Maintaining Integrity when Working Remotely

A guide for all public sector employees covered by the Code of Conduct

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# For further information

The VPSC is available at integrity@vpsc.vic.gov.au or on 03 7004 7220.

# Section 1: Introduction

Many public sector employees are now working remotely and are likely to do so into the future.

Although working arrangements have changed, the obligations on public sector employees remain the same.

This guide supports the [Code of Conduct for Victorian Public Sector Employees](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/resources/code-of-conduct-for-employees/) (the Code). It seeks to support public sector employees, and reduce the integrity risks raised by remote working, by providing additional guidance on how Victorian public sector employees can comply with the Code while working remotely.

Victorian public sector employees can also refer to the Victorian Public Sector Commission’s (VPSC’s) shorter guide, the [Maintaining Integrity while Working Remotely – Short Guide](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CNewPC%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5C9NYM65FF%5CVPSC.vic.gov.au%5CLINK), for a summary version of this guidance.

While this guide is tailored to the Code, it is also a useful guide for public sector employees covered by the [Code of Conduct for Victorian Public Sector Employees of Special Bodies](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/resources/code-of-conduct-for-employees/).

We also recommend you read IBAC’s [information sheets on integrity in times of crisis](https://www.ibac.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/article/information-sheet-building-integrity-during-times-of-crisis-or-emergency).

# Section 2: The values and the Code

The Code prescribes the behaviour that is expected of public sector employees. It describes behaviours that exemplify the values contained in the *Public Administration Act 2004* (Vic):

Responsiveness

Integrity

Impartiality

Accountability

Respect

Leadership

Human Rights.

The Code applies to and is binding on all public sector employees, as defined in section 4 of the Act, other than employees of a special body, or unless excluded by a specific declaration issued by the Victorian Public Sector Commissioner.

The values and the Code build on our public sector’s long tradition of striving to meet the high standards the community rightly expects of it. They provide the foundation of the integrity and accountability framework for all public sector employees.

While all the values in the Code are relevant to maintaining integrity and public trust while working remotely, this guide focuses on three. It supplements the advice on demonstrating responsiveness, integrity and impartiality under the Code with additional practical guidance for public sector employees working remotely.

**Section 3: Responsiveness when working remotely**

What the Act says

Public officials should demonstrate the value of responsiveness by:

1. providing frank, impartial and timely advice to the Government; and
2. providing high quality services to the Victorian community; and
3. identifying and promoting best practice.

Why responsiveness matters

Providing advice in a frank, impartial and timely manner, and with an understanding of its implications on the broader policy direction of the Government, requires public sector employees to demonstrate responsiveness. Responsiveness matters because it supports and informs decisions and actions that are most likely to lead to the best outcomes for the community.

Maintaining responsiveness when working remotely

### Advising Government

* Public sector employees provide a high standard of advice to the Government of the day. While working remotely, public sector employees’ obligations in respect of advising Government remain the same.
* Public sector employees who demonstrate responsiveness adapt the way in which they communicate with Government representatives, their leaders, colleagues and key community stakeholders to ensure that they continue to provide quality advice to Government in a prompt manner. For example, when working remotely, discussions that would typically be held face-to-face may be conducted via telephone or video conference.
* Public sector employees demonstrate responsiveness when they continue to capture the varying viewpoints of interest groups, and a cross-section of the Victorian community in the development and delivery of Government policy.
* Public sector employees who demonstrate responsiveness recognise that changed working arrangements can have an impact on their wellbeing and ability to remain responsive when advising Government. They work with their manager to address any wellbeing issues and put appropriate arrangements in place to balance responsiveness with wellbeing and mental health considerations.

### Serving the community

* Public sector employees serve the community in an equitable, professional and prompt manner.
* Public sector employees demonstrate good service when they undertake actions such as:
* proactively alerting their team, managers, stakeholders and relevant community contacts when they are unavailable;
* set up call forward from their usual workplace to their remote work location;
* set up an alternative contact for when they are not available; and
* leave an out-of-office message indicating when they will be back to respond and who to contact in their absence if a matter is urgent.
* Public sector employees who are managers support staff in maintaining a good work/life balance when working remotely.

### Contributing to improvements

* Public sector employees actively identify opportunities to improve processes. This includes when working remotely. A public sector employee contributes to improvements when they share a process that makes work more effective, and complies with their organisation’s policies as well as relevant legislative requirements including their financial delegations.

# Section 4: Integrity when working remotely

## What the Act says

Public officials should demonstrate the value of integrity by:

1. being honest, open and transparent in their dealings; and
2. using powers responsibly; and
3. reporting improper conduct; and
4. avoiding any real or apparent conflicts of interest; and
5. striving to earn and sustain public trust of a high level.

## Why integrity matters

Earning and maintaining public trust, and being in a position to provide high-quality, trustworthy advice to support Government decision-making, requires public officials to conduct themselves with integrity.

# Maintaining integrity when working remotely

### Being honest, open and transparent in their dealings

* Public sector employees exemplify honesty and transparency by setting clear expectations when dealing with the community and through their interactions with their employer. This might include letting people know how, and when, to contact them while working remotely.
* When working remotely, public sector employees who are managers support integrity when they regularly check in with their staff by telephone or video conferencing, to ensure employees do not become isolated from management and team norms, and continue to work effectively together to achieve required outcomes
* Public sector employees working remotely may have other demands on their time, such as needing to facilitate remote learning. A public sector employee demonstrates integrity when they make their colleagues, managers, and where appropriate, any community stakeholders, aware of any periods of unavailability, and who to contact if the issue is urgent.
* Public sector Employees exemplify honesty and transparency when they continue to fulfil the core responsibilities of their role, and advise their manager when they are unable to meet these responsibilities.

### Using powers responsibly

* Public sector employees use their powers responsibly. They make decisions and exercise power where they have appropriate authorisation to do so. Where employees are required to exercise a statutory power or make a decision in a remote working environment, the requirements and limits of the power remain the same.
* Public sector employees do not use their power to provide a private benefit to themselves, their family or associates. They exercise power in a way that is fair and reasonable, and family or other relationships do not improperly influence their decisions. While working remotely, it is important that public sector employees continue to abide by all aspects of their organisation’s conflict of interest policies.

### Demonstrating financial probity

* Public sector employees observe the highest standards of integrity in financial matters and comply with the requirements of relevant financial management legislation, policies and procedures. This legislative framework and the Code require public sector employees to keep a strict separation between work-related and personal financial matters, other than appropriate exceptions such as claiming an approved work-related expense.
* Public sector employees working remotely use public funds only for authorised uses. Where an employee has access to an organisation’s credit card or bank account, they demonstrate integrity when their conduct remains consistent with the Code and the financial details of their public sector organisation are kept safe, including from household members.
* Public sector employees demonstrate integrity when they record with their manager any IT equipment or other resources they borrow from the workplace to use while working remotely.

### Official information

* Public sector employees with access to official information ensure it is only used for official purposes and in an approved manner. Official and personally identifying information is handled according to relevant legislation and public sector body policies and procedures. When working remotely, the same record-keeping and security principles for documents apply.
* Public sector employees take care with official information when they secure documents in line with their organisation’s guidelines. Public sector employees only disclose official information or documents when required to do so by law, in the legitimate course of duty, when called to give evidence in court, or when proper authority has been given.
* Public sector employees take care with official information when they have sensitive discussions away from others to prevent them overhearing, lock their computer when not near it, securely store paper documents, refrain from storing official information on private devices, and keep their passwords confidential. They do not allow household members to use work hardware and systems, and they take extra precautions to keep documents secure when using their home printer for confidential documents. Official or secure documents are not placed in household rubbish or recycling bins. Organisations can provide advice on how best to dispose of these documents securely.
* Public sector employees do not post photographs of their home office or work station on social media, where work-related documents might be visible on a monitor.
* Public sector employees can refer to [guidance by the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner](https://ovic.vic.gov.au/about-us/news-and-media/covid-19/) and the [Public Record Office Victoria](https://prov.vic.gov.au/recordkeeping-government/a-z-topics/working-remotely) for further information.

### Cyber threats and fraud

* Public sector employees remain aware of the risk of cyber-attacks and fraud when working remotely.
* Public sector employees demonstrate integrity when they comply with their organisation’s anti-virus software and firewall policies. They ensure anti-virus and anti-malware software is installed and up-to-date on work devices.
* Public sector employees who demonstrate integrity use only licensed software to perform their work.
* Public sector employees demonstrate integrity when they follow their organisation’s information security guidelines for working remotely, follow their organisation’s protocols for using electronic signatures, and check their organisation’s policy in relation to using their work device for non-work purposes.
* Public sector employees can refer to the Victorian Government’s guidance on [cyber security](https://www.vic.gov.au/cyber-security-victorian-government) for further information.

### Public comment

* Public sector employees only make public comment when specifically authorised to do so in relation to their duties, a public sector body, or Government policies and programs. These comments are limited to factual information and avoid expression of personal opinion.
* Public comment includes speaking engagements and providing information through any media, including social media. Public sector employees who use social media for work do so in line with the Public Administration (Public Sector Communications) Regulations 2018.
* Public sector employees making public comments as a private citizen:
* ensure that their comments are not related to any government activity that they are involved in or connected with as a public sector employee;
* state that their comments are not official comment and that they are speaking on behalf of themselves;
* state that their comments do not reflect the work of the Victorian Government; and
* ensure their statements do not compromise them performing their public sector role in an unbiased manner.
* Public sector employees are aware that even if they follow the above points, disciplinary action may still be taken if making a public comment in a private capacity brings the government into disrepute.
* Public sector employees demonstrate integrity when they follow their organisation’s social media and internal communication policies. Further information is provided in the VPSC’s [guidance for the use of social media in the Victorian public sector](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/html-resources/guidance-for-the-use-of-social-media-in-the-victorian-public-sector/).

### Instant messaging platforms

* Public sector employees apply the Code to how they use tools such as Skype for Business, Slack, or Microsoft Teams. Anything said in these platforms will usually remain on record. Just as with other records, this information can be requested under [freedom of information laws](https://ovic.vic.gov.au/freedom-of-information/).

### Reporting unethical behaviour

* Public sector employees comply with legislation, policies and lawful instructions in the performance of their work.
* Public sector employees have a responsibility, including where working remotely, to report to an appropriate authority workplace behaviour that violates any law, rule or regulation or represents corrupt conduct, mismanagement of public resources, or is a danger to public health or safety, or to the environment.
* Public sector employees can refer to the VPSC’s guidance on [public interest disclosures](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/about-vpsc/protected-disclosures-procedures/) for further information.

### Conflicts of interest

* Public sector employees avoid conflicts of interest wherever possible. A conflict of interest occurs where there is a conflict between the public duty and private interests of a public official. A conflict can be actual, potential or perceived. This requirement continues to apply when working remotely.
* Public sector employees ensure that their personal or financial interests (including the interests of family members, friends, or associates) do not influence and are not perceived to influence their performance of their public sector role.
* Public sector employees have an obligation under the Code to declare any conflicts of interest. They have an obligation to manage any conflicts of interest that cannot be avoided in accordance with their organisation’s policies and procedures. For example, if an employee works in a team that administers a government grants program and a member of their household applies for a grant, the employee has an obligation to declare this to their manager.
* Public sector employees speak with their manager if they are unsure if they have a real or perceived conflict of interest. More information is available in the VPSC’s guidance on [conflicts of interest](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/ethics-behaviours-culture/conflict-of-interest/).

### Other employment

### Public sector employees only engage in other employment where the activity does not conflict with their role as a public sector employee. They comply with their organisation’s policies on secondary employment.

### Drugs and alcohol

* Public sector employees carry out their work safely and avoid conduct that puts themselves or others at risk. This includes misuse of alcohol, drugs and or other substances when at work or when engaged in work-related activities. The policies relating to alcohol and illicit drugs that apply to public sector employees in the workplace continue to apply when working remotely.
* Public sector employees who are on medication that could affect their work performance or the safety of themselves or others ensure they inform their manager to allow any necessary precautions or adjustments to work to be made.

### Respecting others

* Public sector employees promote an environment that encourages respect.
* Public sector employees are fair, objective and courteous in their dealings with the Government, community and other public sector employees. They do not bully or harass their colleagues.
* Public sector employees can refer to guidance by the [Fair Work Commission](https://www.fwc.gov.au/disputes-at-work/anti-bullying) for further information on bullying.

# Section 5: Impartiality when working remotely

# What the Act says

# Public officials should demonstrate the value of impartiality by:

# i. making decisions and providing advice on merit and without bias, caprice, favouritism or self-interest; and

# ii. acting fairly by objectively considering all relevant facts and fair criteria; and

# iii. implementing Government policies and programs equitably.

# Why impartiality mattersProviding advice that is perceived as being free from prejudice or favouritism, and based on sound judgment, requires public sector employees to demonstrate impartiality.

# Maintaining impartiality when working remotely

### Decisions and advice

### Public sector employees make decisions and provide advice that is free from prejudice or favouritism. Public sector employees working remotely can continue to exemplify impartiality by:

### implementing government policies in a fair and equitable way;

### following agreed processes;

### managing issues consistently, fairly and in a timely manner; and

### basing their decisions and advice on sound judgment, free from self-interest.

### Gifts and benefits

# Public sector employees do not – for themselves or others – seek gifts and benefits (including hospitality). They refuse offers of gifts and benefits that could reasonably be perceived as influencing them or undermining the integrity of their organisation or themselves, consistent with their employer’s policies. This includes items such as discounted memberships or special treatment by other organisations.

# Public sector employees comply with any policies of their employer in relation to accepting, declaring and recording the receipt of gifts and benefits.

# The VPSC’s guidance on [gifts, benefits and hospitality](https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/resources/gifts-benefits-and-hospitality-resource-suite/) contains further information.

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