside body would be where, as a member of your Council's licensing committee, you are to consider an application made by the outside body. A further example would be where, as a member of your Council's planning committee, you are to consider a planning application where the outside body is an objector. The requirement for you to declare your interest as a member of the outside body in these situations would apply regardless of whether or not you actively participated in the decision by the other body to make the application or objection.
- 144** You should note that you can take part in any Council discussions and decision-making on finance

and funding matters relating to any outside body or ALEO, even if you are appointed or nominated to that outside body or ALEO by your Council. However, you should be aware that, in terms of paragraph 5.4(c)(2) of the Code, you may still have a personal conflict by reason of:

- your actions;
- your connections (other than your membership of the outside body or ALEO); or
- your legal obligations.

**145** An example of where you have a personal conflict, and therefore a declarable interest, **by reason of your actions** could be where you have stated, during a meeting of an ALEO, that the ALEO requires further financial support and where you have then voted in favour of applying to your Council for more funding. It is likely that your actions in doing so would result in a personal conflict if your political group then makes it clear that its members are to vote to reject the funding request at a subsequent Council meeting. In such a scenario, it is likely that your actions would prevent you from taking part in the discussion and decision-making at the Council meeting. This is because a member of the public, with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard you as having a personal conflict of interest.

**146** A further example could be where you have categorically and publicly stated, at a stakeholder event run by an outside body of which you are a member, that the body is exceeding all its targets and functioning successfully, but where you are then asked to scrutinise that body's performance at a Council committee meeting.

**147** An example of where you have a personal conflict **by way of a connection** (other than solely from your membership of the outside body or ALEO) would be where your partner works for the outside body, and the body is seeking a package of funding from the Council for its operations that could have an impact on your partner's job.

**148** Examples of where you may have a personal conflict as **a result of legal obligations** would include where you are either a director of a company or a charity trustee. Both the Companies Acts and the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 impose obligations on you to act in the best interests of the company or charity, and those obligations may conflict with your role as a councillor. If you are in doubt as to what your legal obligations are to the outside body, you should seek advice from its legal advisers.

**149** A further example would be where you are a member of a pension fund committee. If, for example, your Council was to consider a motion to request that the pension fund committee should take a certain action (investment or otherwise) then it is likely that this will be a declarable interest resulting from your personal obligations as a member of that committee. This is because duties of pension funds are fiduciary in nature and accordingly, any decision made by a pension committee must have regard to the parties to whom a duty is owed (being both the scheme employers and scheme members) and any decisions must also accord with investment regulations.

**150** Having a view in advance on a matter to be considered at a Council meeting (and discussing such a view with colleagues or constituents) would not in itself create a personal conflict that could be said to arise by way of your actions (provided the matter is not quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature). You are entitled to express views and opinions, and doing so before a meeting to discuss matters that are not quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature does not, by itself, create a declarable interest.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had breached the Code by failing to declare an interest when taking part in a committee decision on changes to a community council boundary. The complaint was*

*that the councillor had done so, despite having sent private messages, which then entered the public domain, to friends and family before the meeting encouraging them to vote against the proposal to amend the boundary. The Hearing Panel noted, however, that the expressing of an opinion privately, on a council policy, to friends and family would not amount to having an interest that arose by way of the councillor's actions. This was because the matter before the committee (i.e. the boundary change) was not quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature. The Panel noted that councillors were entitled to have, and to publicly express, views and opinions on policy matters and matters of local interest (and that they are often elected because they have expressed such views). The Panel confirmed that the Code does not prevent councillors from discussing or debating matters of policy or strategy.*

## **Stage 2: Interest**

### **Paragraph 5.5**

- 151** Having decided that you have a connection to a particular matter, you should apply the objective test to that connection to decide whether it amounts to an interest that requires to be declared.
- 152** The **objective test** outlined in paragraph 5.5 of the Code assumes that a member of the public has knowledge of the relevant facts. The question you need to consider is whether a member of the public, with this knowledge, would reasonably regard the connection as so significant that it would be likely to prejudice your discussion or decision-making in your role as a councillor. If the answer is yes, the connection is an interest which you should declare.
- 153** At all times when applying the objective test, you should be aware that it is just that – objective. The test is not what you yourself know about your own motivations and whether the connection would unduly influence you: it is what others would reasonably think, if they were in possession of the relevant facts.
- 154** There may be instances where, having applied the objective test, you consider the connection is so remote and insignificant that you do not think it amounts to an interest. Examples might be where a supermarket you regularly use is engaged in a property transaction with the Council, or when a neighbour you have little social contact with works for a company receiving financial assistance from the Council.
- 155** Section 3 of the Code sets out the very limited circumstances in which you would accept gifts and hospitality. As you must apply an objective test when deciding whether or not to accept any gift or hospitality being offered, it would be unusual for such a gift or hospitality to be so significant that it would constitute an interest.
- 156** When making a declaration of interest you only need to provide enough information for those at the meeting to understand why you are making a declaration. For example, it may be sufficient to say: *“I declare an interest as my partner is a member of the organisation making the application”*. You might not necessarily need to provide details about how long your partner has been a member and in what capacity.
- 157** You must disclose or declare your personal interests both in formal and informal dealings with Council employees and other councillors, not just in formal Council or committee meetings. This is an important consideration, especially when you are seeking advice or assistance from Council employees or other sources. You should not assume that employees and others will know or will remember what your interests are.
- 158** You should be mindful of the need to protect the confidentiality of another person's business or

financial interests when making a declaration of interest. You are only required to provide enough information to make it clear why you consider you have a clear and substantial interest.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor who had been appointed to represent the Council on a stakeholder group had participated in a discussion regarding a review of child health and medical services in the Council area at a meeting of the stakeholder group. This was despite being aware that his employer, who was a Member of the Scottish Parliament, had an interest in retaining certain services under consideration. The employer had previously raised the issue in the Scottish Parliament and had made public statements in the press. The councillor had failed to apply the objective test as, had he done so, he would have realised that in raising issues and concerns that were similar to those raised by his employer, a member of the public might have perceived him as being influenced by his employer. It was determined in the circumstances that the nature of the employee / employer relationship could not reasonably be considered to be remote or insignificant. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had failed to register her non-financial interest as a member of a local Steering Group set up in support of a Business Improvement District (BID). The BID process was a matter of public interest due to the use of public funds and the public ballot of the business community. It was found that the councillor was a member of the Steering Group prior to, during and after a ballot on the establishment of the BID. As such, members of the public might reasonably have considered that her interest in the Steering Group could influence her actions, speeches or votes in the Council in respect of the BID and, therefore, her interest should have been registered. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had not declared any interest at three meetings of a policy and scrutiny panel of the Council, during which reports were presented about the Council's contribution towards the funding of voluntary organisations, including her employer. This was despite her employer having been mentioned specifically in reports considered at the meetings in question. It was found that the councillor should have applied the objective test, declared a non-financial interest and taken no further part in the discussions and decision-making at the meetings. She was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor failed to declare an interest in a planning application at a meeting of the Council's Planning Board despite having a close and long-standing friendship with the family who were seeking the planning consent. While the Panel recognised that there was no potential for personal gain by the councillor, he was nevertheless found to have breached the Code. This was because the Panel was satisfied that a member of the public, knowing that the councillor was close friends with the family who had a financial interest in the planning application, would reasonably regard the interest as sufficiently significant as to be likely to prejudice his decision-making. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had failed to declare his non-financial interests and the non-financial interest of close relatives in relation to involvement with a school lobbying group after a planning application to build a new school had been submitted and the formal planning process was underway. The councillor had incorrectly assumed that employees were fully aware of his interests, and also the interests of his family in the lobbying group. It was noted that councillors should ensure that all the relevant information is provided to employees when advice is sought, so that councillors can be assured that any advice given to them by employees is fully informed and comprehensive. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had failed to declare an interest at a meeting at which a planning application for a wind farm on land adjacent to a farm owned by her was being considered.*

*In return for payment, the councillor had granted a right of access over her land to allow entry to the proposed wind farm. The councillor relied on an argument that a confidentiality clause contained in the access agreement had prevented her from declaring her interest. The Panel rejected that argument as irrelevant, and the councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

### **Stage 3 - Participation**

#### **Paragraph 5.6**

- 159** If you decide that you should declare an interest, you should do so at the earliest opportunity. If you only realise a declaration is necessary when the discussion in respect of a matter is underway, you may wish to consider whether you should provide a brief explanation as to why you had not realised you had an interest at the outset of the meeting.
- 160** Thereafter, when the item is being considered, you should leave the room. It is not sufficient for you to retire to the back of the room or to any public gallery. If the meeting is being held online, you should retire to a separate breakout room or leave and re-join after the discussion on the matter has concluded. It is not sufficient for you to turn off your camera and / or microphone for the duration of the matter.
- 161** You should not give anyone reason to doubt that you are no longer in any position to influence the outcome of deliberations on the relevant item either directly or indirectly. This means that you should refrain from contacting your councillor colleagues remotely (for example by email or text) while they are considering the item.

*A councillor, who was also a member of a planning committee involved in determining a planning application, made a declaration of interest stating that their partner was a shareholder in the company applying for the planning permission in question. The councillor's declaration was noted and they were asked to leave the meeting, which was being held online. However, instead of fully leaving the online meeting, the councillor simply switched off their camera, meaning they were still able to see and hear the proceedings. The councillor then sent WhatsApp messages to their colleagues on the committee, urging them to approve the application. The Panel found that the councillor had breached the Code.*

- 162** Where the only interest is in relation to an item included in an agenda which is being laid before the committee, or the Council, for noting or formal approval, no declaration is required unless it is then decided that the item needs to be discussed or debated as a substantive issue.
- 163** You are reminded that, when considering whether a declaration of interest is appropriate or the effect of making a declaration in terms of the actions you are then required to take, you should refer to the full provisions of the Code. The Standards Commission has produced an Advice Note for Councillors on How to Declare Interests, which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.
- 164** You may wish to check that any declaration of interest you have made at a formal meeting is recorded in the minute with the relevant agenda item identified. For example: *“Councillor A declared an interest in relation to the planning decision at Agenda Item 16 as she owns a property on the same street. Councillor A therefore left the room and took no part in the discussion or decision-making on that item”*.



## Paragraph 5.7

**165** You may wish to think about whether you should indicate why you consider any connection you have to a matter does not amount to a declarable interest. This is particularly if you know that members of the public are aware of your connection, but where you suspect they may not have knowledge of all the relevant facts.

**166** In those circumstances you might want to make a transparency statement. For example, you could state: *"I have a connection to this item by reason of... However, having applied the objective test I do not consider that I have an interest to declare. This is because..."*. If you think it would be helpful you can ask the employees who are clerking the meeting to note your transparency statement in the minutes. Similarly, you may wish, for the sake of transparency, to state that you were offered, but turned down, a gift or hospitality.

## Paragraph 5.8

**167** The Standards Commission can consider requests for dispensations in certain circumstances, either from a councillor as an individual or to a class or description of councillors who are affected by a particular category of interest.

**168** Any application for a dispensation should be submitted either by email to [enquiries@standardscommission.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@standardscommission.org.uk) or by mail to the Executive Director, The Standards Commission for Scotland, Room T2.21, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Any application should detail all the relevant information, including the reasons why a dispensation is sought. Factors to consider before making the application include whether:

- it would be in accordance with both the spirit and intent of the Code to grant the dispensation; and
- you have provided sufficient reasons for the request, including what the effect or consequence would be if it was not granted.

**169** The Standards Commission will respond as soon as practicable after receipt of all information, usually within 20 working days. Where an application for dispensation relates to a specific item of business, the Standards Commission will try to respond before the meeting at which the business is to be considered. However, Standards Commission Members work on a part-time basis, so this may not always be possible. As such, all applications should be submitted to the Standards Commission as soon as the relevant information / circumstances are known.

**170** If a dispensation is granted, you should consider stating this at the meeting, and asking for this to be recorded in the minutes.

## **SECTION 6: LOBBYING AND ACCESS TO COUNCILLORS**

- 171** As a councillor, you will be approached by those wishing to make their views known. This is perfectly legitimate and should be encouraged, as the ability to approach and lobby a council or councillor is an essential part of the democratic process.
- 172** Paragraph 6.1 of the Code sets out some of the ways in which you, as a councillor, may be lobbied. For example, you may be lobbied by a constituent on a personal issue, such as a housing matter. You may become involved in a particular local issue as part of your role and responsibility to promote community engagement and build capacity. You may be approached by someone seeking financial or other benefit from the Council, either by way of a contract for goods or services, or some form of licence or consent.
- 173** It is easy for the lines between these different types of approach to become blurred, particularly when you are dealing with quasi-judicial and regulatory matters, such as planning or licensing. It is important to recognise, however, that the integrity and reputation of the Council's decision-making process depends on openness, transparency and following proper process. There is a risk that private meetings with lobbyists, particularly those that fall outwith Council procedures and where employees are not involved, will undermine or could reasonably be perceived as undermining this.
- 174** Lobbyists can expect to deal with Council employees at certain stages of an application process. If you are seen as facilitating an approach outwith the normal process, there may be a perception that you have allowed the lobbyist special access to the decision-maker and that you are bypassing employees. As such, if you are approached by anyone about a pending decision of any kind, you should advise the employees who are dealing with the matter and give them all relevant information.
- 175** Discussing the information you have received from lobbyists with employees will give you an opportunity to establish if it is something they are aware of and / or if it is relevant to any decision you will be making. It may be that lobbyists will present information in a way that is favourable to their case, but which does not give the complete picture. Employees can give you professional advice on what may or may not be a relevant consideration in respect of any decision you will be making.
- 176** Even if you do not sit on the regulatory committee that is taking the relevant decision, there are still likely to be issues under the Code that you will need to consider. In particular, it would be a breach of the Code for you to lobby employees or members of the regulatory committee either on your own behalf, or on behalf of others.

### **Constituent Enquiries**

- 177** Dealing with constituent enquiries is a key part of your role, and helps ensure the Council is open, accessible and responsive to the needs of the public. When you respond, you should be mindful of the need to treat everyone with respect, and to otherwise promote the key principles outlined in Section 2 of the Code. In some cases, however, you may feel that there is nothing further to be gained by responding to a constituent and that you are not able to help them further. In those circumstances, you should politely inform the constituent that is the case.
- 178** You are entitled to raise a constituent's enquiry with the relevant employee, although you should, at all times, follow the Council's policies on the processing of personal data. You can ask questions about how a service has been delivered, and can seek information on progress on behalf of a

constituent, but you should be careful not to stray into operational management (for more advice on this, please see the Standards Commission's Advice Note for Councillors on Distinguishing between their Strategic Role and any Operational Work, which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>).

- 179** You should be aware of the distinction between a constituent's request for service (or for information about a service), and a complaint about a service received. In the latter case, you should recommend that the constituent makes use of the Council's formal complaints procedure, as this enables common patterns of complaint to be identified, and enables a complainer to escalate their complaint to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, if necessary and as appropriate.
- 180** Inevitably there will be occasions where the constituent looking for your help is also a Council employee. While they are entitled to do so as a private individual in the same way as any other constituent, you should decline to get involved in anything which relates to their status as an employee (such as performance or attendance management). You are a member of the organisation that employs them, and employment matters should be handled by their line manager or their union representative, as appropriate. You should also be mindful of the terms of Appendix A to the Code, which deals with the relationship between Council employees and councillors.

## **Community Engagement**

**181** Community engagement is a key part of your role, as it helps to:

- identify a community's needs;
- determine Council priorities;
- contribute to more informed decisions; and
- help community empowerment and capacity building.

You should note, however, that there is a distinction between community engagement and a single-issue campaign about a regulatory decision.

## **Lobbying**

**182** Private meetings with lobbyists - whether professional lobbyists or members of the public seeking your support - can undermine public trust in decision-making processes. It can also have consequences for the lobbyist. For example, a private meeting could disqualify them from the tender process if they are bidding for a Council contract. Private meetings can also involve offers of hospitality, which could lead to a breach of the gift and hospitality provisions at paragraphs 3.13 to 3.20 of the Code.

**183** If you are approached by a lobbyist, it is likely that they are seeking your involvement as someone in a position of influence, whether as part of the decision-making committee or otherwise. It is important to recognise that there is a difference between lobbying on behalf of a commercial or personal interest, and lobbying for a policy change or benefit which affects a group of people, a community, or an organisational sector. You should always consider what will benefit the Council area as a whole, not just any narrow sectoral interest.

**184** You must not, in any case, accept any paid work in which you give advice on how to influence the Council or its decision-making processes.

**185** In all situations, care is needed. You should be guided by the Code and, in particular, consider:

- could anything you do or say be construed as you having been improperly influenced to take a particular stance on an issue;
- are you giving, or could you be perceived as giving, preferential access to any one side of an argument;
- when seeking information on the progress of a case or particular matter, are you doing so in a factual way or could you instead be perceived as making representations or lending support; and
- are you reaching your own view on a matter having heard all the relevant arguments and evidence (including the guidance of Council officials), and not simply agreeing or complying with any view expressed by your political group.

### **Lobbying in Quasi-judicial or Regulatory Matters**

**186** If you choose to be an advocate for or against a particular cause, you will forfeit your right to be a decision-maker in regulatory or quasi-judicial decisions concerning that cause. If you are approached and wish to remain as a decision-maker, you can listen to views expressed but you must make it clear that you cannot lend support or make a decision until the appropriate meeting, when you have heard and considered all relevant and material evidence and information. However, you can:

- advise employees of the representations you have received;
- assist constituents in making their views known to the relevant employee;
- seek factual information about the progress of a case; and / or
- advise those that are lobbying who they can contact (being the relevant employee or a councillor who is not on the decision-making committee).

**187** In determining an application, you cannot take into account any community benefits that are not essential to enable the proposal. In particular, the promise of money to the local community (for example, from wind turbines) can never be a consideration in deciding a planning application as this would be contrary to the principle that planning permission can never be bought or sold. Granting an application contrary to policy, because of the money on offer, could also result in you being subject to criminal charges for bribery.

*A complaint alleged that a councillor failed to engage with, and denied access to, a constituent who had sent an email to the Council seeking information on a motion which had been endorsed by the councillor and approved by the full Council. The Council had referred the individual's email to the councillor for response. The individual considered that the councillor's response and subsequent comments in the press indicated that he did not want to engage with her. However, there is no specific obligation under the Code for individual councillors to respond to all who seek to lobby them, and as such the complaint did not amount to a breach of the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had been involved in a 'secret' meeting with some local residents. The outcome of the meeting resulted in a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO), which ultimately led to the introduction of parking restrictions. The complainer alleged that, by attending the meeting, the councillor had failed to be accessible to the public and had demonstrated bias in favour of some residents. It was established, however, that the councillor had been accompanied at the meeting by an employee from the Council's Roads Services. No evidence was found that the councillor had indicated support for or against the making of the TRO, and as such his conduct did not give rise to a breach of the Code.*

*In advance of a planning committee meeting to determine a contentious application to erect screen netting at a tennis club, a councillor made an unaccompanied visit to the objectors' property and engaged with them. The councillor had previously called in the application, meaning that it was to be*

*considered by the committee. At the committee meeting, the councillor seconded a motion to approve the application with a different type of netting. The Panel held that, by not seeking the views of employees or having similar discussions with the applicant, she had given the appearance of unfairness and bias towards one of the parties and was therefore found to have breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that at a meeting of a planning committee, a councillor attempted to influence other members of the committee in their consideration of the application by suggesting a site visit. It was found that the councillor had simply suggested a site visit and there was no evidence he had attempted to influence the other members in their consideration of the application. It was found that suggesting a site visit in itself would not amount to inappropriate lobbying or influence that in turn could amount to a breach of the Code.*

## SECTION 7: TAKING DECISIONS ON QUASI-JUDICIAL OR REGULATORY APPLICATIONS

### Introduction

**188** The Key Principles set out at Section 2 of the Code, in particular Integrity, Objectivity, and Openness, are of particular importance where you are taking decisions on quasi-judicial or regulatory matters. The decisions you take will often have a significant impact on the applicant and others. As paragraph 7.2 of the Code sets out, there may be formal legal routes beyond the Council to challenge a decision made on a quasi-judicial or regulatory matter. As many of the decisions will be controversial, they may be subject to intense scrutiny. A failure to observe the terms of the Code, or the perception that you have not done so, could result in a challenge against the Council's decision, with associated cost implications. A successful challenge can have an adverse effect on the Council's reputation, as well as your own. Even if any such challenge is ultimately unsuccessful, it is likely that the Council will still incur costs.

### Quasi-judicial or Regulatory Decisions

**189** The list of quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions at paragraph 7.3 of the Code is illustrative and not exhaustive. You should note that such decisions are not limited to planning or licensing matters. If you are in any doubt about whether an application or matter is quasi-judicial or regulatory in nature, you should seek advice before taking part in any discussion, decision-making or voting.

**190** When making quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions, you must do so objectively and with an open mind. Your decision should be made in accordance with the law, your Council's policies and should be based solely on the merits of the case. You should not represent or make decisions based on any private interest. Questions to ask yourself include:

- are you acting fairly?
- have you taken proper account of the public interest?
- have you taken account of all the material and relevant facts, evidence, opinions and policies?
- are you considering irrelevant and inappropriate matters, such as what may be reported by the press, or what might be popular at the ballot box?
- have you taken account of advice from Council employees who are exercising their statutory duties and functions?
- are you able to give clear and adequate reasons for your decision, if required?
- have you indicated, outwith the committee forum, your support for, or opposition to, the matter on which you are due to make a decision?

**191** If you have been appointed to an outside body by the Council you will be entitled to participate in any Council discussion and voting on matters relating to that body. It should be emphasised, however, that you cannot take part in respect of any matter of a quasi-judicial or regulatory nature relating to or potentially affecting that body. Examples of this are where the body in question:

- is applying to the Council for a licence, a consent or an approval; or
- is making an objection or representation or, in some other way, has a material interest concerning such a licence, consent or approval; or
- is the subject of a statutory order of a regulatory nature, made, or proposed to be made, by the Council.

An example of this would be where you have been appointed by your Council to an outside body and that body has submitted an application to the Council for a theatre licence. If you are on the Licensing Committee considering the application you must declare your interest and withdraw from the room while the matter is being considered.

- 192** If you have an interest (whether financial or non-financial) in terms of Section 5, in relation to a particular application, you must declare that interest, take no part in the decision and withdraw fully from the room. The very limited circumstances where you can remain in the room as a representative in line with your Council's procedures are outlined at paragraphs 7.11 and 7.12 of the Code. When you are outside the room you should not do anything which would raise a suspicion that you were communicating with or in any other way trying to influence colleagues involved in the decision, for example by sending them an email or text. If the meeting is online, it is not sufficient to merely switch off your camera or microphone; you must leave the meeting entirely and re-join when you are advised that the discussions and / or voting on the matter has concluded.
- 193** Although you are entitled to hold a preliminary view on a matter in advance of a meeting at which a decision will be taken, you must keep an open mind. This means you must be prepared to consider the merits of all views and representations made about the matter under consideration before making your decision. You must not make your mind up about a particular matter before you have had the opportunity to consider all the evidence – making up your mind in this way is known as pre-judging or pre-determination.
- 194** Pre-judging or making a pre-determination may invalidate the Council's decision and leave it open to legal challenge, as well as being a breach of the Code. For example, if you state that "*wind farms are blots on the landscape and I will oppose each and every one that comes before the committee*", you cannot claim to have retained an open mind on the issue and say that you are prepared to determine each application on its merit. However, saying: "*some people find wind farms ugly and noisy so I will need to be persuaded we should allow more in this area*", demonstrates you are willing to listen to the merits of an application.
- 195** You may come into contact with quasi-judicial or regulatory matters in your role as a councillor in a number of ways. For example, you may be contacted by a constituent, either in person or in writing, about a particular application. You may sit on the committee deciding the application, or another committee giving a view on it. You may be a member of a committee such as a local review body, with very strict procedural rules on how applications are considered. In all of these contexts you should avoid expressing a view which indicates you have closed your mind on the matter.
- 196** If you take part in a meeting at which views in advance of a committee decision at a later date are being gathered (such as a pre-determination hearing) you can express a preliminary view on the matter in line with any policy your Council may have in place for doing so. However, even in this context, you should avoid comments indicating that nothing will change your mind on how you will vote at any subsequent meeting.
- 197** In matters of a quasi-judicial or regulatory nature, it is almost inevitable that you will be lobbied by a number of parties both for and against the issue. You should be mindful of the provisions of Section 6 on lobbying in such situations at all times.

*A councillor had, prior to her election to the Council, been a member of an anti-windfarm group. Although she had left the organisation before being elected, she remained as the administrator for its Facebook page. The Panel found that, the councillor's prior membership of the organisation, her continuing role as administrator of the Facebook page, and her previous expression of anti-windfarm sentiments, meant that she should have declared an interest at a planning committee when an application for a windfarm was being considered and withdrawn from the meeting. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

*A councillor, as a member of the Council's licensing committee, made comments to the press which demonstrated that he had pre-judged a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence application before it had been heard by the committee. The councillor had voted against the licence being granted at the licensing committee meeting and in doing so had failed to avoid the appearance of improper conduct. If the councillor had acted in accordance with the Code and not taken part in the discussion and vote, it would have reduced the risk of the Council's decision being legally challenged. When the decision was then subject to legal challenge, the councillor then took part in a vote about whether the Council should defend its decision to refuse the HMO application. This was despite knowing that employees and the licensing committee convener had expressed concerns about his participation in the item at the initial meeting, and despite one of the grounds of appeal being that he, as an individual, had pre-judged the matter. The Panel determined that the councillor should have withdrawn from both meetings and taken no part in the discussion or decision-making on the item at either. His failure to declare an interest and do so amounted to a breach of the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor, in his role as a member of a licensing board, stated that he was minded to support an application. This statement was made before the board had heard all submissions, which indicated he had pre-judged the matter. The councillor was also disrespectful towards members of the public who were present as objectors when he questioned them in a confrontational and adversarial manner and was dismissive of their views. Following the licensing board decision, a judicial review seeking of the decision was lodged. The petition, which included an account of the councillor's conduct, was based on the grounds that the objectors were not afforded a fair hearing. The petition was granted by the Court and legal costs awarded against the Council. It was found the councillor had breached the Code.*

*A complaint alleged that a councillor had sent emails from his Council email account to certain members of an area committee, making representations in support of a planning application made by a company of which he was a director. It was found that he had made the representations outwith the committee forum and not in accordance with the relevant Council procedures. The councillor was found to have breached the Code.*

## **Policy and Strategy**

- 198** Many quasi-judicial or regulatory decisions are taken against the background of a policy or strategy which has previously been agreed by the Council or one of its committees. Such policy or strategy (for example, a local development plan) could have been set as a result of a decision being made on an application relating to one you are now considering. As such policies are always under review, you should be mindful that they may be changing while applications are being decided. In such contexts, you can express views on policy and strategic issues while still being able to determine applications relating to them.
- 199** When making statements about emerging policy, you should nevertheless be mindful that the Council must be able to demonstrate that all relevant and material evidence underpinning such matters has been considered. As such, you should make it clear that you will not reach a final decision until you are in possession of and have considered all relevant and material information.
- 200** For example, you may think that a particular site being proposed for housing development in the draft local development plan is unsuitable. It would be perfectly legitimate for you to say something like, "I'm not convinced that X is the best site for housing development". However, you should avoid saying "nothing would convince me that the site in question should be developed for housing", as doing so could indicate that you had entirely closed your mind on the matter before being in possession of and considering all relevant and material information.



- 201** You can adopt an advocacy role by, for example, saying you would welcome planning applications for the redevelopment of an area, or would like to preserve greenbelt land or promote industry. As a member of a Licensing Committee or Board you may wish to express a view and seek to influence the Council's formation of a policy to address local concerns, such as stating that you consider there is an overprovision for licensed premises in a particular area or an overprovision of Houses of Multiple Occupancy. However, you cannot then comment on a specific application, once lodged, in advance of the meeting at which it will be determined.
- 202** You should familiarise yourself with the Scottish Government's Guidance on the Role of Councillors in Pre-Application Procedures which can be found at:  
<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Built-Environment/planning/Roles/Planning-Authorities/Documents>

## **Representation**

- 203** Paragraph 7.9 of the Code makes it clear that, if you wish to remain part of the decision-making process, you cannot act as an advocate either for or against an application. If you have done so, you are obliged in terms of paragraph 7.10 to declare an interest and leave the meeting room – this includes leaving the media gallery, the public gallery or any other space within the meeting room.
- 204** In some councils there are procedures under which supporters of, or objectors to, applications can make verbal representations at a meeting. If you have been involved with any such individual or group, you should consider very carefully whether your participation in such procedures would be helpful. It may be that another representative from such a group could make the representations instead.

## **Paragraph 7.11**

- 205** If you intend to make representations before a committee you are a member of, for example, to support your constituents' views, you should advise the Chair and committee clerks at the earliest opportunity. You should ensure your declaration of interest is recorded in the minutes of the meeting. When making such representations, you should do so from the same place as any member of the public or applicant would do, and not your usual committee seat. You should only participate to the extent that your Council's procedures and standing orders would allow any other individual to do so.
- 206** If you have made representations, you must not participate as a decision-maker in the application, nor attempt to influence employees or lobby other councillors involved in the application.

## **Paragraph 7.12**

- 207** If you intend to make representations before a committee you are not a member of, for example, to support your constituents' views, you should only participate to the extent that your Council's procedures and standing orders would allow any other individual to do so.
- 208** Having made any such representations, you should then follow your Council's policies and procedures for parties appearing before committees, while the application is being discussed and determined. For example, if the Council's policy requires the party who has made the representation to leave the room, you should do so. If it requires the party to retire to the public gallery, you should do the same. If you retire to the public gallery, you should not do anything from there that could give rise to suspicion that you are trying to influence the decision.

## Site Visits

**209** The Code recognises that individual Councils will have their own procedures for site visits and does not attempt to be prescriptive about what these procedures should include. Some Councils will insist that you attend site visits if you are taking part in the final decision. This is particularly the case in relation to local review bodies carrying out site inspections under the planning legislation. As site visits can form part of the committee process, a degree of formality should apply, and you should behave accordingly. You must follow your Council's own procedures in making site visits as part of the committee process, and must not give any impression during a visit that you have made your decision prior to the committee itself.

## Enforcement

**210** If you are advised or become aware that the Council may need to take enforcement action in respect of any quasi-judicial or regulatory matter, you cannot get involved and cannot organise support for opposition to such action. You can only refer the matter to the appropriate Council team, or advise anyone making an enquiry about how to do so.

**211** Similarly, you cannot lobby other councillors (whether they are on the relevant committee or not), or put pressure on planning officers to either take, or not take, investigative or enforcement action.

**212** Most enforcement matters are delegated to Council employees. While you can ask for updates on how a particular enforcement is progressing, you cannot interfere in any action that is taken by your Council. More information on how to distinguish between strategic and operational matters can be found in the Standards Commission's Advice Note for Councillors on Distinguishing Between their Strategic Role and any Operational Work, which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

**213** You should also bear in mind that the decision on one application may not be the end of the matter and that other, related applications may be lodged in the future. You should be careful of the perception that any close interest you show in enforcement may indicate that you are supporting or are opposed to any related application.

## ANNEX A

### PROTOCOL FOR RELATIONS BETWEEN COUNCILLORS AND EMPLOYEES IN COUNCILS

#### Principles

- 214** Annex A of the Code outlines the different roles councillors and employees have, and how they should behave towards one another. The protocol is not intended to cover every scenario, but instead should be used as a guide to ensure councillors and employees understand their respective remits and responsibilities.
- 215** The key message, detailed at paragraph 2 of Annex A, is that councillors and employees should work in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Such an atmosphere contributes towards the effective operation of the Council. Neither party should seek to take unfair advantage of their position or influence.

#### Roles

- 216** As a councillor, you are expected to provide strategic leadership and management. This involves:
- setting strategy and policy; and
  - scrutinising and making major, complex decisions that concern the Council as a whole.
- Councillors are not, however, responsible for operational management, which is the planning, organising and execution involved in day to day activities.
- 217** Day to day operational management of the Council is delegated to employees, who are answerable in the first instance to the Chief Executive as the Head of Paid Service, under the [Local Government and Housing Act 1989](#).
- 218** Councillors are required to be involved in certain operational matters when:
- undertaking advocacy work (lobbying or campaigning);
  - representing constituents (case work); and
  - taking decisions on quasi-judicial or regulatory applications (in their role on any regulatory, appeals and appointment committees).
- 219** The Standards Commission's Advice Note for Councillors on Distinguishing Between their Strategic Role and any Operational Work. The Advice Note provides advice about how to balance these operational aspects of a councillors' role with their strategic role. It also provides advice about how to avoid conflicts when undertaking the decision-making role on any regulatory, appeals and appointment committees. The Advice Note can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/education-and-resources/professional-briefings>.

#### Human Resource Issues

- 220** Councillors should not become involved in issues relating to an individual employee's pay or terms and conditions of employment (even if they are a constituent), unless they are serving on a committee delegated to deal with such matters.

#### Public Comment

- 221** Councillors should avoid making any public comments that could bring their Council into disrepute. It should be noted that paragraph 24 of Annex A does not seek to restrict a councillor's

ability to properly scrutinise the performance of the Council or its employees. Instead, it seeks to discourage a councillor from making unfounded public accusations, either about any employee or the Council as an entity.

- 222** Councillors should avoid raising any adverse matters about the conduct or capability of employees in public. This includes repeating or drawing attention towards criticisms of employees publicly. If you have concerns about the conduct or performance of an employee, you should raise it privately with their line manager.
- 223** You should be careful not to make public statements which expressly, or by implication, criticise the actions (or inaction) of an individual employee or identifiable group of employees. You should note that the concept of a public statement is very wide and can cover a variety of scenarios such as published minutes of a Council or committee meeting, a comment on a social media platform, or being overheard in a public area.
- 224** You have a right to receive good quality information from employees on which to base your decisions and undertake your scrutiny role. If you do not feel that any information provided is sufficient, you are entitled to ask for more. In doing so, you should be mindful of being perceived as being publicly critical of any employees. For example, saying *“X’s report is inadequate as they have failed to include a risk assessment”* at a meeting could be perceived as public criticism of X’s conduct or performance. Instead, you may wish to say: *“I do not feel I can make a decision on this matter until a risk assessment has been prepared and included in this report”*.

## **ANNEX B**

### **DEFINITIONS**

There is no Guidance on Annex B as it only contains definitions of terms used in the Code.

## ANNEX C

### BREACHES OF THE CODE

#### Hearings

**225** The Standards Commission, after receiving a report from the Ethical Standards Commissioner, (ESC), can decide to hold a Hearing (usually in public) to determine whether a breach of the Code has occurred and, if so, to determine the appropriate sanction. A policy outlining the factors the Standards Commission will consider when making such a decision on a report referred by the ESC can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases>.

**226** Details of the procedures followed at a Standards Commission's Hearing are outlined in its Hearings Process Guide and Rules, which can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/hearing-rules>. In certain circumstances and following the agreement of parties involved in the Hearing, the Standards Commission may use an Abbreviated Hearing Process.

#### Sanctions

**227** [Section 19 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#) (2000 Act) obliges a Hearing Panel to impose a sanction, following a finding that the councillor has breached the Code. This can be either a censure, suspension, or disqualification:

**Censure:** A censure is a formal record of the Standards Commission's severe and public disapproval of the councillor.

**Suspension:** This can be a full or partial suspension (for up to one year). A full suspension means that the councillor is suspended from attending all meetings of the council. A partial suspension means that the councillor is suspended from attending some of the meetings of the council.

The Standards Commission has produced Guidance on the extent of the activities in which a councillor can engage while they are subject to a period of full suspension (either on the finding of a breach of the Code at a Hearing or as an interim measure while an investigation about their conduct is ongoing). This can be found at: INSERT LINK.

**Disqualification:** Disqualification means that the councillor is disqualified from holding office or standing for election as a councillor for the period determined (which can be up to five years). The disqualification extends to the councillor's membership of any joint committee, joint board or other body on which they are a representative or nominee of the council.

**228** The Standards Commission's policy outlining the factors a Hearing Panel will consider when making a decision on the sanction to be imposed can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/hearing-rules>.

#### Interim Suspensions

**229** Section 21 of the 2000 Act gives the Standards Commission power to impose an interim suspension on a councillor on receipt of an interim report from the ESC about an ongoing investigation. A policy outlining the Standards Commission's approach to interim suspensions can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/details-of-alleged-breach>.

**230** The decision to impose an interim suspension should not be seen as a finding on the merits of a complaint, nor as a disciplinary measure. Guidance on what activities a councillor can engage in when they are subject to either a full or an interim suspension can be found at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/cases/details-of-alleged-breach>.



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Extract from Scheme of Administration

**SECTION XII**

**AD-HOC COMMITTEES**

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**Constitution**

Eight Members of the Council, being, five members from the Administration and three members from the Opposition.

**Quorum**

Three members of the Committee shall constitute a quorum.

**Functions Referred**

The following functions of the Council shall stand referred to the Committee:-

1. All matters relating to the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000.
2. The adoption and application of the Code of Conduct for Councillors.
3. The consideration, investigation and determination of all complaints made concerning the conduct of Councillors.
- \*4. The consideration and revision from time to time of the list of sanctions available to the Council in the event of misconduct on the part of a Councillor.
5. The consideration of reports from the Monitoring Officer on matters relating to the Ethical Framework.

**Functions Delegated**

All functions above NOT marked \*. Those functions marked \* are referred to the Committee for consideration and recommendation only and must receive approval of Council.

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