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F.A.O. Ms Burgess
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
(via email)

13th January 2025

Dear Ms Burgess

Subject: The Provision of Training to Councillors on the Code of Conduct

Thank you for your invitation to provide feedback regarding the provision of training for councillors on the Code of Conduct.

Following the webinars we conducted with the Standards Commission on the Councillors' Code of Conduct, two additional webinars are scheduled for January, with further sessions under discussion for later this year. These webinars have been well-received by attendees, and the recordings are available on our website for councillors to access at their convenience. We are aware of their use by officers and councillors and will continue to promote these recordings periodically.

Supporting councillors in their development, including matters related to conduct and behaviour, presents significant challenges. Many councillors balance their council responsibilities with additional employment and caring commitments. Combined with the demands of formal council and committee meetings and casework, this leaves limited time for professional development. Furthermore, the geographic size of councils in Scotland often necessitates lengthy travel for in-person sessions, which can impact attendance. While in-person sessions are sometimes the most effective format, our experience suggests that attendance can be low due to these logistical challenges.

As a national organisation supporting 1,226 councillors across Scotland's 32 councils, we strive to provide flexible development opportunities. We have successfully used online meeting technology to deliver development sessions and accommodated hybrid formats where preferred by councils. Additionally, we are exploring bespoke e-learning content that councillors could access as needed. While e-learning is not always the best solution for every development need, it could be effective in providing scenario-based learning opportunities on the application of the code and complement other methods of support. Flexibility is crucial to ensuring councillors can engage with training effectively.

Additional opportunities to improve conduct

Training on the code of conduct is one way to help improve conduct but will not resolve all issues. In your letter to the Ethical Standards Commissioner, you referenced Mr. Bruce's evidence concerning "hotspots across the country where councillor-on-councillor complaints are very prevalent."

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A high volume of such complaints is an indicator of ineffective working relationships between councillors, which the Accounts Commission has identified as a barrier to good governance and achieving Best Value.

We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Ethical Standards Commissioner and the Standards Commission to explore ways to support councils experiencing these challenges. Providing targeted support to improve councillors working relationships could improve good governance and contribute to achieving Best Value. Both the Ethical Standards Commissioner and the Standards Commission have expressed interest in pursuing this collaboration, and we look forward to exploring these possibilities further.

Thank you again for the opportunity to engage on this important matter. We are happy to provide further information or discuss any of these points in more detail.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Gadsden
Chief Executive