

2024-25



# Commissioner's Report



Northern Ireland

**Local Government**

Commissioner for **Standards**





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# Foreword from the Commissioner



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret Kelly".

**Margaret Kelly**  
*Commissioner for Standards*  
*January 2026*

**The approval of the Code of Conduct for councillors and the establishment of a new ethical standards regime for councillors in 2014 was a clear demonstration by the Assembly of the importance of high standards in public life.** The Code sets out clearly the standards of conduct and behaviour that are expected of those who are elected to represent people at a local level, including how any conflicts between their private interests and their public duty should be managed.

Local councils have significant responsibility. They are responsible for spending in excess of one billion pounds per year, for most planning decisions, for providing significant funding through grants and awards as well as undertaking significant procurement of goods and services. The Code of Conduct recognises the importance of these responsibilities and the public's expectation that those in public life who are responsible for them will adhere to high standards. This promotes both trust and confidence in local decision-making.

Further, the introduction of the statutory code of conduct brought Northern Ireland broadly in line with similar regulatory arrangements in both Scotland and Wales. A similar statutory standards regime is currently under consideration for all levels of local government in England. It is, therefore, good to note that the Code has become embedded and now forms a recognised and accepted part of the oversight approach to ensuring high standards in public life in Northern Ireland.

The legislation which established the standards regime provided that NIPSO had responsibility for both the investigation and, when necessary, adjudication of alleged breaches of the Code. To ensure fairness a separate team, the Local Government Ethical Standards team was established to investigate alleged breaches

of the Code. When appropriate they will forward any alleged breach to me, in my role as Commissioner, to consider if it meets the threshold and, if necessary, take forward an adjudication.

NIPSO have held this jurisdiction for just over a decade and in that time, we have investigated over 430 allegations and adjudicated on 27 cases. Within the legislation a councillor who has been subject to an adjudication may take an appeal to the High Court. Over the last decade there have been four appeals which have been dismissed, a Judicial Review and an appeal to the Court of Appeal which have been dismissed, and there is currently one appeal to the High Court linked to this same case, which is awaiting decision.

It is also important that as well as addressing breaches of the Code we work to positively promote councillor's understanding and engagement with the Code. In the last two years we have therefore spent time reviewing and improving how we deliver our role. This has included a survey of councillors, those who have made allegations and senior council staff who may have had occasion to engage with the Office. Following this we reviewed and updated the adjudication procedures, substantially increased the number of engagement events with councils and councillors and we are currently working on developing further resources to support compliance with the Code.

A further focus of this work is to ensure that councillors fully understand the obligations of the Code and to encourage and support councillors to co-operate with my office if they are the subject of an allegation. It is my intention to repeat this survey in the coming year to ensure we continue to understand the experiences of councillors, those who bring forward allegations, and senior council staff in order to make the Code and its regulation as effective as possible.

I am pleased to report that this year we have continued to meet our KPIs in relation to both stages of the investigation process. Further, all but one of the older cases at adjudication are now complete and I would thank Adjudication Commissioner Ian Gordon for his ongoing work and support to me throughout the year to ensure that this remains the case.

I want to thank those councillors who have been the subject of an allegation for their co-operation during the process. I and the LGES investigation team understand that this is a difficult time for any councillor, and we thank them for their co-operation and engagement.

I would further like to thank my staff at the Local Government Ethical Standards team for their hard work during the year as well as those who ensure the smooth running of adjudications.

# Introduction

The mandatory Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for councillors (the Code) came into effect in May 2014. The Code sets out the standards of conduct expected of councillors in Northern Ireland to maintain confidence in local democracy and decision making.

The role of the Commissioner for Standards involves both the investigation and where appropriate adjudication of written allegations made about a councillor that their conduct or behaviour may have, breached the Code. Save for certain situations during an existing investigation as outlined in the governing legislation, the Commissioner has no ability to initiate an investigation into the conduct of a councillor without a written allegation.

On receipt of a written allegation providing evidence of conduct by a councillor or former councillor which indicates there may have been a breach of the Code, there are a number of possible outcomes;

- i. The threshold for investigation is not met and the allegation against the councillor is closed.

- ii. Following investigation, it is determined that there is no need to take any further action in relation to the allegation.
- iii. The investigation establishes that there is no evidence that the councillor has breached the Code and the case is closed.
- iv. The investigation indicates that there is evidence that the councillor may have breached the Code and that no further action is not an appropriate course of action.

Where the investigation indicates there is evidence of a breach of the Code and no further action is not appropriate, then the case may either be;

- i. referred to the Commissioner requesting that she hold an adjudication or
- ii. an alternative means of resolution is explored and agreed with the councillor.

The investigation of allegations has been delegated by the Commissioner to the Local Government Ethical Standards (LGES) team. The separation between the investigation and adjudication functions ensures that should a case be referred to and accepted by the Commissioner, the issues raised in the allegation and considered as part of the investigation report are considered independently by the Commissioner.

Only the Commissioner, after an Adjudication, can decide that there has been a breach of the Code by a councillor or former councillor.

This report covers both the investigation and adjudication functions.



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## Section 1

# Case Work

## Allegations received during 2024-25

During the year we received 36 written allegations that councillors may have breached rules within the Code of Conduct. This compares to 31 written allegations received in 2023-24.



## Issues raised

Each written allegation may contain information indicating a potential breach of a number of rules of the Code of Conduct. During the year the 36 allegations indicated **65** separate breaches.

Similar to previous years the largest area of concern raised in the allegations received related to the behaviour of councillors towards others. A

total of **26** issues were raised about councillors' behaviour. This compared to **24** issues about behaviour towards others being raised in 2023-24.

The standards of behaviour towards others are covered in Section 4.13 of the Code, which states that councillors must:

- a. Show respect and consideration for others;
- b. Not use bullying behaviour or harass any person; and
- c. Not do anything which compromises, or which is likely to compromise the impartiality of those who work for, or on behalf of, the council.

The Code does not prevent robust debate on political or local issues. However it does set standards, with an expectation that debates are respectful and should focus on the issues and not involve personal comments regarding political opponents or others.

Some of the cases examined at investigation during the year involved consideration of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Article 10 of the ECHR is designed to protect an individual's right to freedom of expression, including a person's right to hold opinions or to share information or ideas. The right of politicians, including councillors on matters relating to political expression, is enhanced, meaning that Article 10 provides politicians speaking on political issues with a higher level of protection than the general population. Article 10 of the ECHR is not an absolute right and may be interfered with through the application of a sanction such as set out in the local government standards regime. Circumstances where interference with a councillor's Article 10 ECHR right to freedom of expression include where comments amount to offensive personal attacks, or incite violence or hatred. In considering the allegations made to the Commissioner, 42% related to comments or actions where Article 10 of

the ECHR applied. While many of the comments or actions were offensive and may have been in contravention of the requirements of the Code, they did not breach the high threshold required for interference with a councillor's right to freedom of expression on political issues and therefore no action could be taken.

The largest area of concern raised in the allegations received related to the sections of the Code on obligations as a councillor. Fifty percent of the allegations raised concerns about the obligations in this part of the Code which requires councillors to act lawfully, in accordance with the Code, and not to act in a manner which could bring their position as a councillor, or their council, into disrepute.

The registration and declaration of interests are key requirements of the Code, including

the need to withdraw from making decisions where conflicts or perceived conflicts of interest exist. This issue has been repeatedly raised in allegations made to the Commissioner and breaches have been found following adjudication.

Particular areas of concern relating to conflicts of interest include councillors' actions on planning committees or when awarding contracts or grants. Councillors, when considering whether they need to make a declaration of interest, need to take account of how the issue would be considered by members of the public.

A councillor's failure to act in accordance with these sections of the Code has the potential to significantly undermine public confidence in their role as councillor but also harm the reputation of the council as a whole.

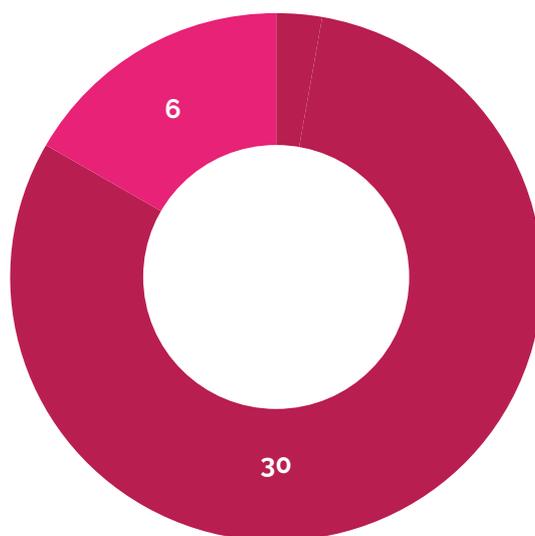
## Analysis of allegations

Allegation	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
Behaviour towards other people (requirement to show respect and consideration for others)	26	24	26	29
Obligation as a councillor (requirement to act lawfully and not bring council/position of councillor into disrepute)	18	11	21	22
Use of position	5	5	6	6
Decision-making	3	3	1	3
Planning matters	1	3	12*	5
Disclosure of Information	4	2	1	0
Use of council resources	1	1	1	0
Registration of interest	2	1	0	0
Disclosure and Declaration of Interest	2	1	1	4
Lobbying and access to councillors	3	0	0	0
<b>Total Issues</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>69</b>

**NB:** More than one person may make the same or similar complaint, and someone may allege that more than one area of the Code has been breached.

## Analysis by referral source

Source	2024-25
Member of the public	30
Councillor	6



## Analysis by council

Council area	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	2	1	4	6	4
Ards and North Down Council	8	9	0	0	0
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	3	5	0	1	3
Belfast City Council	4	2	2	0	3
Causeway Coast & Glens Council	1	3	1	2	17
Derry City and Strabane Council	3	1	0	0	2
Fermanagh and Omagh Council	1	2	8	6	11
Lisburn and Castlereagh Council	3	1	2	4	0
Mid Ulster Council	3	0	2	1	2
Mid and East Antrim Council	5	3	12	17	6
Newry, Mourne and Down Council	3	3	14	5	1
<b>Total Allegations</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>48</b>

## Allegations determined in 2024-25

The table below shows the closure stages for each of the allegations determined during the year.

Allegation	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23
Allegations ongoing from the previous year	32	45	63
Allegations received in year	36	31	45
Total allegations under investigation during the year	68	76	108
Closed at Validation Stage <sup>1</sup>	1	4	14
Closed at Assessment Stage <sup>2</sup>	13	13	16
Closed at Investigation Stage <sup>3</sup>	14	20	33
Adjudication decisions	3 <sup>4</sup>	7	4
Allegations ongoing at year end	37	32	45

<sup>1</sup> Whether the allegations relate to conduct covered by the Code.

<sup>2</sup> Whether there is evidence of conduct which, if proven, indicates a breach of the Code.

<sup>3</sup> Whether there is any evidence of a failure to comply with the Code.

<sup>4</sup> These were consolidated into 2 Adjudications.

Where the information contained in the allegation indicates a potential breach of the Code of Conduct which is acknowledged by the councillor, and the breach is unlikely to lead to a significant sanction by the Commissioner following an adjudication, the LGES team will explore whether resolution is possible without the need for an adjudication.

In the last three years **10 cases** have been resolved by action taken by the councillor without the need for an adjudication.

# Performance

The Commissioner has established two Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) for the Investigation team.

The first KPI establishes a target of four weeks for the timeframe within which a decision should be made on whether an allegation should progress to investigation. The target is to achieve this in 85% of cases

The second sets a timescale of 40 weeks for completion of the investigation and reporting to the councillor on the outcome of that investigation. The target is to achieve this in 60% of investigations

**Both targets were met during 2024/2025.**

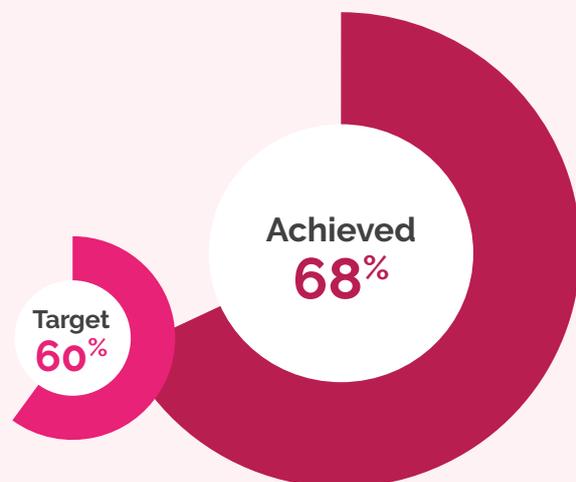
## KPI 4

Within four weeks of receiving an allegation, we will notify both the person who raised it and the councillor(s) involved of the decision whether to investigate.



## KPI 5

We will complete an investigation within 40 weeks of the date of validation of the allegation. The target is 60%.



# Case Summaries

These cases summaries highlight how the Code applies to the areas of respect, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest.

The decisions were made on the basis of the available evidence and taking account of the unique circumstances of each case. They therefore provide a general indication of how the Code is applied in practice and provide useful guidance. Care needs to be taken not to overly interpret the lessons to differing factual backgrounds.

Nevertheless, the summaries are intended to demonstrate the possible outcomes of allegations which have been examined at the Assessment and Investigation stages of the Commissioner's process.

Summaries of cases decided at the Adjudication stage are available in Section Two.

## CASES CLOSED AT ASSESSMENT



### Rules of the Code did not apply

#### Allegation

A man contacted a councillor to complain about the condition of a road following slurry spreading on his land. He alleged that during the phone call he was subjected to 'abusive, bullying, arrogant and threatening behaviour'.

He said he did not consider the councillor's behaviour to 'befit public office'.

#### Decision

The investigation considered paragraph 2.3 of the Commissioners Guidance on the Code, which states that:

*'Councillors are entitled to privacy in their personal lives, and many of the provisions of the Code apply to you only when you are acting in the role of councillor or acting as a representative of your council.'*

Having carefully considered the evidence available the Deputy Commissioner decided that at the time he was contacted by the person making the complaint about the condition of the road, the councillor was not acting as a councillor, or on behalf of the council. As a result, many of the rules relating to conduct did not apply to the Councillor in this situation and the case was closed at the assessment stage.



## Allegations relating to respect and equality

### Allegation

During a debate at a council meeting, a councillor referred to two other councillors who were also in attendance as 'amateur politicians'. It was alleged that this comment was 'misogynistic' and 'fell foul of gender equality guidance and legislation for Northern Ireland'.

### Decision

The debate was considered to be political expression protected by Article 10 of the ECHR. Political expression is given a wide meaning when considering the enhanced protection afforded to councillors under Article 10 of the ECHR. The investigation looked at the comment against the Commissioners Guidance on the Code of Conduct, which at 4.6.3 states;

*'As a councillor, your right to freedom of expression under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights attracts enhanced protection when your comments are political in nature. "Political" comments are not only those made within the council chamber but may include, for example, comments you may make generally about your council's policies or about a political opponent.*

*The LGES team's assessment of whether a complaint should be investigated will take account of all the facts of the case. However, it is unlikely to investigate a complaint about political comments unless the comments were unlawful or highly offensive. The Courts have found that councillors should have a "thicker skin" in dealing with, and responding to, politically motivated comments.'*

Having considered the evidence available the Deputy Commissioner was of the view that the statement was made during a political debate and attracted the enhanced protection provided by Article 10 of the ECHR. He concluded that the comments, while unpleasant, were not sufficiently serious as to warrant an interference with the councillor's right to freedom of expression. The matter was not considered to reach the threshold for investigation.



## Investigation 'not proportionate or in the public interest'

### Allegation

A councillor was alleged to have breached confidentiality by revealing that other councillors wanted to defer a discussion about bonfires on council land. It was also claimed that the information he posted on his party's website contained legally privileged information.

### Decision

The investigation noted that the agenda for the meeting was on the council's website. Because of this the Deputy Commissioner believed that as it was an issue of interest the decision to adjourn the meeting would have become public knowledge. He was also satisfied that the issue of legal advice was not sensitive in nature, and that the information posted by the councillor related to a matter of considerable public interest.

While the councillor's actions may be considered to have breached the Code, given these factors he decided it was not sufficiently serious to pursue. The investigation was closed without further action.



## No evidence that councillor had prejudged planning applications

### Allegation

A councillor referred himself to the Commissioner's Office as he was concerned that he did not declare an interest or leave a meeting when it discussed a number of planning issues. He was unsure whether, as a member of the Planning Committee which had yet to consider the applications, that in considering the tenders for the projects he could be seen as having prejudged the outcome of the planning process.

### Decision

For the purposes of this assessment the LGES team considered the Code's rules on decision-making and on planning matters. Paragraph 8.1 states *'when participating in meetings or reaching decisions regarding the business of your council, you must do so objectively, on the basis of the merits of the circumstances involved, and in the public interest [and] not prejudge or demonstrate bias, in respect of any decision.'*

It also considered the Public Duty, Integrity, Accountability, Honesty and Leadership Principles of the Code.

It reviewed the relevant minutes of the Strategic Policy and Resources (SP&R) committee meeting and the Council Meeting. The SP&R committee recommendation was to issue 'intention to award' letters to the successful tenderers and to appoint a supply team subject to planning approvals. It was noted that the Planning Committee had yet to be presented with information on the relevant application and a decision had not been made.

As the matter had not yet come to the planning committee for a decision and the councillor had indicated his intention not to participate in any vote regarding the applications, there was no evidence he had prejudged the applications. As such there was no indication that the councillor had breached the Code. It was decided that the threshold for investigation had not been met.

## CASES CLOSED AT INVESTIGATION

### No evidence of councillor's bias in planning decision

#### Allegation

It was alleged that a councillor who was the chair of the Planning Committee showed bias towards an organisation of which he had formerly been a member. The allegation arose when the organisation objected to a planning application before the Committee.

#### Investigation

The investigation examined evidence from the meeting and spoke to the councillor.

During the meeting the councillor allowed the representative of the organisation to speak over his allotted time by 24 seconds. He asked the council's planning manager a question relating to planning policy. The complainant believed this was on behalf of the organisation.

The councillor was the only member to vote against the application.

Council records showed the councillor registered his former membership of the organisation in his Register of Interests. At interview the councillor said he had been a member of the organisation for 6 years and had left when he was elected as a councillor because he recognised a potential conflict. He said he was a member of the organisation's Facebook group.

The councillor said he did not have a pre-determined view on the planning application, and that he allowed the representative of the organisation to overrun as he did not want to cut off the person presenting in mid-sentence.

In relation to his decision to vote against the application, the councillor explained that the planners had given weight to a development plan that had been superseded

by a subsequent plan which had greater restrictions on the type of development proposed. This was why he questioned the planning manager about the interpretation of planning policy.

He was also able to point to records of other planning applications where the organisation was not involved and where he had raised the same issue. He believed his actions in challenging the planning officer were therefore consistent with his understanding of the relevant development plan.

#### Decision

After looking at the evidence, the Deputy Commissioner decided that while the councillor had registered his prior membership of the organisation, given the time that had elapsed from his membership, it was not a significant interest that would have prevented the councillor from participating in the meeting.

The Deputy Commissioner also noted that the recording of the meeting indicated that the representative of the organisation was concluding his remarks at around the allocated time, and permitting him to continue appeared reasonable and was not an indication of bias. The councillor had raised the appropriateness of the application of extant development plan previously in relation to other applications where the organisation was not an objector. There was no indication the councillor was seeking to benefit himself or others from the decision he took on the application, or that he was seeking to disadvantage others.

The case was closed at investigation with no evidence that the councillor had failed to comply with the relevant rules of the Code.



## Councillor's comments protected under Article 10

### Allegation

A written allegation was received that a councillor posted a derogatory comment on Facebook. The allegation was that the comment which was directed at Mr A implied he had mental health problems and that he was a liar.

### Investigation

The investigation found that Mr A had made a post on Facebook addressing the outcome of a political debate between elected representatives. In response the councillor wrote: *'...posts like this really does make me pity this former Councillor. It's so sad that none of his friends or family encourage him to seek professional help. The lies are so absurd.'*

The councillor told investigators that Mr A fitted the definition of an online troll who had attempted to humiliate him and others on many occasions. He said that he made the post because he pitied Mr A and was encouraging him to seek help for his destructive behaviours and the effect they might have on others. He also wanted Mr A to stop bullying him and others.

The councillor stated that he worked for an organisation that supported individuals and advised people with mental health problems on a daily basis. He said his comment in the Facebook post was not designed to belittle anyone's mental illness.

### Decision

The investigation considered that Mr A's posts were of a satirical political nature which focused on attacking the councillor's political party. By responding to his posts the councillor was engaging in political debate.

As the Facebook interaction related to an issue of political expression the councillor had enhanced protection for his comments under Article 10 of ECHR which provides qualified protection on freedom of speech. It was considered that the councillor's response to Mr A was ambiguous in its phrasing and could be interpreted in a number of ways. However, as it was judged to relate to a matter of political expression as part of a robust debate with a political opponent the threshold for action relating to the councillor's comments was high.

It was considered the comments were not a gratuitous, unwarranted personal attack and the threshold for interference with the councillor's enhanced protection of matters of political expression was not reached. The case was closed.



## No evidence councillor released confidential information

### Allegation

It was alleged that a councillor had disclosed confidential council information on his Facebook page. The information related to items discussed at a Council Committee meeting.

### Investigation

The council had agreed to part fund the costs of a feasibility study into removing or disguising a prominent phone mast. The costs of the feasibility were to be split with another public authority.

It was later reported in the media that the other public authority had decided not to fund any part of the feasibility study. The council committee met and discussed the matter under confidential business.

The following day the councillor posted '*Council are seeking to spend £100K on a feasibility study on removing the telecommunications mast (sic) [location]*'.

The councillor was not a member of the committee and stated that he had not attended in person or online. He said that he was unaware of what was discussed within the committee and that the issue of the funding was common knowledge.

The investigation found no evidence that anyone from the committee had informed the councillor of the nature of information discussed within the meeting. He said it was coincidental that he made his post the day after the meeting.

The investigation considered case law on breaches of confidential information.

### Decision

It was considered that while the specific details of the discussion were not publicly available, the issue was a matter of public knowledge. As the councillor had not attended the meeting and had not heard the information first hand, it was found that he was not under an obligation of confidence. While the investigation had some concerns regarding the timing of the councillor's post, there was no evidence to suggest that he had released confidential information provided to him.

The case was closed at investigation with no evidence that the councillor had failed to comply with the Code.



## Councillor apologises for causing upset and annoyance

### Allegation

A member of the public alleged that a councillor was rude to her during a phone call. The councillor had been helping the residents of a housing complex where the woman lived. She called him from a communal area of the housing complex to ask for additional help. Because of hearing issues she had her phone on the speaker setting. She said that during the call the councillor repeatedly referred to an unproven criminal accusation against her and that his tone was cheeky and rude.

### Investigation

At interview the councillor denied this. However, the woman produced a number of witnesses who stated they were present during the conversation and confirmed the councillor spoke to her in an inappropriate way. They described his manner as abrupt, aggressive and ignorant.

The investigation considered that on balance there was evidence to support the allegation that the councillor had spoken to the complainant in a disrespectful way, and that it may have breached Paragraph 4.13(a).

After considering the seriousness of the alleged breach alongside the possibility that an adjudication outcome may not result in significant sanction, it was agreed to resolve the allegation if possible, by means of Alternative Action.

### Decision

In order to draw a line under the matter the councillor wrote a letter to the lady apologising for the upset and annoyance he had caused.



## Social media post 'was political speech'

### Allegation

A councillor posted a meme on X (Twitter) of a person playing a musical instrument pointed at the head of a recipient. The words *'Me, trying to live my life'* are written below the recipient's head. On the body of the person playing the instrument there is a rainbow-coloured flag with the words *'LGBT Propaganda'*.

It was alleged that the meme was homophobic.

### Investigation

At interview the councillor said that the meme did not single out the LGBT community but rather the propaganda that comes from the political movement around it. He said the meme was political engagement. He also considered it was not fair to say he was attacking the LGBT community just because he disagreed with some of their political ideals.

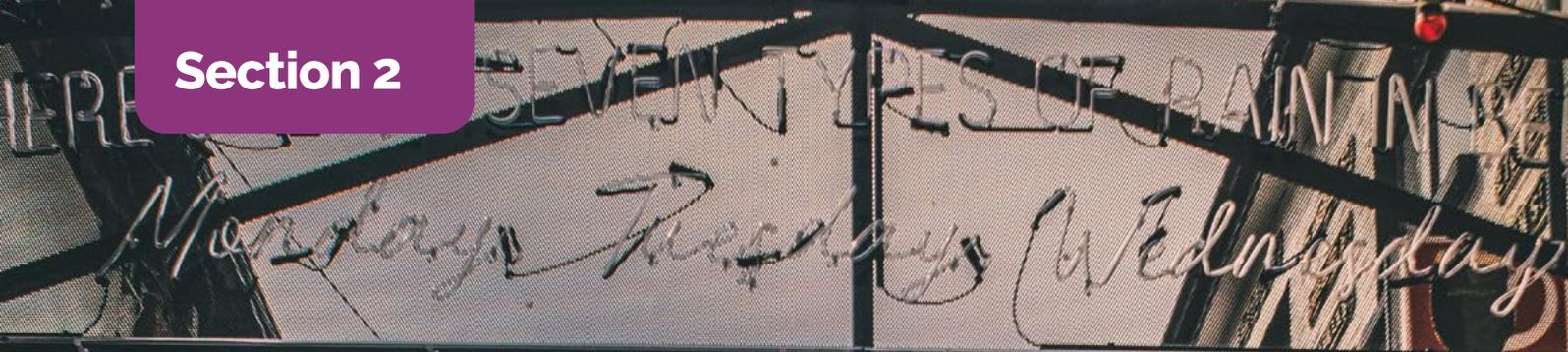
The investigation considered Article 10 of ECHR. It noted a definition of propaganda: *'ideas or statements that may be false or present only one side of an argument that are used in order to gain support for a political leader, party, etc.'*

It also noted that the meme did not contain anything to indicate that its message was directed against an individual or individuals. It referred to LGBT propaganda, which given the definition above, the investigation considered as having political connotations. As such the investigation considered that the meme and its message could be construed as political expression.

Furthermore, in addition to the post clearly being a value judgement it was not considered to be gratuitous, or personally abusive against specific individuals within the LGBT community. Nor did the investigation consider that it was of a nature or tone that would be likely to lead to harm or violence against the community.

### Decision

On this basis the investigation did not consider that the councillor's post exceeded the limits of acceptable discourse. The case was closed at investigation with no evidence that the councillor had failed to comply with the relevant rules of the Code.



## Section 2

# Adjudications

When an investigation is completed by the Deputy Commissioner and the evidence indicates a breach of the Code of Conduct, the Deputy Commissioner can request that the Commissioner consider adjudicating on the issues.

Having reviewed the referral from the Deputy Commissioner the Commissioner decides what action needs to be taken, including whether she should adjudicate on the alleged breaches included in the Deputy Commissioner's report.

The Commissioner can decide not to proceed with an adjudication or take other action to resolve the matter as she considers appropriate.

Adjudication Caseload	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23
Cases ongoing at the start of the year	3	3	7
Cases referred to Commissioner for consideration of adjudication	4	3	0
Cases accepted	4	3	0
Pre-hearing reviews	15	12	33
Cases closed	2	3	4
Cases ongoing at year end	5	3	3

Adjudication Decisions	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23
No Breach	0	0	0
Breach - No Further Action	0	0	0
Breach – Alternative Action	0	0	1
Breach - Censure	0	1	0
Breach - Suspension/Partial Suspension	1	1	2
Breach - Disqualification	1	1	1
<b>Total decisions</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

# Case Summaries

## Cases closed at Adjudication



### Councillor suspended for 2 months

Councillor Cathal King (Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) was suspended from his position as councillor for two months following an Adjudication Hearing held in March 2025.

The sanction related to Councillor King's arrest in Newry City centre in the early hours of 6 July 2024 for being in charge of a vehicle with excess alcohol. Councillor King pleaded guilty to the offence and was ordered to pay a fine of £200. He also received 10 penalty points on his driving licence.

Commissioner Margaret Kelly found that the offence, which was reported in the media, was likely to have diminished the trust and confidence that the public places in him as a councillor.

However, she found that his conduct and subsequent conviction had not brought his council into disrepute.

She was satisfied that he had breached paragraph 4.2 of the Code, which states: *'You must not conduct yourself in a manner which could reasonably be regarded as bringing your position as a councillor, or your council, into disrepute.'*

In considering what sanction to apply, Ms Kelly noted the mitigating factors in the case, which included Councillor King referring himself to the Commissioner's office prior to his conviction, his co-operation with the investigation and adjudication process, and the fact that he had shown remorse for his actions.

Due to the councillor's co-operation, the Commissioner's office was able to complete the investigation and adjudication process within 8 months of the councillor's self referral.

However, although the councillor was not charged or convicted of an offence of driving with excess alcohol, he pleaded guilty to and was convicted of being in charge of a motor vehicle while over the legal limit for alcohol consumption. This remains a serious rather than a minor criminal offence.

Having considered the sanctions available and taking account of the need to uphold confidence in the standards regime, the Commissioner believed that suspension for a period of 2 months was a necessary and proportionate sanction.



## Former councillor disqualified for 5 years

Former Councillor William Walker (Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) was disqualified from holding the office of councillor for 5 years following an Adjudication Hearing held in May 2024.

Commissioner for Standards Margaret Kelly ruled that former Councillor Walker had breached the Code of Conduct by bringing his position as councillor and his council into disrepute.

The finding followed a conviction of attempted communication with two persons under 16 years of age for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification.

In June 2023 the Court imposed a 100 hours Community Service Order, a 3 year Probation Order, a 5 year Sexual Offences Prevention Order, and the former councillor was placed on the Sex Offenders Register for 5 years.

When interviewed as part of an investigation by the Deputy Commissioner staff, the former councillor acknowledged he had not only let himself down, but also his colleagues within the council.

At the Adjudication Ms Kelly said it was beyond doubt that a member of the public, knowing all of the relevant facts in this case, would reasonably consider that the former councillor's conduct was such that it brought his position as a councillor into disrepute.

She said that although his criminal behaviour was not linked directly to his position as a councillor, she was satisfied that his actions had brought the council into disrepute.

Stating that Mr Walker had shown he was not fit for public office, she believed it was appropriate to apply the maximum sanction available to her, which was to disqualify him from holding the position of councillor for 5 years.



# Appendix 1

## Adjudication Commissioners



**Margaret  
Kelly**

Ms Kelly took up the post of Local Government Commissioner

for Standards in August

2020. She has worked extensively in the voluntary and community sector for over 30 years and gained a range of experience in leading and managing services, developing policy and working in partnership with the public sector.



**Ian  
Gordon**

Mr Gordon is a retired Deputy Chief Constable of Tayside

Police. Seconded to

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary for 3 years, he was the lead police officer on the annual statutory inspection of five UK police forces. Mr Gordon was a Convener for the Standards Commission for Scotland between 2010 and 2017.

# Appendix 2

## Funding and Expenditure

The Local Government Ethical Standards (LGES) directorate is funded from a separately identified portion of the overall annual budget for the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). The LGES budget is proactively managed by NIPSO over the course of each financial year to ensure that any emerging funding pressures are identified and addressed.

Similarly, where reduced requirements arise, under established arrangements with the Department for Communities

(All £k)	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23
Staff Costs	441	395	461
Other Admin costs	190	196	153
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>614</b>

(DfC), any such amounts are released back to DfC by NIPSO by means of a mutually agreed in-year transfer.

This is in accordance with normal in-year financial monitoring procedures, after which DfC pay the released funding back to Local Councils. Where applicable a final end of year adjustment must also be returned directly to DfC. In all cases the amounts returned are made available for redeployment within Local Government, thus ensuring that any unspent amounts are able to be utilised fully and effectively.



Northern Ireland

**Local Government**  
Commissioner for **Standards**

**Northern Ireland Public  
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