

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS GUIDANCE NOTE 1

Introduction to Professional Ethics

Version 01.01

The [RTPI Code of Professional Conduct](#) (the Code) sets out the required standards of professional conduct and practice expected of RTPI Members. Its purpose is to protect and guide practitioners, and to serve as a tool to maintain public trust in the profession. All members, irrespective of their class of membership, are required to adhere to its five Core Principles:

- Honesty and integrity
- Professional competence
- Independent professional judgment
- Professional practice and duties
- Professional behaviour and respect

This guidance has been prepared to support RTPI Members with their professional responsibilities relating to (1) the importance of professionalism, (2) ethical challenges, (3) raising concerns and whistleblowing, and (4) complaints.

1. The importance of professionalism

Professional institutions play a key role in defining ethical behaviour and setting standards to regulate the education, accreditation and practice of their members. It is the application of values and principles that helps to build public trust and confidence in a profession. The planning profession operates across a range of organisations and businesses, including private firms or consultancies, local planning authorities, sole practitioners and national agencies and governments.

Being a member of the RTPI brings responsibilities and obligations. It not only involves a high level of technical competence, but also meeting certain standards of behaviour.

Professionalism is the way that you handle, and are accountable for, such situations and the behaviour with which you conduct yourself. You need to have regard for the reputation of the profession and the RTPI as well as yourself. The professional standards required of RTPI Members is set out in the Code and apply to areas of planning practice such as (but not limited to):

- Acting in accordance with the terms of engagement / fees for a project.
- Selecting and/or managing consultants in an objective and auditable manner.
- Submitting information in relation to planning applications, development proposals, policy or research reports in an accurate, objective and truthful way in accordance with legal requirements.

Approved for use October 2024

Registered charity number: 262865 Scottish registered charity number: SC 037841

- Providing objective professional advice based on the available evidence and having had regard to the relevant policy and legislative framework.
- Running consultation/engagement events or responding to or taking account of community engagement / consultation responses, in a proportionate, respectful, open and transparent manner.
- Treating colleagues and stakeholders with respect, even if you have a differing professional viewpoint.
- Engaging in negotiations in a positive, open and transparent way.
- Other activity that does not bring the RTPI or the profession into disrepute.

2. Ethical challenges

It is the mark of a reflective practitioner to demonstrate the ability to balance competing issues or views in order to come to a reasoned and objective professional decision. Ethics is generally understood as moral principles governing human behaviour¹ and is central to the way RTPI Members conduct themselves as professionals. A defining feature of the planning profession is the duty “to advance the science and art of planning (including town and country and spatial planning) for the benefit of the public” under our Royal Charter².

Historically, acting in the public interest has been understood in terms of protecting public health, public amenity and the environment from ‘harm’. Nowadays RTPI members can act for a broad range of interests including clients, employers, local communities and politicians within the context of meeting the needs of current and future generations. Tensions can often arise when trying to reconcile these different interests and challenges.

RTPI Members can fulfil their ‘public interest’ duty by having regard to:

- The long term consequences of the planning proposal or issue in question and their professional involvement;
- The inter-related and cumulative effect of decisions;
- The use of accurate and relevant technical information;
- The views of stakeholders and public agencies and representations made by local residents and businesses;
- The protection of natural, cultural and historic environments or any features of special interest;
- Public amenity, safety, design and accessibility.

Ethical challenges are generally recognisable by the need to ask the ‘But, what if...?’ question and a feeling of awkwardness or tension around how to respond. There

¹ [BBC - Ethics - Introduction to ethics: Ethics: a general introduction](#)

² [RTPI | Royal Charter, Byelaws and Regulations](#)

may not necessarily be a right or wrong answer depending on whether the issue falls within the requirements set down in the Code.

Ethical challenges exist in areas of planning practice such as (but not limited to):

- The implications of being asked by a private client to influence a friend working for the local planning authority determining a planning application
- Feeling under pressure to review your professional opinion or interpretation of policy or legislation, because it is at odds with the advice from a client or line manager
- Feeling unsure whether to accept the views of a local politician or from a private sector client as 'materially relevant' to your assessment of the impact of a development proposal
- Providing advice which is guided by national policy requirements and legislation even though it may be contrary to what you believe the planning system, as a whole, should or should not be facilitating.

If you are faced with these types of issues, this can lead to considerations around conflicts of interest, honesty and integrity, competence, judgement.

It is often best to set aside some time to think through the implications of a situation rather than making a snap decision. Asking yourself a series of questions, such as the ones in this flow diagram, may help.



3. Raising concerns and whistleblowing

RTPI Members should raise concerns about poor ethical practice, misconduct or wrongdoing particularly where it is not in the public interest. Concerns should first be raised internally with a manager but if this does not address your concern, or the concern relates to your manager in some way, you may want to discuss with another colleague or independent agency.

RTPI Members practising in the UK or who are engaged by a UK company and who are considering raising a concern, or whistleblowing, should be aware of the

Approved for use October 2024

Registered charity number: 262865 Scottish registered charity number: SC 037841

provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998:

www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/23/contents.

Members outside of the UK should check whether other relevant legislation applies in their jurisdiction. The Act affords individual protection from action taken by an employer for reporting a concern whether or not the information is confidential or whether the malpractice occurred within the UK or overseas. Personal grievances (e.g. bullying, harassment, discrimination) should be dealt with through employer procedures or alternative dispute resolution services.

In addition, local authorities have a Monitoring Officer. A Monitoring Officer is the statutory officer responsible for the legal governance of a local authority. Their role is to report on matters they believe to be illegal or amount to maladministration, to be responsible for matters relating to the conduct of councillors and officers and, to be responsible for the operation of the council's constitution. They are often, but not always, the head of legal services in a local authority.

Additional RTPI advice on raising concerns can be found online:

<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/16063/probity-and-the-professional-planner.pdf>

4. Complaints

Any alleged breach in the Code is dealt with through the RTPI's Complaints Procedures. Complaints can be brought by other RTPI Members, members of the public or clients.

The RTPI can also investigate matters without a formal complaint. The following penalties, increasing in sanction, may be imposed on RTPI Members found to be in breach of the Code:

- Warning,
- Reprimand,
- Suspension, or
- Termination of membership.

RTPI Members may or may not be named in the published report of the decision and advice on how to conduct themselves in the future can also be given, whether or not a penalty is imposed.

The RTPI website provides further information on the RTPI complaints process:

<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/membership/professional-standards/make-a-complaint/>

Approved for use October 2024

Registered charity number: 262865 Scottish registered charity number: SC 037841

Approved for use October 2024

Registered charity number: 262865 Scottish registered charity number: SC 037841