STANDARDS COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND

INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

SCS Agenda item 4

MINUTES

Meeting date: Tuesday 27 January 2026

IN ATTENDANCE

Members:

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

Executive Team:

- Lorna Johnston (Executive Director)
- Edward Fellows (Case Manager)

ITEM	CONTENT	ACTION
STANDING ITEMS		
1.	**APOLOGIES** No apologies were received. Members welcomed the Case Manager to his first meeting of the Standards Commission. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST** The Executive Director declared an interest in item 13(f) and took no part in the discussion.	
2.	**MATTERS ARISING** Members noted all matters arising from the last meeting, on 8 December 2025, were complete.	
CONSENT ITEMS		
3.	**DRAFT MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING** Members reviewed and approved the minute of the meeting on 8 December 2025.	
STRATEGIC MATTERS		
4.	**PROMOTING THE ETHICAL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK AND UPDATE ON OUTREACH WORK** Members noted that since their last meeting: • The Executive Team met, on 10 December 2025 and 14 January 2026, 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. • Mr Bell attended a Parliamentary reception on the State of Human Rights in Scotland on 11 December 2025. • The Executive Team held a meeting with COSLA on 16 December 2025 to discuss strengthening the complaint process and the sanctions available should a breach of the Councillors' Code be found. COSLA also advised they would be happy to send, with the Standards Commission and potentially ESC, a joint letter to political parties asking them to encourage compliance with the Code amongst their members and suggesting they seek training opportunities. • The Executive Team met the NHS Board Secretaries Group on 17 December 2025 to discuss the production of a video on the role of NHS Board Standards Officers. A script was then agreed and video produced. • The Executive Director presented a webinar for councillors, with the Improvement Service, on 15 January 2026 on distinguishing between strategic and operational matters. The Executive Director advised there was a good level of engagement both at the webinar and via subsequent enquiries. • Members held their annual meeting with the SPCB on 15 January 2026.	

	• The Executive Director had been asked to join a short-term working group established by the Scottish Government to review the statutory guidance focusing on the roles, responsibilities and membership of Health and Social Care Integration Joint Boards. The Group had held its first meeting on 20 January 2026 and topics discussed included how the Standards Commission could assist in training IJB Members on their roles and responsibilities under their Codes of Conduct. Members further noted that: • The Executive Director and Mrs Stewart were to deliver a training presentation on the Councillors' Code to elected members of Glasgow City Council in-person on 29 January 2026. • The Executive Director and Mr Bell were due to present a joint webinar with the Improvement Service on 29 January 2026 on gifts and hospitality. • The Standards Commission was to hold its annual Standards Officers' workshop online on 17 March 2026. Invitations had been issued with December 2025 Standards Update. • The Standards Commission was to deliver a training event on the Model Code for Members of Public Health Scotland on 23 April 2025. • The Standards Commission had been asked to deliver a training event on the Model Code for Members of Crown Estates Scotland. The date for this was yet to be agreed. • The Standards Commission was to hold an online training event on the Councillors' Code for Council Officers the morning of Friday, 22 May 2026, with invitations having been issued on 15 January 2026. Members noted the Improvement Service was partnering with the Open University (OU) to develop an e-Learning portal for councillors, with the intention of making some of the content available to prospective local authority candidates. Members noted that the Standards Commission had agreed to work with the OU Design Team to develop content for a module on the Councillors' Code, with a view to publishing information about the module and how to access it on the Standards Commission's website. Members noted the Improvement Service had advised that it has approval and funding for the portal and the OU was proceeding to produce it. Members noted the Executive Team sent some draft content for the course to the Improvement Service in quarter two and was due to meet the Improvement Service and OU on 28 January 2026 to discuss the project. Members noted that an update on this would be circulated to them by email afterwards.	**Executive Team**
5.	**BUSINESS PLAN 2026/27** Members reviewed and approved the draft Business Plan for 2026/27 prepared by the Executive Team. Members noted that the plan was based on the objectives outlined in the draft Strategic Plan for 2024/28 and followed its format. Members further noted that, as the Standards Commission did not have any control over the timing of case referrals from the ESC, it may be that the indicated timescales for actions to be taken in respect of non-case related work would need to be altered during the year. Members noted that any outstanding activities from 2025/26, that the Standards Commission has been unable to action due to time and resourcing constraints, would be added before the Business Plan was finalised and published on the website. Members agreed some further actions to promote the actions and work of the Standards Commission, including publishing personalised blogs, and engaging proactively in follow-up with media closer to Hearings. Members agreed it would be helpful to record any measurable impact or outcomes as part of the updates on progress against the Business Plan. Members asked the Executive Team to amend the draft Business Plan accordingly with the final version to be included in the papers for approval at the next Standards Commission meeting on 31 March 2026.	**Executive Team**

6.	**RISK REGISTER 2026/27** Members approved the draft Risk Register for 2026/27. Members further agreed current and target scores for each risk, both in terms of potential impact and probability. Members noted the Audit & Risk Committee would review the Risk Register, and the actions taken to mitigate each risk at its meetings in May and July 2026, and January 2027. The Audit & Risk Committee would then report on these reviews and any suggested changes to the agreed scores at the Standards Commission meeting that followed.	
BUSINESS MATTERS		
7.	**AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE MEETING ON 20 JANUARY 2026** Members noted the draft minutes, and the verbal report provided by the Chair of the Audit & Risk Committee, Ms Donaldson, of the meeting on 20 January 2026. Members agreed the draft audit plan proposed by Audit Scotland, for the 2025/26 audit. Members noted that the Committee had proposed that the Internal Auditor be invited to review how the Standards Commission conducted its Hearings, to make sure it did so in accordance with its own Rules, policies and any published procedures. Members agreed with the proposal and asked the Executive Team to notify the internal auditor accordingly. Members noted that the Committee had conducted its final review of the 2025/26 Risk Register. Members agreed with the Committee's recommendations in respect of changes to overall risk scores in light of the activities undertaken. Members noted that any ongoing risks had been incorporated in the Risk Register for 2026/27.	
8.	**REVIEW OF EXPENDITURE AGAINST BUDGET TO 31 DECEMBER 2025** Members noted the report on expenditure to 31 December 2025 against budget. Members noted that the Standards Commission based its annual budget submission on its staffing and associated costs, business plan activities and funding for a projected number of Hearings. As expenditure associated with Hearings depends on a variety of factors, some of which are wholly outwith the Standards Commission's control, it was not possible to forecast the resources required with complete certainty. Members noted that, due to an underspend on training, there had been a small overall underspend against budget in the year to 31 December 2025. Members noted that it was expected that this would unwind over the next few months.	
9.	**QUARTER 3 PROGRESS AGAINST KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND ANNUAL REVIEW OF MEASURES** Members reviewed performance in 2025/26 against the agreed internal and external key performance indicators (KPIs) for the nine months to 31 December 2025. Members were pleased to note that the majority of the targets had been met or exceeded. Members undertook their annual review of the suite of key performance indicators. Members agreed that the format of the report on the key performance indicators be amended to reflect the four strategic aims. Members agreed that the Audit & Risk Committee should research the key performance indicators used by comparable bodies and suggest, in light of these, any new ones the Standards Commission could adopt in 2027/28. Members further agreed that while any key performance indicators should be proportionate to the Standards Commission's size and remit, they should allow Members to monitor its performance at a strategic level across all activities.	**Executive Team** **Audit & Risk Committee**

10.	**PROGRAMME FOR STANDARDS OFFICERS' WORKSHOP** Members approved the draft programme for the Standards Commission's annual Standards Officers' Workshop, due to be held online on Tuesday, 17 March 2026. In doing so, Members agreed the content for the open discussions and the topics they wished to discuss with attendees during the breakout groups. Members noted that the ESC had agreed to provide a brief update on the work of his office. Members asked the Executive Team to issue the programme to all Standards Officers and any other relevant stakeholders in advance of the workshop.	**Executive Team**
11.	**SURVEYS TO BE UNDERTAKEN IN 2026/27** Members noted the Standards Commission aimed to undertake five-yearly surveys of councillors, members of devolved public bodies, Monitoring Officers and Standards Officers, in order to better understand their views on and experiences of the ethical standards framework (including the Standards Commission's work) and, in particular, compliance with the Codes of Conduct. Members noted the last such surveys were undertaken in the first half of 2022 and agreed the next surveys should be undertaken after the upcoming Scottish Parliament Election on 7 May 2026 but before next Scottish Local Government Election on 6 May 2027 (in order to ensure the views and experiences of existing councillors could be sought). Members agreed that the Standards Commission should explore the following key themes, in relation to all those surveyed: • Awareness and understanding of the provisions in the Codes of Conduct (including whether councillors and members feel their applicable Code hinders scrutiny); their experiences in respect of compliance with the Codes by their colleagues and whether this has improved or otherwise over last four years. • Their experience of the investigatory and adjudicatory processes in past four years (including: whether they felt supported as a Respondent, Complainer, witness or in their capacity as Monitoring or Standards Officer); and whether they consider there are any barriers (perceived or actual) to making complaints about potential breaches of the Codes. • Their experience of the Standards Commission's service, including its training events and educational materials, and how it responds to enquires. Members agreed the Executive Team should contact COSLA, the Improvement Service and Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC) to ask whether they have any suggestions in respect of topics to be covered, before circulating a draft of the questions to Members for comment and approval. Members agreed it was important to draft questions that would allow a comparison with the outcomes of the surveys undertaken in 2021/22. Members further agreed that the Executive Team should use every available opportunity and forums to encourage engagement with the surveys.	**Executive Team**
CASES UPDATE		
12.	**REPORTS FROM THE ESC & SECTION 14 LETTERS** **(a) LA/H/4330**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Highland Councillor. **(b) LA/R/4412**: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Renfrewshire Councillor. **(c) LA/H/4296:** Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Highland Councillor.	

	(d) LA/ER/4374: Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about an East Renfrewshire Councillor. **(e) LA/Fa/4441:** Members noted that a 'do neither' decision had been made on a report received from the ESC about a Falkirk Councillor. **(f) LA/G/4414**: Members noted that the ESC had sent a draft breach report to a Glasgow City Councillor under Section 14 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act. 2000.	
13.	**CASES** **(a) 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. **(b) LA/G/4115**: Members noted that the Hearing scheduled to take place on 20 November 2025 in Glasgow City Chambers had been postponed. Members noted that while a new date was yet to be agreed, the Executive Team had scheduled a meeting with the Respondent's representative to discuss the best way forward. **(c) LA/DG/4041**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 3 February 2026 in the Municipal Chambers, Dumfries**.** **(d) 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. **(e) LA/G/4182**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 26 February 2026 in Glasgow City Chambers. **(f) LA/E/4130**: Members noted that a Hearing was scheduled to take place on 11 March 2026 in Edinburgh City Chambers. **(g) LA/AB/4081 and LA/AB/4147**: Members noted that Argyll and Bute Council had confirmed that it had formally considered a decision the Standards Commission made at a Hearings held on 7 October 2025 and 23 October 2025, respectively. **(h) LA/H/4028**: Members noted that Highland Council had confirmed that it had formally considered a decision the Standards Commission made at a Hearing held on 4 November 2025.	
14.	**INVESTIGATIONS EXCEEDING 3 MONTHS – INTERIM REPORTS** **(a) NB/HES/4282**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about a former member of Historic Environment Scotland had taken more than six months to investigate. **(b) LA/ER/4382**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about an East Renfrewshire Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate. **(c) LA/Fa/4359**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about a Falkirk Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate. **(d) LA/AB/4402**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about an Argyll and Bute Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate.	

	(e) LA/AB/4265: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about an Argyll and Bute Councillor had taken more than six months to investigate. **(f) LA/Fi/4293**: 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. **(g) LA/EA/4394**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into a complaint about an East Ayrshire Councillor had taken more than three months to investigate. **(h) LA/SA/4134, 4220, 4222**: Members noted the contents of an interim report from the ESC advising that an investigation into complaints about three South Ayrshire Councillors had taken more than nine months to investigate.	
15.	**FEEDBACK INCLUDING ANY HEARINGS SURVEY RESPONSES** Members noted the positive feedback provided on the webinar on distinguishing between strategic and operational matters, held on 15 January 2026.	
16.	**NOTABLE CASES FROM OTHER JURISDICTIONS** Members noted recent decisions from other jurisdictions, including ones from Northern Ireland and England and a case determined by the European Court of Human Rights that involved the extent of a Respondent's right to freedom of expression.	
ANY OTHER BUSINESS		
17.	**ANY EMERGING RISKS** None identified. **TOPICS FOR TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT DAY ON 23 FEBRUARY 2026** Members noted the Executive Team intended to arrange training for them on media and committee appearances and would provide a progress update by email. **AGENDA ITEMS FOR NEXT SCS MEETING** Members agreed to advise the Executive Director of any items to be included in the agenda for discussion at the next meeting.	**Executive Team**
18.	**2026/27 DIARY DATES AND WORKPLAN** Members noted the diary dates and ongoing workplan. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING** Members noted that the next meeting of the Standards Commission was scheduled to take place online on Tuesday, 31 March 2026.	