

JAOC INVESTIGATIONS: NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

Part 2: Councillors, Conflicts & Rule Breaches

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Introduction

This section examines how elected councillors have handled land sales, asset disposals and decision-making processes. We identify confirmed rule breaches, undeclared interests and links to buyers and contractors.

1. Confirmed Cases of Concern

Councillor John Higgins (SNP)

- **Role:** Member, Finance & Assets Committee; Economic Growth Board
- **Involvement:** Approved Ravenscraig land sale March 2023
- **Conflict:** Appointed Director of NL Regeneration Partnership Ltd — the buyer company — in June 2023
- **Breach:** Declared interest after heads of terms signed; remained part of decision-making process
- **Benefit:** Receives £6,000–£9,000/year director fees; company paid £1.4m below valuation
- *Audit Note: "Declaration came too late to allow proper scrutiny"*

Councillor Margaret Cowie (Labour)

- **Role:** Convener, Housing & Communities Committee
- **Involvement:** Approved Coltness Estate sale and change of use
- **Conflict:** Brother sits on board of purchaser Coltness Housing Ltd
- **Breach:** Declared link but refused to withdraw from debate and vote
- **Benefit:** Land sold £700k below value; organisation received £1.2m extra grants
- *Standard: Ethical guidance states close family connection requires full recusal*

Councillor James McGuigan (SNP)

- **Role:** Member, Planning & Development Committee
- **Involvement:** Supported Newhouse Farm sale and fast-track planning
- **Conflict:** Cousin is senior quantity surveyor at Docherty Construction — main contractor for the site
- **Breach:** Declared relationship 9 months after contracts awarded
- **Benefit:** Firm secured £30m+ in related works
- *Audit Note: "Failure to disclose at the time prevents proper challenge"*

2. How Rules Are Bypassed

- Declare interest only after decision made: Higgins — Ravenscraig
- Declare but continue voting: Cowie — Coltness
- Classify details as “commercial confidential”: All major land sales
- Use delegated officer powers to avoid committee vote: Newhouse planning approval
- Update Register of Interests many months late: McGuigan — Newhouse

3. Official Standards vs Council Practice

“A councillor does not need to receive cash to breach rules. Any foreseeable benefit to yourself, family or associates damages public trust.”
— Ethical Standards Commissioner for Scotland

“We found several cases where councillors with close links to buyers remained involved in decisions. This is not best practice.”
— Audit Scotland 2025

4. Whistleblower Alert

We continue to receive accounts of:

- Pressure to approve deals without full information
- Private briefings given only to selected members
- Deliberate delays in updating registers of interest

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