



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Ian Bruce
Ethical Standards
Commissioner

18 December 2024

Dear Ian,

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee on 19 November on your annual report for 2023/24. As you know, we also took evidence from the Standards Commission for Scotland on the same day. The Committee has considered the evidence provided and I am writing to you to share our reflections. I am also writing to the Standards Commission for Scotland in similar terms.

The Committee shares your concern about ethical standards in local democracy given the marked increase in complaints compared to the previous year. We also note your comment that “the impression that I get is that standards are not great and that certain issues are certainly driving up complaint numbers.”

We further note that around 80% of complaints in the reporting year were inadmissible and that whilst the majority of complaints came from members of the public, complaints from fellow councillors also increased from 10 to 17%. It is also worth noting what you described as “hotspots across the country” where councillor-on-councillor complaints are very prevalent. As part of our work on understanding barriers to participation in local politics, we heard that poor standards of conduct can act as a barrier to greater diversity in public life and would welcome any steps that could be taken to help reduce such behaviour. We share and are concerned about your impression “that there is a feeling out there from new, young female councillors in particular that they are entering a misogynistic environment.” You undertook to analyse your data on complaints to assess whether any trends had emerged, for

Contact: Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Email: localgov.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.

example, whether female councillors were more likely to complain or be complained about than their male counterparts. We look forward to considering the output of this work when available. We also note your suggestion that monitoring officers might be able to provide a clearer impression of what is going on at a local level and will contact the Society of Local Authority Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland (SOLAR) to invite them to share their reflections on this as you suggested.

The Committee welcomes the steps you have taken to raise awareness of the code of conduct such as writing to political parties to remind them of the importance of adhering to its provisions. We also discussed options for increasing the provision of training on the code to councillors and whilst we recognise that this would not be a panacea and should not simply be a “tick box exercise” we are keen to explore what more can be done, particularly in light of the expected increase in councillor remuneration following the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee’s report. I am therefore writing to the Improvement Service too to invite them to consider what more can be done in terms of training for councillors, including whether such training should be mandatory.

In respect of waiting times, we very much welcome the reduction in investigation times, but note that there has been a slight increase in initial waiting times as a result of increased volumes of complaints. You confirmed that you were monitoring the situation and had piloted some new measures to improve waiting times and we look forward to discussing the efficacy of these measures with you next year.

Finally, we asked the Standards Commission for Scotland about the proportion of complaints deemed not to be relevant that came from councillors who had not undergone training on the code of conduct. They were unable to respond given that they do not see complaints that were inadmissible so I would be grateful if you could respond to the question in writing.

The Committee recognises that this can be a challenging area that involves disparate stakeholder groups including all 32 councils in Scotland, political parties, COSLA and the Improvement Service. We very much welcome the improvements that have been made since you became Ethical Standards Commissioner, initially on an acting basis, and we look forward to discussing what we hope will be further improvements with you next year.

Yours sincerely,

Ariane Burgess
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Contact: Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP. Email: localgov.committee@parliament.scot. We welcome calls through Relay UK and in BSL through Contact Scotland BSL.