

Section 32 (1) (a) - SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Section 32(1)(a) of the Public Service Reform Act 2010 provides that named public bodies, which include the Standards Commission, must publish a statement outlining the steps they have taken during the financial year to promote and increase sustainable growth through the exercise of their 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 five of the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes, as provided in the National Performance Framework are outlined below:

Communities: *We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe.*

Any member of the public can make a complaint that a councillor or member of a devolved public body has breached their respective Code of Conduct. The Standards Commission empowers them to do so by providing advice on what could constitute a breach and how to make a complaint. It also holds its Hearings in public, and publishes and disseminates its decisions, meaning that local communities can hold their representatives to account.

Economy: *We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive and sustainable economy.*

The Standards Commission’s role in improving and maintaining ethical standards in public life will help promote business confidence in Scotland as being a nation where decisions that can affect competition, enterprise, inclusivity and sustainability are made objectively, honestly and in the public interest.

Human Rights: *We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination.*

The Standards Commission’s work in promoting high standards of conduct, and in sanctioning those in public life who fail to treat others with courtesy and respect, helps maintain the public’s trust that those in positions of power will lead by example and refrain from participating in, or in any way condoning, acts of harassment, discrimination, victimisation or bullying. The Standards Commission will nevertheless always balance the right to freedom of expression with the need to protect the rights and reputations of others.

Fair Work and Business: *We have thriving and innovative businesses, with quality jobs and fair work for everyone.*

The Standards Commission’s work contributes to raised confidence that those who are elected or appointed to serve within the public sector environment will conduct public business in a fair and open manner.

International: *We are open, connected and make a positive contribution internationally.*

The Standards Commission’s work in helping to ensure decisions are made transparently and in the public interest, contributes to the perception that Scotland is fair and socially just, and is regarded as a vibrant, modern country where communities are seen as being important and playing a vital role. The Standard’s Commission’s work also contributes to the standing of Scotland internationally in the view of organisations such as the United Nations and Transparency International.

During 2024/25 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.
- Presented joint webinars with the Improvement Service for councillors on confidentiality, identifying and managing conflicts of interests and quasi-judicial and regulatory decision-making.
- Issued and published a revised version of its Guidance on the Councillors' Code of Conduct in light of feedback and enquiries received.
- Developed and published a new E-Learning module covering the confidentiality requirements of the Councillors' and Model Codes of Conduct.
- 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).

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 follow a hybrid working policy which allows them to work either from home or the office. In addition, six of the ten scheduled Standards Commission meetings and development days 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 2024/25 included:

- Identifying improvements to the way in which Hearings were managed and amending the Hearing Rules to ensure they were conducted as efficiently and proportionately as possible.
- Adding a new 'information for witnesses' page to the Standards Commission's website, with a video explaining the Hearing process and what a witness could expect when giving evidence. A similar video was produced and published for Respondents, which provides an overview of the Hearing process and explains what will happen before, during and after a Hearing.
- Holding all 16 Hearings within an average of nine 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 three days of the report being received.
- 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 16 Hearings held in respect of breach and, if applicable, the sanction applied.
- Publishing on its website a written record of the decision and reasons for the decision in all 53 cases where it decided to take no action on cases referred by the ESC.
- Reviewing all sanctions imposed at Hearings in 2023/24 to identify trends and issues and check for fairness and consistency in the application of sanctions.