

Section 32 (1) (a) - SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Section 32(1)(a) of the Public Service Reform Act 2010 provides that named public bodies, which includes the Standards Commission, must publish a statement of the steps they have taken during the financial year to promote and increase sustainable growth through the exercise of its functions.

The Government Economic Strategy, which was published in November 2007, indicated that the purpose was “to focus the Government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth. By sustainable economic growth we mean building a dynamic and growing economy that will provide prosperity and opportunities for all, while ensuring that future generations can enjoy a better quality of life.

The National Performance Framework was developed to provide a clear focus and direction for the whole of the public sector in Scotland and in common with the rest of the public sector, all bodies are expected to align their activity in support of the National Outcomes set out in the Framework.

The Standards Commission’s contribution to achieving four of the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes, as provided in the National Performance Framework are outlined below:

National Outcome 1: “We live in a Scotland that is the most attractive place for doing business in Europe.”

The Standards Commission’s role to improve and maintain ethical standards in public life helps promote business confidence in Scotland as being a nation where decisions made in the public sector, which affect businesses, are made objectively, honestly and in the public interest.

National Outcome 11: “We have strong, resilient and supportive communities where people take responsibility for their own actions and how they affect others.”

The Standards Commission’s work in ensuring compliance with the Codes of Conduct encourages councillors and members of devolved public bodies to take responsibility for their own actions. By reaching decisions on alleged breaches of the Codes of Conduct independently, impartially and by making our service accessible to all, the Standards Commission enables appropriate challenges to be made when a breach is identified.

National Outcome 13: “We take pride in a strong, fair and inclusive national identity.”

The Standards Commission’s work contributes towards raising confidence in those who are elected or appointed to serve within the public sector environment, which in turn promotes pride in the national identity.

National Outcome 15: “Our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs.”

The Standards Commission strives for improvements to services to ensure we support best value principles.

During 2022/23 the Standards Commission continued to focus on promoting the ethical standards framework and providing guidance and support to assist councillors and board members of devolved public bodies to act in accordance with the Codes of Conduct. In working towards this aspect of our remit it:

- Supported councillors and board members to meet the standards expected of them by holding training events on the Codes of Conduct.
- Developed and published two interactive E-Learning modules covering when the Codes apply and the three-stage test for identifying and declaring interests.
- Reviewed, updated and published its standard training presentations on the Codes. Video versions of these presentations were also filmed and uploaded to its website.
- Revised and published its Advice Notes for councillors and members of devolved public bodies on a variety of topics.

- Published news articles and monthly blogs on its website on topical issues relating to the ethical standards framework and the key principles of public life.
- Continued to use its website and 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).
- Monitored compliance by the ESC with the statutory directions issued under the Standards Commission's oversight powers in terms of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000.

The Standards Commission recognises the importance of environmental issues and sustainability and endeavours to take such matters into consideration when making business decisions. While the Standards Commission is not directly covered by the Greening Government Commitments, as its offices are located within the Scottish Parliament building, it continues to support the Scottish Parliament's efforts in meeting their sustainability and environmental targets through compliance with their policies and procedures. This included choosing sustainable products, making use of waste and recycling facilities and, where possible, encouraging staff and Members to car share or use public transport.

The Standards Commission also aims to reduce its carbon footprint and continually seeks to develop and improve its processes to achieve this. Wherever possible and appropriate, the Standards Commission communicates through electronic media and disseminates all educational, promotional and training material via its website, social media and email in a cost effective and environmentally friendly manner.

Staff at the Standards Commission continued to follow a hybrid working policy in 2022/23 which allowed them to work either from home or the office. In addition, 5 of the 10 Standards Commission meetings held in the year were held online, meaning there was a significant decrease in travel to the office by Members. The Standards Commission continued to operate on an entirely paperless basis, with all records retained online and almost all correspondence being issued by email (in a few cases replies to enquiries had to be sent by post as no email address or telephone number had been provided).

Section 32 (1) (b) - EFFICIENCY, ECONOMY and EFFECTIVENESS

Section 32(1)(b) of the 2010 Act provides that each listed public body must publish a statement of the steps it has taken during that financial year to improve efficiency, economy and effectiveness in the exercise of its functions. Steps taken by the Standards Commission in 2022/23 included:

- Publishing on its website a written record of the decision and reasons for the decision in all 32 cases where it decided to take no action on cases referred by the ESC.
- Publishing information on its website and social media pages about forthcoming Hearings, including the name of the Respondent, the name of the Respondent's Council or public body, and the Hearing date, time and venue.
- Publishing on its website a written record of the decision and reasons for the decision made at each of the six Hearings held in respect of breach and, if applicable, the sanction applied.
- Undertaking a comprehensive review of its Hearing Rules to make them as clear and succinct as possible.
- Creating a new page on its website for Respondents, which contains information and advice about how Hearings are managed and how to present a case; and amending the 'Cases' page to make it easier to find information about specific types of decision.
- Producing and publishing a pre-election case referral document, outlining how the Standards Commission will normally proceed when it receives a report from the ESC about a complaint about a councillor immediately before, and during, a local government pre-election period.
- Amending its case referral policy to make it clear that advance notice of the potential issues the Panel will wish to explore at the Hearing will be provided to the parties in cases where the ESC has concluded that there may not have been a breach of the applicable Code, but where the Standards Commission has decided, nevertheless, that it is both proportionate and in the public interest to hold a Hearing.
- Holding all six Hearings within an average of 12 weeks of making the decision on the referral report.

- Issuing written decisions on all cases where it decided to take no action on cases referred by the ESC within 4 days of the report being received.