



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Suzanne Vestri
Convener, Standards
Commission for Scotland

18 December 2024

Dear Suzanne,

Thank you for giving evidence to the Committee on 19 November on the Standards Commission for Scotland's annual report for 2023/24. As you know, we also took evidence from the Ethical Standards Commissioner 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 Ethical Standards Commissioner in similar terms.

The topic of training for councillors on the code of conduct and whether this should be mandatory, formed one of the key parts of our discussions, both with yourself and with the Ethical Standards Commissioner. The Committee is keenly aware from our previous work on understanding barriers to participation in local politics 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 the concerns of the Ethical Standards Commissioner that "young female councillors in particular [feel] that they are entering a misogynistic environment" and welcome the training and promotion work that you have undertaken with the Improvement Service, both online and in person. However, we note that in person training was only provided to two councils in the reporting year. Whilst we are mindful that the Standards Commission for Scotland is a small organisation with limited resources, we very much welcome this work and were pleased to hear that the events were well attended and received positive feedback. However, we note that it would take 16 years to deliver such training to all of Scotland's councils at a rate of two per year

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.

and invite you to consider whether in person training could be provided on a more frequent basis.

We further note your comments that newly elected councillors can be overwhelmed by “information overload” upon taking up the role and that mandatory training on the code of conduct may not be particularly helpful at that point, but we emphasise the importance of all councillors receiving such training. We further note that the provision of training for councillors who have been returned in a by-election can be inconsistent and agree with you on the importance of having refresher training that can be accessed at any time.

In respect of volumes of complaints, you noted that a large proportion are inadmissible and that a better indicator of standards in public life is how many breach findings are made. It was therefore reassuring to hear from you that “we are not necessarily seeing huge increases in the number of breach findings.” However, you suggested that a number of complaints appear to have been driven by some councillors seeking to distance themselves from difficult decisions in what remains a challenging budgetary climate and behaving inappropriately to council officials. You further stated that complaints about respect, bullying and harassment had increased over the last five years, including those relating to councillors’ behaviour towards members of the public, their colleagues and council officers. The Committee is concerned about this trend and again welcomes the work you have undertaken with the Improvement Service on how councillors can best go about assisting their constituents without getting involved inappropriately in operational matters and remaining respectful towards officers throughout as well as on how to avoid behaviour on social media that could lead to complaints. Mindful of your comments on the risk of “information overload” when first elected, along with the need to ensure any such training is interesting and compelling, we are attracted to the suggestion that training on the code of conduct could be embedded as part of a mandatory programme during a councillor’s first year in office. We would welcome any further reflections you may have on this suggestion, and I have also written to the Improvement Service inviting them to do the same.

Thank you for what proved to be an interesting and constructive discussion. I look forward to your response and to hearing from you again after the publication of your next annual report.

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.