



CLGE Code of Conduct, interview

In 2009, Dr Frances Plimmer was appointed by a Working Group from the CLGE, now chaired by Jean-Yves Pirlot, to develop a Code of Conduct for European Surveyors. In this interview, they discuss why there is a need for such a Code, the process involved in its development and the importance of ethical behaviour for this profession.

Marc Vanderschueren, for Geoinformatics/CLGE



Dr Frances Plimmer and CLGE President Jean-Yves Pirlot in Kuala Lumpur, © Marc Vanderschueren

Geoinformatics: Several national surveying organisations have Codes of Conduct, so why was it considered necessary to develop a Code of Conduct specifically for European Surveyors?

Frances Plimmer: The impetus for a Code of Conduct for different professions in Europe, including Surveying, came from the European Union's Directive on Services in the Internal Market (2006/123/EC). This recognises such a Code as a device to facilitate the provision of services and the establishment of the profession within its member states. The EU also stated that such a Code would:

- contribute to ensuring the highest quality services;
- promote higher levels of confidence in the relationship between European Surveyors and consumers; and
- enhance the image of the profession within Europe.

Jean-Yves Pirlot: our code of conduct is a good example of self-regulation. You can find it on the website of the European Economic and Social Committee.

Geoinformatics: What guidance did you have from the European Union in developing the Code of Conduct?

Frances Plimmer: There was very little specific guidance from the EU, although their documentation provided an example of an exist-

ing Code of Conduct which had been developed for another profession. The only major requirements were that the development of the Code should be inclusive and transparent, which seemed to me to relate more to the process of developing the Code than to its contents.

Jean-Yves Pirlot: A good example had been provided by CEPLIS, the European Umbrella for Liberal Professions, which defined some common principles for codes of conduct. Based on these general rules, we have developed a profession-specific code.

Geoinformatics: How did you go about developing the Code of Conduct for European Surveyors?

Frances Plimmer: The plan was that I would have copies of the codes of conduct from those members of CLGE which had published them and, from these, develop a single Code which reflected the ethical principles of all of these organisations.

In reality, I received relatively few such documents and fortunately, because of this, the language barrier was not a major issue. I proceeded by developing a draft version of the Code based on the information I had received, and which was widely circulated by the CLGE working group to which I reported. As a result of this, I was sent feedback on which to base a second version. This feedback was vital for me; to discover any issues which I had overlooked, to clarify any misunderstandings, as well as to reflect on any criticisms of what I had included. Some of the feedback I received was contradictory, which gave me a great deal to think about.

Based on this feedback, I was then able to develop an improved second version which I sent to the CLGE working group, together with an explanatory document in which I clarified and justified the details of the clauses in this revision of the Code. I did not think it good enough just to present the Code alone. I felt it important to provide reasons for rejecting or accepting the comments and suggestions which had been made, so that the whole process was as transparent and comprehensible as possible.

Geoinformatics: Were there any major issues of contention?

Jean-Yves Pirlot: Only one, and this was more a case of clarification than disagreement. It was evident from the Codes of Conduct from the various professional associations received by Frances, that it was widely accepted that the surveyors' primary duty is to their clients. Clients' needs, confidentiality etc. were considered to be of overriding importance, and she disagreed with this.

It was clear that once she had provided a precise example of a situation in which clients' needs are not paramount; specifically when a surveyor is required to provide evidence to a court of law when, of course, the surveyor's duty is to the court and to no-one else – there was widespread acceptance of this. Everyone recognised the absolute duty of a surveyor to help the court come to a correct decision.

Frances Plimmer: Yes, indeed, I remember this discussion as if it were yesterday. In fact this is a principle I learned, as a very new practitioner, being required to provide evidence in court for property tax purposes. I suspect that, because not all surveyors can expect to be called to provide evidence in a court in their professional capacity, this situation had been largely overlooked. Far more surveyors have clients and are well aware of potentially conflicting situations which might arise and risk damaging the interests of their clients. Having a strong awareness of the principal duty to the client is, therefore, more relevant to them. Nevertheless, they all clearly recognised their primary duty to a court, should they be called to the witness box, so it was simply a matter of clarification and explanation on my part.

Geoinformatics: Why is a code of conduct important for professionals?

Frances Plimmer: In my view, it is not important for individual professionals, in the sense that a true professional is, by definition, inherently ethical and will behave appropriately regardless of the existence (or otherwise) of a written Code of Conduct. Conversely, someone who is unethical is not likely to change simply because of the existence of a Code of Conduct.

Geoinformatics: Why then do we need a Code of Conduct?

Frances Plimmer: A Code of Conduct is a public statement of the ethics or rules of behaviour which clients, governments and the public can expect of us. It is, as the European Commission states, a contribution to promote higher levels of confidence in the relationship between European Surveyors and consumers and to enhance the image of the profession within Europe.

Jean-Yves Pirlot: Because there are professional associations of surveyors within Europe which do not have a Code of Conduct, the European Code also serves to provide such a statement for their home market. Since its adoption by CLGE in Rome on 12 September 2009, about 60% of the national liaison groups or organisations have signed up to, or endorsed, the CLGE Code. This process is still ongoing but we strongly believe that the last 40% will follow soon.

This code plays an important role in our communication strategy with the general public. Therefore, we intend to monitor not only the pace

of its adoption by our member associations but also the way it's used by them. We need to know the number and type of infringement procedures. The international European procedures will be particularly interesting.

Frances Plimmer: However, there is, I think, a more subtle result of having such a public statement of our professional ethics. A Code of Conduct highlights for us all the importance of ethical behaviour. Ethical behaviour is now no longer implicit in the role of a professional; it has become explicit. There is, for example, increasing focus on education programmes on Ethics for professionals, in which students can test and discuss their responses to real world situations and thus develop an understanding as to the extent to which their chosen course of action may be ethical.

We believe that it has also contributed to a growing perception that it is increasingly acceptable to discuss ethical dilemmas, which we face, with our colleagues. Most of us have been or will at some point in our professional lives be faced with an ethical dilemma. We may find it hard to deal with that dilemma on our own, and, as the saying goes: "two heads are better than one". It is becoming increasingly accepted that a discussion with colleagues about an appropriate solution is more likely to lead to an ethical outcome – indeed, some companies actively encourage such discussions. With a high profile Code of Conduct, it becomes easier to talk through ethical dilemmas between ourselves. This also has an educational benefit in that we all learn from each other, and new professionals develop their understanding of ethical behaviour more quickly as a result. For far too long it has been assumed that new professionals acquire their sense of appropriate ethical behaviour from close proximity to older more experienced professionals, but this is not considered good enough any longer.

What is crucial to remember is that, as individual professionals and as members of professional associations, we enjoy the privilege to practice our expertise because we have an ethical reputation, not just high quality technical skills. Professional associations reserve the right to remove members who demonstrate that they do not meet the necessary professional standard of behaviour, thereby protecting the reputation of the rest of us.

Good reputations take years to develop, and can be lost because of one bad decision. With so much at stake, a Code of Conduct which explicitly states how we should behave, together with the ethical expectations which are inherent in our professional status, are absolutely fundamental to our individual future and that of our profession.

Geoinformatics: What's the way ahead?

Jean-Yves Pirlot: Frances has devised the code in very general and durable terms. This is important for such founding texts, especially when the implementation phase requires a lot of energy and time. However, the evolution doesn't stop and we have to adapt ourselves to the varying environment. For the moment, CLGE is part of an international coalition trying to design an international ethical code for the worldwide surveyor. We will report back about this initiative in the future.