

THE GENERAL OPTICAL COUNCIL

Code of Conduct for Members, Advisers and Visitors

Introduction

The General Optical Council's main objective is to protect, promote and maintain the health and safety of the public. It follows that public protection is at the heart of the role of Council members, Committee members, Hearings Panel members, advisers and visitors, and must at all times underpin their conduct and behaviour.

This Code provides guidance for members, advisers and visitors to assist them in undertaking their duties in accordance with currently accepted standards of public service.

The Council endorses the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by the Nolan Committee (1996):

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other benefits for themselves, their family or their friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Ways of working

Our values are based on The Better Regulation Commission's criteria for good regulation:

Proportionate:

Regulators should only intervene when necessary. Remedies should be appropriate to the risk posed, and costs identified and minimised.

We will identify and target the issues of greatest risk to public safety.

We will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

Accountable:

Regulators must be able to justify decisions, and be subject to public scrutiny.

We will seek, and respond to, the views of stakeholders and partners.

We will consider and review the consequences of our actions.

Consistent:

Government rules and standards must be joined up and implemented fairly.

We will work in collaboration with UK health regulatory bodies and other partners to develop consistent policies and procedures.

Transparent:

Regulators should be open, and keep regulations simple and user friendly.

We will explain and publicise decisions, and make public, wherever possible, Council information, activities and proceedings.

Targeted:

Regulation should be focused on the problem, and minimise side effects.

We will ensure that our activity is focused on the areas of greatest risk, or where there is most benefit to public health and safety.

Organisational excellence:

We will provide good value for money.

We will pursue high standards of customer service.

We will ensure that the Council is a good place to work, particularly through developing and training our staff and members.

We will promote and develop equality and diversity in all our work.

Corporate responsibilities

The members of Council together take corporate responsibility for the governance of the organisation and its decisions. The key functions of the Council are:

- Policy and Strategic Direction
- Performance Monitoring
- Financial Stewardship
- Accountability, Communication, and Stakeholder Engagement

Individual responsibilities

Individual members should follow the Seven Principles of Public Life and comply with this Code of Conduct as follows:

Attendance

Members are expected to attend Council, Council committees, working groups and seminars regularly, to prepare and contribute effectively and to conduct themselves at all times in accordance with the public interest.

Confidentiality

Members are expected to respect the confidentiality of privileged information and only to share documents on public agendas.

Expression of views

Members are expected to distinguish clearly, when speaking or writing, between personal views and those of the GOC. Any communication with the media either of a general nature which may not be specifically related to Council work or policy or more particularly which is about the Council's work or policy, including publication of views via the Internet, should be discussed with the Communications Manager, Chair or Registrar before a statement is made.

Corporate responsibility

Members contribute to Council decisions and take joint responsibility for them. This does not preclude a member who disagrees with a decision of a Council committee (Audit Committee or Remuneration Committee) on which they serve from presenting their views to the Council provided that any disagreement has been raised at the meeting and notification has been given to the Committee Chair and to the Council Chair. However once a Council decision has been taken each member must support it.

Financial or Professional Interests

Members must declare in the register of interests, any professional, personal or business interests that may conflict, or appear to conflict, with their responsibilities as members, advisers or visitors.

Conflicts of Interest

Members are free to engage in political activities or to maintain associations with professional organisations provided that such activity does not conflict with the public protection role of the GOC or compromise their position as a

Council member. Such outside activities must always be openly declared when a related matter is under discussion.

If a member, or a body corporate for which a member is a responsible officer, is the subject matter of an investigation or proceedings undertaken by the GOC regarding their fitness to practise (or in the case of a body corporate, fitness to undertake business as an optometrist or dispensing optician, or both) the member must contact the Registrar and declare this. The member must make such a declaration immediately they are aware that the GOC has received a complaint or information to initiate an investigation or proceedings. The presumption will be that the member will withdraw from all activities related to Council business until the conclusion of the investigation or proceedings. This is an essential step to protect the GOC from any perception that a conflict of interest may exist which might impact upon the decisions that the GOC takes during the investigation or proceedings. The member must under no circumstances discuss the subject matter of the investigation or proceedings with any other member of Council or member of a GOC committee.

Members may be approached to act as a witness on behalf of a registrant who is to appear before the Fitness to Practise Committee or whose case is to be considered by the Investigation Committee. It is inappropriate for a member to act as an expert witness for any party appearing before the Fitness to Practise Committee, or whose case is to be considered by the Investigation Committee. Members must refuse to accept any such instructions, or resign their position on the Council. Should a member be approached to act as a lay (i.e. non-expert) or *character* witness on behalf of a registrant who is to appear before the Fitness to Practise Committee, this must be immediately declared to the Registrar. Again, the presumption will be that the member will withdraw from all activities related to Council business until the conclusion of the investigation or proceedings. This is also to protect the GOC from any suggestion that the Investigation Committee for Fitness to Practise Committee might be unduly influenced by hearing evidence from an active member or any perception that the Investigation Committee or Fitness to Practise Committee may be biased as a result.

Equality and Diversity

Members must at all times demonstrate respect and dignity for others; a commitment to diversity and equal opportunities; and conduct themselves in a non-discriminatory manner.

Gifts and hospitality

Members must not accept gifts, hospitality or benefits offered as a consequence of GOC business, other than reasonable refreshments. If gifts cannot be refused without causing offence, they should be reported to the Registrar within 15 working days, who will discuss with the member what action should be taken.

Personal behaviour

Members' behaviour must demonstrate the standards expected of holders of public office. Where a member has been charged with, or has been convicted of, a criminal offence, or has been the subject of a disciplinary procedure by

any licensing body (including the GOC), the member must inform the Registrar at the earliest opportunity. The presumption will be that the member will withdraw from all activities related to Council business until the conclusion of the investigation or proceedings.

17 July 2006

Amended April 2009