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MEDIA RELEASE

ORKNEY ISLANDS COUNCILLOR SUSPENDED FOR DISCLOSING CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

An Orkney Islands Councillor, John Ross Scott, was suspended by the Standards Commission, after at a Hearing held online on 18 January 2021, from attending meetings of the full Council for the next three months. A Hearing Panel of the Standards Commission found that, in two Facebook posts published in March 2020, Councillor Scott disclosed sensitive information about the Council's response to the coronavirus pandemic. This was despite the information having been provided by officers to elected members at private briefings. Having heard from a number of witnesses, including other councillors, the Panel was satisfied that it was evident to all that information provided at the briefings was to remain confidential until officers had time to prepare its public communications.

Ashleigh Dunn, Chair of the Hearing Panel, said: "the requirement for councillors to refrain from disclosing confidential information is a key requirement of the Councillors' Code of Conduct. The Panel noted that a failure to do so can damage the reputation and integrity of a Council and can also impede discussions and decision-making."

"The Panel agreed that, in this case, it was legitimate for the Council to have decided that the information be kept confidential until such a time as the proposals discussed had been finalised and officers had sufficient time to prepare and manage external communications. This would ensure the Council's position and response were communicated clearly and fully."

The Panel heard that the Council wished to ensure its communications about the coronavirus pandemic were represented fully, and that its messages were managed carefully so as to provide reassurance and not cause any undue fear or alarm.

The Panel also found that Cllr Scott disclosed, in another Facebook post in April 2020, that another councillor had passed away, despite having been told that the news was to be kept private until confirmation had been received that all family members had been advised of the news. The Panel concluded that the Respondent had breached the privacy and confidentiality provisions in the Code in respect of all three posts. In addition, the Panel agreed that in sharing the news of the other councillor's death, despite being aware that there was a possibility that not all the family members were aware of the news, the Respondent failed to show due regard for their feelings or wishes. The Panel concluded, therefore, that the Respondent had also failed to demonstrate courtesy and respect towards the other councillor's family as required by the Code.

A full written decision is available on the Standards Commission's website.

Notes:

The Councillors' Code of Conduct is based on nine key principles, which include integrity, honesty and transparency.

The Standards Commission works independently of Government and political parties. It promotes and enforces Codes of Conduct for councillors, as well as individuals appointed to a wide range of national and regional public bodies across Scotland such as the Accounts Commission, the Scottish Qualification Authority, Sport Scotland, Scottish Water and the Scottish Police Authority and many other organisations, including NHS Boards and further education colleges.

Further information on the work of the SCS can be found at <http://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/>

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Issued by the Standards Commission for Scotland. For further information please contact the Standards Commission on 07790 389999 or enquiries@standardscommission.org.uk