

THE GENERAL OPTICAL COUNCIL

Code of Conduct for Members

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 and Hearings Panel members and must at all times underpin their conduct and behaviour.

This Code provides guidance for members 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 mission, vision and values are set out below:

Our mission

Our mission is to protect the public by upholding high standards in the optical professions.

Our vision

Our vision is to be recognised for delivering world-class regulation and excellent customer service.

Our values

Our values underpin the way we work with each other, with the public, registrants and partner organisations:

We act with integrity

We pursue excellence

We respect other people and ideas

We show empathy

We behave fairly

We are agile and responsive to change

Corporate responsibilities

Members of Council together take corporate responsibility for the governance of the organisation and its decisions.

As trustees of a charity employing staff, they have a duty to ensure that the GOC complies with relevant employment, equalities, human rights, health and safety, data protection and freedom of information legislation.

More generally, members of Council have corporate responsibility for ensuring that Council complies with any statutory or administrative requirements for the use of its funds. This includes compliance with charity law and the requirements of the Charity Commission.

Council is accountable to the public through Parliament and the Privy Council.

The key functions of the Council are:

- ③ Policy and Strategic Direction
- ③ Performance Monitoring
- ③ Financial Stewardship
- ③ Accountability, Communication, and Stakeholder Engagement

Duties of individuals

Members of Council have a duty to ensure that they have a clear understanding of their responsibilities as trustees of a registered charity and that they meet the legal requirements for eligibility to serve as a charity trustee.

Members have a duty to make themselves available for service on the Council and those of its Boards, Committees and Panels to which they may be appointed.

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.

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.

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.

Collective responsibility

Members accept collective responsibility for enabling Council to achieve its objectives and for decisions taken by Council. Members are expected to contribute to discussion and debate freely to enable a robust decision to be made. Once Council has taken a decision, members must support the communication and implementation of that decision.

Speaking up

Notwithstanding collective responsibility, members have a duty to raise any concerns about possible wrongdoing within the GOC, as set out in our Speaking Up Policy, with the Chief Executive if it concerns a member of staff, with the Chair of Council if it concerns the Chief Executive or another member, or with the Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee if it concerns the Chair of Council.

Conflicts of Interest

Members have a duty to complete and maintain their entry in the Members' Register of Interests, declaring any professional, business, or personal interests which may, or might be perceived to, conflict with their responsibilities as members in accordance with Council's guidance.

Members have a duty to avoid placing themselves under obligation to any individual or organisation which might affect their ability to act impartially and objectively in relation to their GOC responsibilities. This includes observing our guidance on management of interests and making any declarations as required by this guidance.

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 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 or employee.

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. Should a member be approached to act as a lay (i.e. nonexpert) 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.

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.

Anti-Fraud

Members are expected to adopt the highest standards of propriety and accountability and to promote an anti-fraud culture. This includes ensuring compliance with the law on bribery and taking steps to avoid any situation where there is an expectation of a gift or payment in return for an advantage of any kind.

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

Amended November 2020