STANDARDS COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND

INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

# MINUTES Meeting date: Monday 8 December 2025

***IN ATTENDANCE***

**Members:**

- Suzanne Vestri (Convener)
- Malcolm Bell
- Helen Donaldson
- Morag Ferguson
- Lezley Stewart

**Executive Team**:

- Lorna Johnston (Executive Director)
- Richard Wilson (Case Manager)

| ITEM | CONTENT | ACTION |
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| **STANDING ITEMS** | | |
| **1.** | **APOLOGIES**<br>No apologies were received.<br><br>**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**<br>The Executive Director declared an interest in item 14(j) and took no part in the discussion. | |
| **2.** | **MATTERS ARISING**<br>Members noted all matters arising from the last meeting, on 3 November 2025, were complete. | |
| **CONSENT ITEMS** | | |
| **3.** | **UPDATE FROM DATA PROTECTION OFFICER**<br>Members noted the update from the Scottish Parliament's Head of Information Governance, who also acted as the Standards Commission's Data Protection Officer, on changes to the UK's data protection and privacy laws resulting from the enactment of the Data Use and Access Act 2025. | |
| **4.** | **DRAFT MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING**<br>Members reviewed and approved the minute of the meeting on 3 November 2025. | |
| **5.** | **REVIEW OF RISK MANAGEMENT POLICY**<br>Members undertook their annual review of the Standards Commission's Risk Management Policy, which provides details of the organisation's approach to the management of risk, but did not identify any changes that needed to be made. Given that only minor changes had been identified during the annual reviews over the past three years, Members agreed that going forward, the policy only required to be reviewed on a three-yearly basis. Members asked the Executive Team to update the Policy Register to reflect this decision. | **Executive Team** |
| **6.** | **REVIEW OF FRAUD PREVENTION AND WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY**<br>Members undertook their biennial review of the Standards Commission's Fraud Prevention and Whistleblowing Policy, which outlines how staff and Members should report any concerns about serious wrongdoing or malpractice, and agreed some minor amendments.<br><br>Members asked the Executive Director to make the agreed changes to the policy, before circulating the revised version to staff and Members and publishing on the website. | **Executive Director** |
| **STRATEGIC MATTERS** | | |

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| **7.** | **PROMOTING THE ETHICAL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK AND UPDATE ON OUTREACH WORK**<br>Members noted that since their last meeting:<br>• The Convener and Executive Director appeared before the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee meeting on 25 November 2025 to give evidence on the Standards Commission's annual report for 2024/25.<br>• The Case Manager presented on the Standards Commission's work and plans at the SOLAR Conference on 14 November 2025.<br>• The Executive Director and Case Manager presented an online session on the Councillors' Code to the Scottish Conservative Councillors Association on 18 November 2025.<br>• The Executive Director and Case Manager presented an online session on the Councillors' Code to elected members of Dumfries and Galloway Council on 26 November 2025.<br>• The Executive Director and Case Manager held a meeting with the Jo Cox Foundation on 18 November 2025 to discuss opportunities for collaboration, and subsequently provided information and suggestions for inclusion in its forthcoming recommendations report.<br><br>Members further noted that:<br>• Mr Bell is due to attend a Parliamentary reception on the State of Human Rights in Scotland on 11 December2025.<br>• The Executive Director is due to meet, on 10 December 2025, the Standards and Conduct team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who are looking to strengthen the local government standards framework in England.<br>• The Executive Team is to meet with the NHS Board Secretaries Group on 17 December 2025 to discuss the production of a video on the role of NHS Boards' Standards Officers.<br>• The Executive Director is due to present at joint webinar for councillors, with the Improvement Service, on 15 January 2026 on distinguishing between strategic and operational matters.<br>• The Executive Director and Mr Bell are due to present at joint webinar with the Improvement Service on 29 January 2026 on gifts and hospitality.<br>• Members are due to have their annual meeting with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body on 15 January 2026.<br>• Requests to provide training sessions on the Councillors' Code had been received from both Stirling and Glasgow City Councils. Dates for the training were yet to be agreed.<br><br>Members noted that the Standards Commission's annual workshop for all public body Standards Officer workshop would be held online on 17 March 2026, with save the date invitations due to be issued with December Standards Update. | |
| **BUSINESS MATTERS** | | |
| **8.** | **REVIEW OF PROGRESS AGAINST 2025/26 BUSINESS PLAN**<br>Members reviewed the progress made in the year to date against the actions outlined in the Business Plan for 2025/26. Members were pleased to note the majority of tasks identified for the first three quarters had been completed or progressed, including actions that had been identified at the Standards Commission's annual workshop for Council Monitoring Officers, held on 27 October 2025. | |
| **9.** | **DRAFT 2026/27 BUSINESS PLAN AND RISK REGSTER**<br>Members identified some actions and activities for inclusion in the Business Plan for 2026/27, which will be based on the objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan for 2024/28. These included work to continue to promote awareness of the ethical standards framework amongst the public and to continue to provide training to councillors on how they can scrutinise effectively the provision of services, while still complying with the provisions in the Councillors' Code of Conduct. Members noted that any outstanding activities from 2025/26, that the Standards Commission was unable to action, due time and resourcing constraints, would also be added before the Business Plan was finalised. | **Executive Team** |

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| | Members noted that a draft Risk Register for 2026/27 would also be prepared and circulated in January or February, so it could be agreed by the year end. Members agreed that a key risk to be included in the register was the ability of staff to provide full support for Members at Hearings, due to availability (see item 11 below). | |
| **10.** | **DECEMBER 2025 STANDARDS UPDATE**<br>Members noted Standards Update to be issued and published on 19 December 2025 was yet to be drafted in full and, as such, would be circulated for approval by email before the end of the week. | **Executive Team** |
| **11.** | **STAFFING RESOURCES AND CASEWORK**<br>Members noted that the Case Manager would be on parental leave from 12 January 2026. Members noted that a replacement fixed-term Case Manager had been recruited and was due to commence in post on 6 January 2026 allowing for a short hand-over period.<br><br>Members noted that the Executive Director was committed to undertaking various outreach events in the first few months of the calendar year (see item 7 above). Members further noted that three Hearings were scheduled to take place in February 2026, with more anticipated before the year-end (31 March 2026) as a result of referrals from the Ethical Standards Commissioner that were expected to be made before the end of December 2025 and in January 2026. In addition, a Hearing that had been due to be held in November 2025, which had been postponed due to the personal circumstances of the Respondent, would need to be held.<br><br>During a thorough discussion, Members noted their responsibility to manage the organisation's strategic risks and ensure effective governance. It was agreed that:<br>• Staff well-being and the ability of officers to take their annual leave must be a priority<br>• Between now and September 2026, staff time should be focused on those areas where the Commission could be exposed to the most serious risks in terms of communication with parties to Hearings and the accurate recording of decisions made<br>• Where it would be beneficial for operational management, KPIs could be relaxed or scheduling of work delayed<br>• Members had been appointed by the SPCB based partly on their training experience and ability, and thus could be expected to deliver training on behalf of the Commission.<br><br>Members noted that the Executive Director will need time to train the replacement Case Manager and bring them up to speed on any ongoing cases. There were already four Hearings timetabled for February and March, and so it was agreed that chairs of each of those Hearings would discuss with the Executive Director, if there were any elements of the work preparing for those Hearings which could be shared, bearing in mind that each Hearing was different. | |
| **12.** | **UPDATE ON RECRUITMENT OF TEMPORARY CASE MANAGER**<br>As outlined above, Members noted that a fixed-term Case Manager had been recruited to provide cover for parental leave, and was due to commence in post on 6 January 2025. | |
| **CASES UPDATE** | | |
| **13.** | **REPORTS FROM THE ESC & SECTION 14 LETTERS**<br>**(a) LA/SA/4349**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a South Ayrshire Councillor.<br><br>**(b) LA/An/4295b**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about an Angus Councillor.<br><br>**(c) LA/SB/4431**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Scottish Borders Councillor. | |

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| | **(d) LA/WD/4407:** Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a West Dunbartonshire Councillor.<br><br>**(e) LA/Fa/4369**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Falkirk Councillor.<br><br>**(f) LA/Fi/4348**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about two Fife Councillors.<br><br>**(g) LA/G/4216**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Glasgow City Councillor.<br><br>**(h) LA/R/4412**: Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Renfrewshire Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.<br><br>**(i) LA/G/4139**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Glasgow City Councillor.<br><br>**(j) LA/AB/4402**: Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to an Argyll and Bute Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.<br><br>**(k) LA/H/4330**: Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Highland Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.<br><br>**(l) LA/H/4296**: Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Highland Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.<br><br>**(m) LA/Fa/4317:** Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Falkirk Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.<br><br>**(n) LA/Fi/4351**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Fife Councillor.<br><br>**(o) NPA/LLT/4230:** Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority member under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000. | |
| **14.** | **CASES**<br>**(a) LA/An/4168**: Members noted that Angus Council had confirmed that it had formally considered a decision the Standards Commission made at a Hearing held on 17 July 2025.<br><br>**(b) LA/H/4028**: Members noted that a Hearing was held online on 4 November 2025. The Respondent was found to have breached the Code and was suspended from full Council meetings for two months.<br><br>**(c) LA/DG/4304**: Members noted a three-month interim suspension had been renewed on a Dumfries and Galloway Councillor while the ESC was investigating complaints about his alleged conduct.<br><br>**(d) LA/G/4115**: Members noted that the Hearing scheduled to take place on 20 November 2025 in Glasgow City Chambers had been postponed. | |

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| | **(e) LA/G/4203**: Members noted that a Hearing was held 2 December 2025 in Glasgow City Chambers. The Respondent was found not to have breached the Code.<br><br>**(f) LA/DG/4041**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 3 February 2026 in the Municipal Chambers, Dumfries**.**<br><br>**(g) NPA/LLT/4184**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 10 February 2026 at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority's Headquarters in Balloch.<br><br>**(h) LA/G/4182**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 26 February 2026 in Glasgow City Chambers.<br><br>**(i) LA/Fa/3910**: Members noted that Falkirk Council had confirmed that it had formally considered a decision the Standards Commission made at a Hearing held on 5 June 2025.<br><br>**(j) LA/E/4130**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 11 March 2026. The venue is to be confirmed. | |
| **15.** | **INVESTIGATIONS EXCEEDING 3 MONTHS – INTERIM REPORTS**<br>**(a) LA/H/4330**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about a Highland Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate.<br><br>**(b) LA/EL/4360**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about an East Lothian Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate.<br><br>**(c) LA/Fi/4351**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about a Fife Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate.<br><br>**(d) LA/S/4312**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about a Stirling Councillor had taken more than five months to investigate. | |
| **16.** | **FEEDBACK INCLUDING ANY HEARINGS SURVEY RESPONSES**<br>**(a)** Members noted the feedback received on the training event on the Councillors' Code for the Scottish Conservative Councillors Association on 18 November 2025.<br><br>**(b)** Members noted the feedback received on the training event on the Councillors' Code for elected members of Dumfries and Galloway Council on 26 November 2025. | |
| **17.** | **NOTABLE CASES FROM OTHER JURISDICTIONS**<br>Not applicable. | |
| **ANY OTHER BUSINESS** | | |
| **18.** | **ANY EMERGING RISKS**<br>None identified.<br><br>**AGENDA ITEMS FOR NEXT SCS MEETING**<br>Members agreed to advise the Executive Director of any items to be included in the agenda for discuss at the next meeting. | **Executive Team** |

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| **19.** | **2025/26 DIARY DATES AND WORKPLAN**<br>Members noted the diary dates and ongoing workplan.<br><br>**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**<br>Members noted that the next meeting of the Standards Commission was scheduled to take place online and in public on Tuesday, 27 January 2026. | |