

# Corporate Governance Guidelines (CGG)

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# Contents

<b>1 Overview of key principles and approach</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2 Role, structure and operation of boards</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>3 Board committees</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>4 Compensation</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>5 Audit, risk and control</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>6 Shareholder rights</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>7 Reporting</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>8 Social and environmental factors</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>9 Voting matters</b> .....	<b>18</b>

The following guidelines apply to Columbia Threadneedle Investments' client accounts to the extent agreed upon and/or permissible including voting on behalf of reo® (Responsible Engagement Overlay) service clients, which gives investors access to our market leading engagement and proxy voting services.

As an asset management business, we seek to act in the best economic interests of clients when carrying out our investment activities. Our investment clients are retail and institutional investors, including corporate pension funds.

Our voting guidelines are applied to all listed equity client portfolios. However, our institutional clients always have the right to determine how we vote their securities. We will always comply with those requests.

In addition to these guidelines, general and country-specific voting guidelines are maintained and applied within the voting process. Voting guidelines provide greater detail on resolutions that will (and will not) be supported and are drawn directly from the Corporate Governance Guidelines.

In executing votes, where companies put forward a strong case for not complying with our voting guidelines, we will take this into account and adjust our vote if we believe the company is acting in the best economic interests of shareholders (and, thus, our clients). We apply our guidelines to client portfolios in a manner that considers our clients' respective investment objectives and best economic interests. This could result in our voting on a matter the same way (or differently) for different clients.

If you wish to clarify anything in these guidelines, please email your relationship manager or the Responsible Investment team at [Governance@columbiathreadneedle.com](mailto:Governance@columbiathreadneedle.com). The Responsible Investment team is responsible for and reviews this document annually.

# 1 Overview of key principles and approach

Well governed companies are better positioned to manage risks, identify opportunities, and deliver sustainable growth and returns for our clients. These guidelines establish a consistent philosophy and approach to corporate governance and the exercise of voting rights. The approach is based on the overarching principles of:

- An empowered and effective board and management team;
- Appropriate checks and balances in company management structures;
- Effective systems of internal control and risk management covering all material risks, including environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) issues;
- A commitment to promoting throughout the company a culture of transparency and accountability that is grounded in sound business ethics;
- Compensation policies that reward the creation of long-term shareholder value through the achievement of corporate objectives; and
- A commitment to protecting the rights and interests of all.

We recognize that such principles may be expressed differently in different markets. Therefore, our voting policies take account of local practices and are applied in a pragmatic fashion that

reflects an integrated understanding of local and international good practice. In all cases, we aim to achieve the same result: the preservation and enhancement of long-term shareholder value through management accountability and transparency in reporting.

We also recognize that companies are not homogeneous and some variation in governance structures and practice is to be expected. Achieving best practice in corporate governance is a dynamic process between the board, management, and shareholders.

We encourage companies to engage in the process of shaping and meeting evolving standards of best practice. Although our voting is strongly rooted in a clear set of corporate governance principles, we approach each company's case on its merits using our expertise, discretion, and dialogue with companies to do so. For this reason, we encourage companies to contact us with information about any governance practices and challenges unique to the company. When we do not vote with management's or the board's recommendations, we may choose to inform the company of our voting decision and provide comments to explain the specific concerns with the resolutions we did not support.

## 2 Role, structure and operation of boards

We use the term “board” to describe the board of directors and similar supervisory decision-making bodies. The board is ultimately responsible for the management of the company.

This is mainly achieved through the delegation of powers to executive management. The board should receive the report of executive management on the conduct of the business and regularly question management on these matters. However, certain matters should be reserved for the board.

The board is responsible for setting and testing strategy proposed by executive management, determining the risk appetite for the business, ensuring the independence and effectiveness of external audit, and for succession planning of both executive management and the board.

The structure, composition and operation of boards will vary from country to country and company to company. Certain elements of effective boards are universal, and these are detailed below under the following sub-headings:

- Roles and independence;
- Competence, objectivity and refreshment;
- Effective functioning of boards; and
- Communication and accountability to shareholders.

### Roles and independence

The composition of the board is of the utmost importance. Boards should have meaningful representation of both executive and non-executive directors. Non-executives should be wholly independent of the company, although we recognize that, in certain cases, connected non-executives have a valuable role to play.

#### The role of the chair and separation of principal roles

The roles of the chair and chief executive officer (CEO) are substantively different and should be separated. We regard separation of the roles as important for securing a proper balance of authority and responsibility between executive management and the board, as well as preserving accountability within the board. If for any reason the roles are combined (e.g., over an unexpected transitional period) this should be explained and justified in the report and accounts. In all such cases, a strong senior independent non-executive director should be nominated (i.e., a lead independent director).

#### Executive directors

Including executives in board meetings is essential to enhance discussion and allow independent directors to gain the fullest understanding of company operations. In markets where customary, we encourage the appointment of key executives

to the board alongside the CEO and the chief financial officer (CFO). The presence of other executives provides additional company knowledge for the board and ensures the board is not solely dependent on the CEO for input relating to the company's operations and strategies. However, the number of executive directors should not outweigh the number of independent non-executives.

#### Non-executive directors

We assess the number of directorships an individual director holds to ensure they have sufficient time and energy to perform their role as a non-executive director properly as this is a demanding role. Factors that determine the appropriate number of directorships are the size of the company, its complexity, its circumstances, other commitments that a director has and the results of board evaluation, among others. We consider that holding multiple directorships in large companies can be excessive even for a full-time non-executive director, especially when considering board committee participation. Multiple directorships should be avoided for a full-time executive. For complex companies, particularly in developed markets, we may vote against non-executive directors who hold more than five directorships.

#### Proportion of non-executive directors on the board

Difficult decisions that center on the best interest of shareholders arise from open and direct interplay between boards and company executives. It is important to have enough independent non-executive directors for an adequate diversity of views and to fulfil committee membership quotas. We expect all widely-held companies to have a majority of independent directors.

For companies with controlling shareholders, we expect there to be a minimum of one-third of fully independent directors on the board.

#### Independence of non-executive directors

Independence of individual directors is valued, but a well-balanced board is valued above all. We will support non-independent directors when they bring skills, sector knowledge and other experience that justify their presence on the board, particularly where the appropriate balance of independence is maintained.

The criteria for the independence of directors draw on a variety of standards, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Principles of Corporate Governance, national corporate governance codes, listing rules, and guidance provided by the International Corporate Governance Network, among others. We favor a principles-based approach, which seeks to ensure that directors can act in the interests of the company and its shareholders. Companies should consider

using the corporate governance report or annual shareholder meeting materials to explain the board evaluation process, and to justify the value that non-independent directors bring to the board.

- Not be former executives of the company. We do not support the idea of a cooling off period for former executives, although in the case of individuals who have served in a junior capacity, a hiatus may be appropriate;
- Not have close family ties with the company's advisers, directors or senior employees;
- Not serve as a board committee chair if they have served on the board for a period of time that may hinder their independence of thought;
- Not hold cross-directorships or have significant links with other directors (see "Interlocking boards" below);
- Not be major shareholders or representatives of any special interest group, including government representatives in cases of state ownership or representatives of affiliated companies;
- Have no significant commercial involvement with the company as professional advisers, major suppliers or customers;
- Not be entitled to performance-related pay, stock options, pensions, or benefit from large donations to charitable causes of their choice;
- Not normally hold other directorships in companies in a closely-related industry so as to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

#### **Interlocking boards**

We seek to ensure that directors are not only independent from the company, but also of one another. We expect companies to disclose interlocking board relationships and to explain how the independence of individual directors is preserved when directors jointly serve on two or more of the same boards.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Extensive board service and independence**

Prolonged membership on a board jeopardizes independence as directors may become close with management and overly invested in prior strategic decisions. Independence is critical to ensuring shareholders have adequate voice inside the boardroom. After a certain length of board service, directors may not be considered fully independent and it may be inappropriate for such directors to serve on committees, such as the audit committee, where absolute independence is a key requirement.

We recognize that there is no fixed time period where a director categorically loses independence. Nonetheless, we will leverage a respective country's own regulatory requirement regarding independence where specified. In North America, we will assess whether the average board tenure of the company is significantly beyond the respective market's average when considering the board's overall balance.

Where the appropriate balance of independence is not met, we will analyze whether to support the re-election of long-standing directors.

#### **Independence of employee representatives**

While a number of countries have legislation mandating a certain percentage of employee representatives on the board, we do not consider these individuals to be fully independent. Hence, we expect companies domiciled in countries with mandatory co-determination (the process by which employees elect their representatives to the board) or employee representation to ensure that the board and its committees have adequate representation of truly independent directors.

#### **Competence, objectivity and renewal**

##### **Diversity, competencies and perspectives**

A relevant and suitably diverse mix of skills and perspectives is critical to the quality of the board and the strategic direction of the company. Companies should therefore strive to widen the pool of potential candidates for board and management roles to ensure they draw on the richest possible combination of competencies and experiences.

In all cases, candidates must be selected for their ability to oversee and enhance long-term company performance. Boards should recruit members with the appropriate combination of skills and experience, and should affirm the value of individual diversity, including gender, racial, ethnic, national origin, professional background and other relevant factors that may enhance the board's overall performance. As boards cannot be transformed overnight, we look for a statement that sets out the board's approach to promoting diversity at the board, executive management, and company-wide workforce level. We welcome disclosure of specific diversity targets set by the board and subsequent reporting on performance against these targets. Where disclosure is absent and appropriate diversity levels across gender, racial and ethnic representation have not been met, we will normally not support the re-election of nomination committee chairs or other relevant directors.

##### **Re-election of directors**

To ensure that it retains an open and critical perspective, the board should be continually refreshed. For this reason, all directors should be required to submit themselves for re-election at regular intervals. We prefer to have all directors standing for annual election to strengthen the accountability of the board to shareholders. Failing that, we encourage the chair of the board, as well as the chairs of the audit, compensation and nomination committees to stand for annual re-election to strengthen accountability for the core functions of the board. We also believe that a minimum of one-third of board members should stand for election annually.

##### **Nomination of directors**

We strongly believe that a board nominating committee composed of a majority of independent non-executive directors is best placed to identify and put forward suitable candidates

<sup>2</sup> Such interlocking relationships can raise concerns when there is an imbalance of power between the two directors.

for the board. Shareholders should only put forward candidates where there is clear evidence of ineffective board oversight and unwillingness to correct the problem—or where a cumulative voting system or similar arrangement encourages direct shareholder participation in board nominations. We expect companies to put forward only one candidate for each available position as an indication that the company is clear about the value each director brings to the board. We encourage companies to specify each candidate's qualifications, experiences and skills that are of relevance and importance to the board's oversight of company strategy.

### **Balanced composition**

We will consider voting against the chair or members of nominating committees who have not constructed appropriately balanced, independent boards. Indicators include: an over-reliance on long-standing members; an over-reliance on affiliated directors; and a lack of appropriate diversity characteristics, including gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, etc., that reflect the nature, scope and aspirations of the business.

## **Effective functioning of boards**

### **Board size**

In the case of a two-tier board structure, neither board should be large: between five and 10 members typically is appropriate. A unitary board normally should have between five and 15 members. In the case of overly large boards and in the absence of a commitment to reduce board size, we may withhold support from the nominating or governance committee chair unless clear justification has been provided explaining the need for such a large board.

### **Two-tier boards**

We are agnostic as to the merits of a two-tier board as opposed to a unitary board, and we recognize that a two-tier board structure is the norm in many markets. At the same time, we are aware that there can be challenges in communication between a supervisory board and a management board. Where there is more than one body forming the board, companies should maintain an effective mechanism for the various elements of the board to work together and should explain how this happens. This system should ensure the most effective use is made of all individuals involved so that the company can optimize the unique skills and experiences of their directors.

### **Board evaluation**

Board evaluations are an important tool for improving board performance. All boards should implement an evaluation process that considers the effectiveness of the entire board, its committees, the contributions made by each member, including its systems for interaction between the board and company management, areas for improvement, and behaviors and overall board culture. The nominating or governance committee may oversee the evaluation process and should report general findings and areas for improvement publicly to shareholders.

Large or systemically important companies should leverage professional, independent assistance to facilitate evaluations on a periodic basis (typically every three years).

### **Board meetings & attendance**

The board should meet at regular intervals to ensure effective oversight of the company. We regard six meetings per year as a minimum guidance, and often more frequent meetings are necessary.

We also expect directors to attend the annual general meeting (AGM), and to facilitate communication with the shareholders whom they represent. The company should disclose the attendance record of individual directors in the AGM report, as well as mechanisms for shareholders to communicate directly with the board. We may withhold support from directors with poor attendance records or boards who fail to accommodate shareholder dialogue.

### **Non-executive director (NED) only meetings**

NEDs should meet without executive board members present on a regular basis and when circumstances demand. They should also have at least one meeting per year to hold an unconstrained discussion away from day-to-day business matters. Ideally, this should be chaired by a senior or lead independent director, although the chair may be present (provided they are a non-executive). Conversely, in the case of two-tiered boards, supervisory boards should meet with executives on a regular basis to minimize the risk that NEDs could become marginalized from the business.

### **Training and mentorship**

All directors should receive appropriate training when being onboarded. Ideally, the onboarding process should include assignment of a board mentor. Mentors are normally long- or medium-standing directors willing to take on the responsibility of providing ad hoc support and context for new directors.

All directors should regularly be provided opportunities to attend conferences, classes, or webinars to upskill and remain relevant. Such offerings may be an outcome of the board evaluation process or a request from directors or management directly. We encourage companies to develop regular director training plans that include educating directors on relevant environmental, social and governance matters.

## **Communication and accountability**

The board should proactively and regularly make itself available for consultation with shareholders. To this end, boards should appoint a senior or lead independent director to fulfil a formal liaison role with key stakeholders. This is most important in cases where the CEO also holds the chair position, has executive responsibilities or was not independent on appointment.

Where appropriate, NEDs should be prepared to discuss matters of strategy, performance, risk, capital structure, standards of operational practice, and oversight of company-specific environmental and social matters.

## 3 Board committees

We encourage companies to move towards fully independent audit and compensation committees, as well as a nomination committee composed of a majority of independent directors. All board committees should report on their activities annually to shareholders (see section on “Reporting” below).

### Audit

The audit committee provides an important safeguard for shareholders and for other stakeholders that rely upon the integrity of the report and accounts as a basis for their investing in the company.

The audit committee should consist exclusively of NEDs, all of whom should be independent, and consist of at least three individuals. At least one should have recent and relevant financial, accounting or audit experience, and all audit committee members should be financially literate. The committee should be responsible for assessing the effectiveness, independence, qualifications, expertise and resources of the external auditors (including the quality of audit) and oversee the process of review and issue of the accounts.

The audit committee should also be responsible for monitoring and approving related-party transactions and should ensure that any material related-party transactions do not disadvantage minority shareholders.

The audit committee is also responsible for publishing the annual audit report, which is essential for investors to evaluate the overall health of the business (see “Reporting” below). The audit committee report should provide meaningful disclosure on the committee’s work and the issues it has addressed. In the event of a significant restatement of accounts or material weakness in internal controls, we may not support the election of members of the audit committee who we consider have not fulfilled their duty to shareholders. We may also not support the election of these director to the boards of other companies.

### Compensation

The compensation (or remuneration) committee is responsible for setting the compensation of executive directors and senior executives and should coordinate with the company’s human resources function to develop a coherent and effective compensation strategy throughout the company. As a best practice we believe that compensation committees should consist exclusively of independent non-executive directors. We encourage compensation committees to engage in direct dialogue with shareholders when developing compensation policies. (See “4. Compensation” below).

The compensation committee must consult with other board functions to ensure that pay mechanisms are well aligned with strategic goals and the company’s appetite for risk. In particular, the compensation committee should work with the board and its committees to determine the appropriate balance in the allocation of profits to employees as incentive payment, to shareholders as dividends, and for retention or reinvestment in the business itself.

The committee’s fiduciary duty is also to ensure that the amount of payment to management is fair and appropriate. Finally, the committee should be attentive to compensation across the company to ensure management is delivering on strategic priorities, especially those that enhance shareholder returns.

We may withhold our support from the chair and/or members of the compensation committee where there are significant concerns with the committee’s decision-making, or where issues we have identified with pay policies and practices remain unaddressed.

### Nomination

A nomination committee should oversee all board and senior executive appointments. Normally it should be a committee of independent non-executive directors and the board chair. In certain instances, it may be appropriate for the committee to leverage management’s advice. Although we prefer a fully independent committee, we recognize that a non-independent director or representative of a large shareholder may be appropriate in some circumstances.

### Corporate governance

We recognize that companies may choose to have the nominating committee or a specific corporate governance committee responsible for corporate governance practices and procedures. Regardless of the structure, the committee should monitor emerging regulatory and industry standards, strive to achieve global best practice, and should consult with shareholders to understand investor expectations.

### Corporate responsibility and sustainability

We believe that committees with responsibilities related to oversight of corporate social responsibility, ethics or sustainability are prudent for purposes of risk management. For large companies exposed to significant ESG risks, such committees are essential to protecting shareholder value and managing reputational risk.

### Business ethics

Whether it is through a committee such as the audit committee or a general board review, it is important that the board affirm its responsibility for reviewing internal business ethics systems, practices, and processes.

# 4 Compensation

Levels of compensation and other incentives should be designed to promote sustainable, long-term value creation and reflect the executives' work and contribution to the company. No director should be involved in setting their own compensation. Given the consistent upward trend in total compensation, we expect careful usage and robust justification of benchmarks. We also wish to see comprehensive disclosure of performance targets as well as actual performance against pre-set targets. We expect justification of base pay levels awarded, and that a significant proportion of total compensation be variable and subject to appropriately challenging performance conditions. We do not set guidelines for levels of compensation beyond the principles mentioned below.

## Level of pay

We expect boards to demonstrate an understanding of (and sensitivity to) the views and expectations of shareholders and other key stakeholders, such as employees, when setting executive pay.

## Relationship to strategy and risk

We expect companies to demonstrate the alignment of their compensation policy with their overall business strategy and planning. Performance metrics should relate to the company's articulated strategy and risk tolerance. Targets should be constructed to align executive incentives to the interests of long-term shareholders and should not create incentives for executives to undertake short-term risks that might imperil sustainable long-term performance. We advocate for risk-related preconditions to bonus awards to ensure inappropriate incentive payments are not awarded in the event the company's financial strength or credit quality deteriorates.

## Disclosure

We seek appropriately detailed disclosure of board and management compensation packages (See "Compensation committee report" below). The purpose of the compensation report should not simply be related to compliance, rather it should be to enhance investors' understanding of the committee's practices, processes, and goals.

Following the award of the bonus, companies should provide a meaningful analysis in the compensation report of the extent to which relevant targets were met. The compensation report should be written in plain language and include the tax implications for the company.

At a minimum, the compensation of all directors, including all non-executive and executive directors, should be disclosed individually. We look for banded disclosure of those individuals at sub-board level who make a significant contribution to the company.

## Executive contracts and pensions

Prior to employment contract agreements, companies should actively consider the potential rewards concerning severance in the event of inadequate performance and clarify the performance conditions under which such severance benefits are to be payable. We encourage companies to seek mitigation in case a director has taken up employment elsewhere and to adjust the length and size of any payments accordingly. We recommend that companies make larger severance packages the subject of a shareholder vote.

## Share schemes/ share compensation arrangements

We believe that strict guidelines should be observed regarding the issue, or potential issue, of shares for incentive schemes (also known as equity-based compensation plans) both as to the proportion of shares issued and to the rate at which these are issued each year. For us to accept large share schemes, the commercial drivers must outweigh the dilutive impacts. If the company is insufficiently transparent regarding the details of such schemes, we may abstain or vote against them.

## Equity incentive plans

We support the principle of motivating and rewarding executives through the granting of equity incentives.

Performance targets for equity incentive plans should be clearly disclosed and challenging. We believe that the compensation committee is in the best position to determine the most appropriate performance metrics for driving the long-term business strategy. However, overall compensation packages should reflect a range of performance targets and should not rely too heavily on the achievement of a single performance metric.

Generally, we believe executive pay plans should reflect a balance of financial, operational, and relative performance targets. We strongly believe that exceptional performance over a significant period merits an exceptional level of compensation. We oppose retesting of performance conditions and may withhold support of compensation plans where the compensation committee has used its discretion to relax any performance targets previously approved by shareholders.

We will consider one-off equity awards on a case-by-case basis in light of justification provided by the company. However, frequent use of exceptional awards raises questions over the adequacy of the overall compensation strategy and effectiveness of succession planning. We will take particular care when reviewing equity awards granted for the purposes of recruitment or retention when such awards are not linked to meaningful performance targets.

We encourage the inclusion of environmental and social factors in performance bonus payments where they have a material impact on shareholder returns. We also expect a discussion of the process undertaken by the company to identify such factors and an explanation as to why it considers these factors to be relevant.

**Holding periods, vesting and malus/clawback policies**

Bonus payments and long-term incentive schemes should be structured to reward long-term growth in shareholder value and be subject to performance-vesting conditions. We encourage companies to include deferred shares as a portion of short-term bonuses. Longer-term incentive plans should be fully share-based, and vesting periods should extend from at least three to five years or longer. We also encourage companies to require longer-term holding periods post vesting. The compensation

committee should maintain a malus authority to withhold all or part of performance-based pay from executives before it has vested in cases where it deems it appropriate. The compensation committee should also have clawback authority to recover sums already paid out to executives. This might occur following a significant restatement of accounts, where previously granted awards were paid on the basis of inaccurate figures, or where the long-term outcomes of a specific strategy result in significant value destruction for shareholders.

**Employee ownership**

Widespread employee ownership can contribute positively to shareholder value, as it further aligns employees' interests with those of shareholders. Such devices should not, however, be instituted as anti-takeover devices, and should be included within company-wide dilution limits.

## 5 Audit, risk and control

We recommend that the independent members of the audit committee meet on a regular basis with the company's auditors and without company management. This may enable a better flow of information between auditors and the board.

### Appointment of auditors

The auditors' performance and appointment should be reviewed periodically. Where the same firm remains as auditor for a period of time, there should be a policy of regular rotation of the lead audit partner. We believe that systematic rotation of audit firms is both desirable and in the best interests of shareholders.

We expect audit quality to be the main consideration in the selection of the auditor and expect that shareholders should be given the opportunity to vote on the appointment and payment of auditors.

### Auditor liability

We recognize the disproportionate risk that joint & several liability may place upon audit firms. However, we will only consider supporting arrangements to cap auditor liability in exceptional circumstances (e.g., where the risk of a catastrophic and disproportionate claim can be demonstrated).

### Fees paid to a company's auditors in addition to audit fees

Companies should disclose when auditors carry out consultancy work in addition to auditing the company and the audit committee should consider whether there is a risk that an auditor's impartiality may be jeopardized. The range, nature and tendering process for any such non-audit work should be supervised by the audit committee, whose responsibilities in this area should be fully disclosed. Where substantial non-audit fees are paid for more than one year, we may not support the reappointment of the auditor or the payment of auditor fees in its voting at AGMs.

### Related-party transactions

Many companies are involved in material related-party transactions, which represent a significant risk to shareholders. This risk is mitigated in companies with fully independent audit committees whose responsibility it is to ensure that such transactions are conducted on the basis of arm's-length valuations. We strongly encourage companies to use such committees for scrutiny, and to secure prior shareholder approval for material related-party transactions.

In the circumstance of continued concerns, we recommend that each company disclose any shareholdings that its controlling shareholders may have in other companies or investment vehicles that have a material interest in the company.

### Risk management

The board as a whole is responsible for defining a company's risk tolerance relative to its strategy and operations—it is also responsible for monitoring the company's performance relative to defined risks. Financial, operational, and reputational risks that are relevant to the company's business and performance should be included in this oversight, including material ESG and ethical risks.

Depending on the size and complexity of the company, a standalone risk management committee may be warranted.

## 6 Shareholder rights

While the precise nature and scope of shareholder rights vary across jurisdictions and many related aspects of our expectations are touched upon in other parts of these guidelines, a number merit direct mention:

### **Liaison with shareholders**

Board and management teams should be ready, where practicable, to engage in dialogue with shareholders based on an understanding of shared objectives. They should also be proactive in making sure important news is imparted, subject to appropriate inside information procedures, and should react helpfully to investor inquiries.

In investment meetings with shareholders, companies should be prepared to address relevant corporate ESG issues.

### **Issuance of Shares**

We respect a company's right to issue shares to raise capital. However, share issuance should be strictly limited to that which is necessary to maintain business operations and drive company strategy. We will not support requests to increase authorized share capital that exceed 50% of existing capital, unless specific justification has been provided (e.g., to complete a strategically important acquisition or undertake a necessary stock split).

### **Pre-emption Rights**

We believe that pre-emptive rights for existing shareholders are essential. Shares may be issued for cash without pre-emptive rights or for compensation purposes, subject to shareholder approval. Companies should adhere to strict limits for issuing new shares as a proportion of the issued share capital. Furthermore, they should also be subject to flow rates, where appropriate.

### **Share repurchases**

We expect companies to repurchase shares in the market when it is advantageous for the company and its shareholders.

Authority to repurchase shares should be subject to shareholder approval.

### **Controlled companies and share classes with differential voting rights**

We favor a share structure that gives all shares equal voting rights. We do not support the issue of shares with impaired or enhanced voting rights.

Where differential voting structures exist, this structure should be transparently disclosed to the market. In the case of controlled companies, we will review any request to issue shares with enhanced voting rights to determine why these are necessary and how they will reflect the interests of minority shareholders. We support the principle of one share, one vote, and encourage companies to take steps to eliminate differential voting structures over time or prevent their introduction. Where there are unequal voting rights, we encourage clear and comprehensive disclosure of a timeline regarding the retirement of unequal voting structures (otherwise known as sunset provisions).

### **Voting caps**

We oppose voting caps in principle and believe that all shares should be entitled to full voting rights irrespective of the holding period. However, we recognize the widespread use of voting caps in certain markets, and the benefits accruing to shareholders not subject to a cap. Therefore, at a minimum, we expect companies to clearly disclose any caps and encourage them not to introduce new caps while phasing out existing caps over time.

### **Mergers and acquisitions, spin-offs and other corporate restructuring**

We expect boards to conduct thorough due diligence prior to pursuing any merger or acquisition and to maximize shareholder value in any deal.

Where major transactions are not subject to shareholder approval, companies should consider the views of their major shareholders, subject to regulatory constraints and shareholders' policies concerning insiders.

We consider the ESG risk implications of any corporate activity as part of the assessment of such activity, particularly in high-impact industries. We also expect the board to evaluate any potential ESG or ethical risks or liabilities of any business combination, including supply chains.

**Poison pills**

We regard artificial devices to deter bids, known as poison pills, as inappropriate and inefficient unless they are strictly controlled and very limited in duration. We believe that any control-enhancing mechanism or poison pill that entrenches management and protects the company from market pressures is not in the interests of shareholders.

**Pension and other similar significant corporate liabilities**

Companies should be aware of, and report to shareholders on, significant liabilities such as those arising from unfunded or under-funded pension commitments. The extent of the liability should be reported, and the plans put in place to cover the deficit should also be reported within a reasonable timeframe for action. The principal assumptions used in calculating amounts should form part of this disclosure. Other significant liabilities could include specific operational or ESG risks that the company faces. The company should provide some indication of how these risks can result in “contingent liabilities.”

**Shareholder resolutions**

We consider all shareholder resolutions that appear on the ballot and vote in accordance with our view of the long-term economic benefit to shareholders. On this basis we will typically support requests to improve board accountability, executive pay practices, ESG disclosure and climate change scenario analyses where we agree with both the broader issue highlighted as well as the implementation proposed. We also typically support shareholder proposals asking companies to report on implementation of environmental and social policies and assessments where there is reason for concern. We will review company and outside data and information, assess peers for benchmarking and consider the proponents' and company's arguments in full.

# 7 Reporting

Companies should have meaningful and transparent disclosure so that investors can obtain a clear understanding of all important and relevant issues. The annual report should provide a full review of the business model and strategy; key performance indicators used to gauge how the company is progressing against its objectives; principal (material) risks and any significant factors affecting the company's future performance, including significant ESG or ethical issues; key achievements; and standards followed during the accounting period.

In all markets, we favor reports that are:

- **Comprehensive**, covering the strategic direction of the business and all material issues, including any significant changes in the regulatory context and key ESG issues;
- **Balanced**, with even-handed treatment of both good and bad aspects of a company;
- **Transparent**, with narrative text that leverages plain language, and accounting notes that provide investors with a full understanding of the circumstances underlying the reported figures;
- **Underpinned by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** that drive business performance, are comparable over time, and are supported by detailed information on how they are calculated;
- **Consistent and joined-up** with other company reporting, including the compensation policy and corporate social responsibility or sustainability reporting.

## Directors

Adequate biographical information on the directors should be provided for shareholders in advance of the AGM. This should include information about directors' qualifications and experience, term of office, date of first appointment, level of independence, board committee memberships and other personal and professional commitments that may influence the quality of their contribution and independence (e.g., other directorships, family and social ties, and affiliations with related companies or organizations). For all newly appointed directors, we encourage disclosure of qualifications, experiences and skills that are considered by the board to be of relevance and importance to its oversight of company strategy. To this end, we encourage disclosure of a clear and concise board skills matrix in the proxy voting materials and annual report.

## Nomination committee report

The committee should report annually on its activity and the report should provide a detailed discussion of its process for identifying and appointing executive and non-executive directors, including the processes it employs to ensure board membership reflects an appropriate diversity of perspectives, experiences, gender and racial or ethnic representation as well as cultural backgrounds. Where necessary, the report should include a thorough discussion of the board's view of the independence of certain members. The report should also include a robust description of the board evaluation process, cadence, and outcomes (including strengths and opportunities identified).

## Audit committee report

The audit committee should report on its conduct during the year and, in particular, any specific matters of judgement relating to the application of accounting principles or the scope of the audit. It should also comment on the process for ensuring the independence of the auditors and for evaluating the impact of non-audit work. The audit committee report should include a narrative description of any related-party transactions, with reference to how these might impact the interests of minority shareholders. Any qualification of the audit statement and all matters raised in the auditor's report must be fully explained.

## System of internal controls and risk management

If the audit committee's remit includes risk management, the audit committee report should also address the board's oversight of enterprise-wide risks. Either as part of the audit committee report or a standalone report, the company should explain the results of the board's review of internal controls, including any identified (or potential) weaknesses in internal controls and how the board plans to respond to these.

## Compensation report

We expect all companies to publish an annual compensation report in line with international good governance standards. Good compensation reporting outlines a company's overall philosophy and its policies and formulas for determining annual, short- and long-term pay. We look for compensation reports to break down fixed versus variable pay and to clearly align total pay packages with long-term shareholder value. The compensation report should clearly disclose specific long-term performance targets and total potential pay-outs.

If short-term performance targets cannot be disclosed due to commercial sensitivity, we expect retrospective disclosure of short-term targets and of actual performance against these targets.

We recommend that all companies put the compensation report to a shareholder vote and encourage compensation committee members to actively consult their shareholders prior to the AGM.

#### **Sustainability reporting**

We encourage companies to report on any significant ESG or ethical risks and opportunities in their annual reports including the systems in place to manage these risks. This may be supported by more detailed disclosure in a separate corporate social responsibility or sustainability report.

#### **Code of corporate governance**

Companies should provide a full and clear statement of all matters relating to the application of the provisions of the relevant national code of corporate governance. The way the provisions are put into effect should be clearly discussed. Any deviations should be supported by meaningful explanations.

#### **Code of conduct**

Companies should maintain a code of conduct reflecting corporate values and promotion of ethical business practices. Such codes should address business-critical compliance issues including anti-corruption practices.

#### **Reincorporation in a tax or governance haven**

Irrespective of the potential benefits a smaller tax burden may bring, we will typically vote against resolutions for a company to reincorporate in a new legal jurisdiction that offers lower legal and governance protections to shareholders. Aggressive

tax strategies, even if structured legally, can pose potentially significant reputational and commercial risks for companies.

We expect boards to ensure the company's approach to tax policy is both prudent and sustainable. To that end, we therefore expect companies to disclose how the board is providing such oversight. Companies should provide a suitable amount of information for investors to understand their tax practices and associated risks.

#### **Listings**

Companies that are listed on an exchange should comply with the rules and listing requirements of that exchange.

#### **Shareholder resolutions and access to the proxy statement**

Shareholder resolutions represent the exercise of a key shareholder right and may encompass a wide range of issues. We encourage companies to engage in constructive dialogue with shareholders and other key stakeholders. Where engagement is unsuccessful, we support shareholders' right to submit a shareholder proposal for consideration by all investors. In these instances, companies should behave respectfully by communicating promptly and fully with shareholders while refraining from obstructing the process. The board should provide a full and reasoned response to any shareholder proposal on the ballot. We consider all shareholder resolutions put forward and vote in accordance with our understanding of the long-term economic benefit to shareholders. We support shareholder resolutions relating to the right to nominate or remove directors, including those related to an advisory shareholder vote on pay. We will incorporate into our decision whether a shareholder resolution is binding in nature or advisory (non-binding) in applying the above considerations.

## 8 Social and environmental factors

Environmental and social factors can present serious risks to corporations and their ability to generate shareholder returns. A well-run company should, therefore, have formal systems to identify, assess and manage significant risks associated with financially material environmental and social factors. Companies should publicly disclose such factors on a regular basis and detail any management-related strategies and targets.

Disclosure should cover both direct operations and, where relevant, the policies applied to their supply chains. Companies should make appropriate and integrated disclosures reflecting touch points to their strategy, research and development, capital expenditures, operational performance, and commercial aspirations.

In general, we evaluate environmental and social proposals based on the relevance of the issue to the company and the desirability of the specific action requested in the proposals to advance long-term shareholder value. We recognize that some proposals may identify important company risks even if the proposal is poorly constructed. In such cases, we encourage companies to identify, mitigate and report on their respective risk management approach effectively.

### **Environmental and social management**

Companies should determine how financially material environmental and social risks and opportunities are addressed via their core business strategy. As part of this process, companies should proactively identify, assess and manage those risks and opportunities, as well as implement robust sustainability governance frameworks to promote accountability and ensure effective oversight. We expect companies to align their disclosure of environmental and social policies, management systems and performance according to internationally accepted standards. We also expect companies to quantify impacts from environmental and social factors and set targets to mitigate and manage material sustainability risks and impacts.

We have set out our detailed thoughts for environmental and social practices in stand-alone documents available on our website.

We may withhold support from management resolutions should we deem companies' responses to involvement in significant environmental or social controversies as insufficient, or where we have concerns about recurrent weak practices by companies in high-impact industries.

We may vote in favor of shareholder resolutions seeking improvements in reporting and/or management of environmental or social practices where we have concerns, acting in the best economic interest of our clients, or improvements are proportionate to the risks faced.

### **Climate change**

We recognize that climate change and the global transition to a lower-carbon economy present both risks and opportunities to businesses. We are supporters of both CDP (formerly, the Carbon Disclosure Project) and the recommendations of the Taskforce on Climate Related Financial Disclosures<sup>3</sup> and expect to see companies report climate risks and strategy against the proper standards and frameworks. We also support company efforts to implement net zero targets; however, the company should disclose specifics as to how they will accomplish this.

Some companies may be exposed to business risks stemming from the effects of climate change either directly via their business operations, regulations, changing consumer demand or through supply chains. Where these are financially material risks, companies should describe how their business strategy incorporates climate risk and ensure adequate disclosure.

Where companies in high-impact sectors—e.g., those requested to disclose to CDP Climate Change—fail to provide investment-relevant climate disclosure or do not have a robust climate change risk management strategy, we may not support management resolutions, including the report and accounts or the election of directors if we think this is in the best economic interests of our clients.

Where there are matters of concern, we may support shareholder resolutions calling on companies to improve their business planning and public disclosure in relation to climate change risks and opportunities.

We will make use of investor tools such as the Climate Action 100+ Net Zero Company Benchmark, the Transition Pathway Initiative, our own proprietary [net zero tool](#) as well as engagements we've conducted to identify companies that fail to follow best practice.

### **Biodiversity**

Loss of biodiversity degrades ecosystems which underpin the Earth's ability to provide regulating, provisioning, cultural and supporting ecosystem benefits. For companies in sectors with high biodiversity impact that fail to provide appropriate disclosure

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fsb-tcfd.org/publications/final-recommendations-report/>.

(e.g., CDP Water Security and/or Forests disclosures), we may not support management resolutions if we think this is in the best economic interests of our clients.

### **Sustainability and integrated reporting**

A company's recognition and management of financially material environmental and social exposures and related disclosures provides shareholders with an additional lens through which to assess the quality, leadership, strategic focus, risk management and operational standards of practice of the business.

Disclosure of significant environmental and social risk factors should be included in the annual report. Certain high risk or high impact operations that are of substantial interest to investors and the public may require modular reporting alongside reporting that aggregates all company activity. We recommend disclosure in line with internationally accepted standards of best practice which enhances our understanding of a company's ability to create and sustain value in the short, medium and long term.

### **Audit of social and environmental management systems**

We appreciate that auditing and assurance practices for environmental and social systems require further development; nevertheless, we consider third-party auditing of sustainability reports to be best practice. We encourage companies to move towards third-party verification.

### **Labor practices and standards**

Companies may incur significant risks because of the employment practices of their own operations and those of their suppliers and sub-contractors. Codes of conduct that address such risks and include detailed and effective procedures for their supply chain are usually in companies' best interests.

Where there is cause for concern, we favor codes based on internationally recognized standards (e.g., core conventions of the International Labour Organization), independent monitoring or auditing of implementation, and reporting of aggregate audit results. We look for regular, public reporting on code implementation.

### **Human rights**

Companies may incur extraordinary risks to their operations, staff, or reputation as a result of operating in conflict zones or in locations at risk of human rights abuses. Risks may also be encountered via supply chains when primary product

inputs are sourced from at-risk areas. Where there is cause for concern, we support resolutions asking companies to develop and implement policies and management systems addressing human rights and security management. These policies should reflect internationally recognized standards (e.g., United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and should apply to suppliers and sub-contractors.

Severe human and labor rights issues often affect the most vulnerable communities and can represent a threat to reputational and operational corporate performance. They are referenced in various international standards and conventions and are linked to existing<sup>4</sup> or evolving<sup>5</sup> regulations that issuers may be subject to.

We believe that effective mitigation of these issues can contribute to sustainable long-term value creation by the companies in which we choose to invest. At companies identified as being most at risk with insufficient mitigation strategies, we may not support management resolutions, including the report and accounts or election of directors if we think this is in the best economic interests of our clients.

### **Diversity and equal employment opportunity**

The best interests of companies, as is maintaining a diverse workforce. We support efforts to strengthen non-discrimination policies, achieve diversity objectives and address glass ceilings at all levels within organizations. We welcome disclosure of specific diversity targets and reporting on performance against these targets, as well as reporting on gender and ethnicity pay gaps within companies and plans to address these. We will look for disclosure of how measures to increase diversity have been applied and the management and oversight of these measures. In an environment where many industries and companies are facing shortages of skilled workers, thus increasing competition for talent, it is advisable and appropriate for company policies and practices to exceed legal requirements in order to attract and retain employees.

### **Political and charitable donations**

Charitable and political donations should be consistent with the company's stated sustainability strategy. (See "Reporting" above). We recommend that the board provide ultimate oversight for political donations and related activity. Furthermore, we believe that companies that undertake charitable giving should have transparent policies and undertake charitable giving programs with due regard for the interests of shareholders and key stakeholders.

### **Environmental stewardship**

Companies should determine how key environmental risks and opportunities fit into their core business strategy. As part of this process, companies should identify, assess, and manage their environmental impacts. This may include minimizing key environmental impacts, reporting on environmental management systems and performance, and discussing related financial impacts. Areas of increasing business interest include energy use, emissions, water, waste, and the utilization of natural resources.

<sup>4</sup> UK Modern Slavery Act, OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises.

<sup>5</sup> EU corporate mandatory human rights due diligence, Swiss mandatory human rights DD (focus weapons), German Supply Chain Code.

## 9 Voting matters

### Annual general meetings

Although we supported company efforts to hold virtual-only AGMs during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage a return to physical annual meetings of the shareholders that are supplemented with a robust and accessible virtual (or hybrid) option. If the company decides to provide a hybrid meeting, shareholders joining virtually should be provided the same treatment and transparency as those attending in-person.

### Vote disclosure

We expect companies to disclose the voting results of their general meetings, both at the meeting and on their websites. This should include a detailed breakdown of votes for and against, as well as abstentions.

In the spirit of transparency, we also make available to both our institutional and retail fund customers, as well as to the public, a comprehensive record of our voting by publishing all our votes and comments on our website.<sup>6</sup> A summary of our voting statistics can be found in our annual Stewardship report

### Shareblocking

We believe that shareblocking—the practice of preventing shares from being transferred for a fixed period prior to the vote at a company meeting—discourages shareholder participation and should be replaced with a record date. Where shareblocking exists, we will follow client policy and may be prevented from voting because of concerns about failed trade settlements and extraordinary cost to clients.

### Electronic voting and of use proxy advisory services

We typically exercise voting rights electronically. We currently vote using ProxyExchange, the electronic voting platform provided by Institutional Shareholder Services (ISS). We do not follow ISS vote recommendations, except as provided for in our Conflict of Interest Policy or if instructed by clients. Instead, ISS assists us through pre-populating our vote instructions in accordance with our vote policies. Our Responsible Investment team reviews a proportion of meetings based on an internal prioritization model.

### Position on abstentions

Our standard voting approach is to either vote for or against resolutions where these options are available to shareholders.

However, there are cases where we consider abstaining to be appropriate—for example, where company practices have improved significantly but do not fully meet our expectations.

With respect to shareholder resolutions, we may abstain in cases where we agree with the broader issue highlighted but do not agree with the way in which the resolution prescribes change.

### Additional soliciting materials

If we become aware that an issuer has filed additional soliciting materials prior to a proxy vote submission deadline, then we endeavor to review and reflect those in the application of our voting policy where: (a) the submission is published at least five days prior to our earliest client vote cut-off; and (b) the enclosed information is considered to be material towards impacting our voting position.

### Stocklending

We observe that stock lending is a widespread market practice involving the sale and contractually pre-agreed repurchase of a stock. We believe that stock lending is an important factor in preserving the liquidity of markets and in facilitating hedging strategies; it can also provide investors with a significant additional return on their investments as the sale repurchase transaction may include a profit margin. Importantly, however, if the term of the instrument coincides with an annual or extraordinary general meeting, the transfer of the voting right impairs the ability of the underlying shareowner to exercise their voting rights. In rare instances, this has led to abuse, where borrowers have deliberately entered into transactions to sway the outcome of a shareholder vote without any intention of owning the stock long-term. We consider the balance struck between stock lending and voting to be a matter for individual decision-making by clients.

### Record dates

We recommend that a record date be set a maximum of five working days prior to AGMs for custodians and registrars to clearly establish those shareholders eligible to vote. This will give time for all relevant formalities to be completed and serves the same purpose as shareblocking without the disruptions noted above.

<sup>6</sup> See vote disclosure webpage.

**Voting systems**

All companies should conduct voting by poll, rather than relying on a show of hands.

We believe that shareholders have the right to appoint any reasonable person as proxy to vote their shares, either in person or electronically.

We encourage the introduction of electronic voting systems that are accurate and provide an effective audit trail of votes cast.

**Bundled resolutions**

Resolutions put to company meetings should cover single issues, or issues that are clearly interdependent. Any other practice potentially reduces the value of votes and can lead to opposition to otherwise acceptable proposals. We will normally oppose resolutions that contain such inappropriately bundled provisions.

**Any other business**

We expect to vote on resolutions where the content has been made clear to shareholders and is in the interests of the company and its shareholders. Where a resolution invites shareholders to vote on “any other business,” we will systematically vote against.

**Political and charitable donations**

We welcome the opportunity to vote on company donations if material. With respect to donations to political parties or to organizations closely associated with political parties, we believe the board is best positioned to oversee the appropriateness of such spending and should review as often as is necessary to ensure congruency with both corporate strategy and values.

## Contact us

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