

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Standards Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Friday, 26 July 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Independent Members – Julia Hughes (Chair), Anne Mellor (Vice-Chair), Peter Lamb and Samuel Jones.

Community Council representative Gordon Hughes
County Councillors Bobby Feeley and Jon Harland

ALSO PRESENT

Monitoring Officer (GW), Deputy Monitoring Officer (SH), Trainee Solicitor (EC), Zoom Hosts (RT-J and ED) and Committee Administrator (SLW)

Observers - Councillor Pauline Edwards and Councillor Andrea Tomlin

1 APOLOGIES

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Independent Member, Julia Hughes (Chair) declared a personal interest in Item 5 (Public Service Ombudsman for Wales – “Our Findings”) report as she was a member of the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

None.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 1 March 2024 were submitted.

Accuracy –

Page 10 (Item 6) – should read Samuel Jones to visit Llangynhafal and not Llanfihangel as stated in the minutes.

Matters Arising –

Page 8 – 2nd paragraph – confirmation that the National Standards Forum minutes from the January 2024 meeting had now been circulated.

Page 8 – 3rd paragraph – the Corporate Joint Committee had been covered during the pre-meeting training session this morning.

Page 8 – 8th paragraph – Page 14 Chairing leaflets – the Chair requested clarification as to the meaning of this paragraph.

The Monitoring Officer clarified that in the past training had been provided to Chairs of City, Town and Community Councils by a person who was not employed by the County Council. Unfortunately, that person had since retired. Rather than training in person, guidance had been circulated to all Chairs. The Monitoring team were to look as to how best to provide training and were to contact One Voice Wales for any useful literature and training available.

Page 9 – final paragraph – the Monitoring Officer confirmed social media etiquette would be added to the Council Workshop forward work programme. If unable to slot into the Council Workshop forward work programme then a separate training session would be arranged. The Monitoring Officer would update Standards Committee at the next meeting in September.

Page 10 – Resolution at the top of the page –

- The Chair asked for confirmation that the “Our Findings” report had been circulated to Group Leaders. The Monitoring Officer responded that he would enquire and report back to Standards Committee.
- Had the Monitoring Officer written to the City, Town and Community Councils with training dates? The Monitoring Officer explained that due to capacity issues, training dates had not been sent. The new Monitoring team were to meet in September to map out training dates following which Standards Committee would be updated.

Page 10 – Item 6 Attendance at meetings –

- The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would check with the Democratic Services Manager as to when the allocation of meetings Standards Committee Lay Members could attend would be reset and would report back to Standards Committee at the next meeting in September.
- At this point, the Chair asked if there were any City, Town and Community Councils which had a new and inexperienced Town Clerk as they could be added to the list for visits. The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would look for this information.
- Lay Members could also visit County Council meetings in person or they could observe the meetings via webcast. Webcasts were saved online for six months following conclusion of the meeting. It was confirmed that a list of all County Council meetings would be circulated to Standards Committee members.

Page 11 – Item 8 National Standards Forum Update. The National Standards Forum meeting was held every six months. All Chairs of Standards Committee were invited to attend. One of the six North Wales Standards Monitoring Officers would attend each meeting and then feedback to the other North Wales Monitoring Officers. Each Monitoring Officer would attend one Forum meeting every three years.

Page 13 – third paragraph Section 15.8 of Page 179/180 – any update regarding background papers. The Monitoring Officer confirmed he was seeking guidance from the Democratic Services Manager and would then update the Standards Committee.

Page 15 – third paragraph – Towyn and Kinmel Bay were not in Denbighshire. The Monitoring Officer confirmed he had telephoned the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Office to point out the error.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above, the minutes of the meeting held on 1 March 2024, be received and approved as a correct record of the proceedings.

5 PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES - 'OUR FINDINGS'

The Trainee Solicitor, Elinor Cartwright, introduced the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW): Our Findings report (previously circulated).

The report covered the period from 15 February 2024 – 15 July 2024.

It was stated that none of the cases related to Denbighshire.

Appendix 1 contained a summary of those cases involving Code of Conduct complaints that had been investigated by the Ombudsman, broken down by subject matter as follows –

Integrity – 1

Promotion of equality and respect – 3

The outcomes could be categorised as follows –

Referred to Standards Committee – 3

Referred to the Adjudication Panel for Wales – 1

Serious cases were referred to The Adjudication Panel for Wales and the Monitoring Officer suggested extending the report to include Adjudication Panel for Wales website. He confirmed he would meet with the Trainee Solicitor to discuss adding the Adjudication Panel for Wales information to the report in the future.

RESOLVED that the Standard Committee notes the contents of the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales – “Our Findings” Report.

6 ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

Members reported on their attendance at the meetings as follows –

- Independent Member Samuel Jones reported on the meeting of Llangynhafal Community Council held on 24 April 2024. The meeting was an Annual General meeting followed by a public open meeting. 8 Community Councillors were in attendance together with the Clerk of the Council. 10 members of public were also in attendance but left after the conclusion of the Annual meeting prior to the ordinary meeting. The meeting was not a hybrid meeting. The Council were very active in the local area. The

Community Council Annual Report stated members of the public could attend all meetings throughout the year. A member made a personal declaration of interest as finance assistance for the sports club had been submitted. The member acted in accordance with their declaration. Appropriate time was allowed by the Chair for responses to questions. The Clerk supported the Chair. The meeting was conducted well and the Clerk responded to emails.

The Monitoring Officer stated Llangynhafal Community Council were a well run council. It was confirmed that if financial assistance was requested for a figure in excess of £500 the declaration of interest might be a prejudicial interest – but if less than £500 there is an exception. A personal interest would still need to be declared.

Independent Member, Peter Lamb, explained he had not been able to visit Prestatyn Town Council but would visit in September 2024.

- Independent Member, Anne Mellor had not attended a City, Town and Community Council since the last Standards Committee.
- Independent Member, Julia Hughes, reported on the meeting of Bodfari Community Council meeting held on 14 May 2024. The meeting had been an Annual General meeting followed by an ordinary meeting. It was a hybrid meeting, 2 members joined remotely and 3 members attended in person together with the Clerk. There were connectivity issues and the 2 remote members lost connection for a short length of time. There were expressions of interest and a declaration of interest when a cheque from the lottery was received in the ordinary meeting and members were not sure if it was a personal interest or personal and prejudicial interest. In the meeting papers the cheque paid to contractors were same surname as that of a councillor. The Councillor declared a personal and prejudicial interest and left the meeting. The meeting concluded at 9.00 p.m. The Chair was supported by the Clerk who was easy to contact. Difficulty in hearing the Councillors who attended remotely due to the position of the seating. The Chair confirmed she was still to attend Rhyl Town Council but as there had been 2 bereavements within the past few months it was felt it would be more appropriate to visit when things had settled down.

There were a number of City, Town and Community Councils who had new Clerks. Some Clerks were experienced but also there were some who had no previous experience. The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would collate a list of those Clerks with no experience.

It was confirmed that if a meeting was conducted through the medium of Welsh, if a non-Welsh speaker were to attend there should be the facility of someone to assist in informing the non-Welsh speaker of the gist of the meeting. The legislation was that the two languages were to be treated equally.

During discussions it had been agreed to populate a list of Councils for the Independent members to visit. A list of County Council meetings to be circulated

and also a list of City, Town and Community Councils which were conducted through the medium of Welsh.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above, Standards Committee note the attendance at meetings update.

7 POLITICAL GROUP LEADER REPORTS

The Monitoring Officer, Gary Williams, introduced the verbal Group Leaders report which covered April 2023 – March 2024.

Some reports had been emailed to the Legal Services Manager, Lisa Jones, who had recently left the Local Authority and the Monitoring Officer was in contact with ICT to enable him to access the emails for the reports. There had also been a delay due to the recent elections.

A Group Leaders meeting had taken place the previous week and all Group Leaders confirmed they would be amenable to meet with Standards Committee, possibly at the September meeting. The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would try to organise the meetings around the Standards Committee meeting.

Each Group Leader would need to speak to Standards Committee individually.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would write to each member of the Standards Committee for their availability and would then contact Group Leaders. Each meeting would last approximately 20-30 minutes.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above, the Standards Committee note the verbal update to the Political Group Leader reports.

8 NATIONAL STANDARDS FORUM UPDATE

The Chair introduced the National Standards Forum update: the last meeting had been held on 24 June 2024 but the notes had not yet been circulated.

It had been confirmed that lobbying regarding remuneration was not the remit of the Forum, it was the responsibility of the Local Authorities.

The new President was Eleri Tudor.

At the Forum discussions took place regarding sanction guidance and it was noted that the Adjudication Panel for Wales could increase or decrease sanctions on appeal.

Michelle Morris, Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) had attended the Forum and stated that they had received more complaints this year. 90% were public services and 10% code of conduct issues. They had no additional resources to deal with the increase in complaints. The PSOW's aspiration was to conclude cases in 12 months.

There had been an issue in the office of the PSOW as a member of staff had made remarks about the Conservative party and questioned political bias in the office. Dr Melissa McCullough was to lead the review together with a review team. The PSOW was keen to establish no political bias. The Monitoring Office agreed to circulate the terms of reference.

There was to be a review of the Local Resolution procedures. It was confirmed that DCC had been contacted by the PSOW and a copy of the Local Resolutions had been provided and acknowledged.

The next meeting of the National Standards Forum was to take place 27 January 2025.

RESOLVED that the Standards Committee note the National Standards Forum update.

9 DEPUTY MONITORING OFFICER ARRANGEMENTS

The Monitoring Officer, Gary Williams, introduced the Deputy Monitoring Officer Arrangements report (previously circulated) to inform the Standards Committee about the arrangements put in place to provide Deputy Monitoring Officer capacity following recent staffing changes within Corporate Support Services: People.

It was confirmed that Lisa Jones the former Deputy Monitoring Officer (Legal Services Manager) had recently left the local authority. Standards Committee took this opportunity to express their thanks to Lisa for all her hard work and requested that the Monitoring Officer write to Lisa to express Standards Committee thanks and well wishes for the future in her new endeavours.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed he would draft a letter of thanks.

A restructure within the Legal Department had recently taken place. The Legal Services Manager role had been retained and one Team Leader.

Gary Williams would remain as Monitoring Officer and there would be three Deputy Monitoring Officers.

The role of Deputy Monitoring Officer (Conduct) would be carried out by the Head of Corporate Support Services: People (Catrin Roberts). The role of Deputy Monitoring Officer (Governance and Lawfulness) would be carried out by the Legal Services Manager (Sally Henderson) and the Legal Services Team Leader (Clare Lord).

The Monitoring Officer and Deputies were to work together as a team in respect of all aspects of the monitoring role.

A series of meetings had been put in place for the monitoring team. The Monitoring Officer would attend as many Standards Committee meetings as possible but, on occasion, one of the Deputy Monitoring Officers would attend in his place.

***RESOLVED** that the Standards Committee notes the new Deputy Monitoring Officer arrangements.*

10 STANDARDS COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Standards Committee Forward Work Programme was presented for consideration, and Members noted the following –

Review of the size and composition of the Standards Committee to be removed as comparable with neighbouring Local Authorities.

Comparison of Standards Committee Recruitment Panel Compilation had been agreed at Full Council – to be removed.

13 September 2024 –

Add Code of Conduct Training – overview of delivery for County and City, Town and Community Councils.

Add Group Leaders Reports.

Add Terms of Office of Standards Committee Members .

6 December 2024 –

Move from 13 September to December meeting - Overview of the register of gifts and hospitality register.

7 March 2025 –

Add National Standards Forum Update.

Add Code of Conduct for officers.

At this juncture, the Chair requested that Dispensation Requests be included in every Agenda even if there are no requests.

***RESOLVED** that, subject to the above, the Standards Committee Forward Work Programme be agreed.*

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Standards Committee is to take place on 13 September 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

**At this juncture (12.20 pm) there was a 10 minute break.
The meeting reconvened at 12.30 pm.**

EXCLUSION FROM PRESS AND PUBLIC

***RESOLVED** that under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds*

that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 12 and 13 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

12 CODE OF CONDUCT - PART 3 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000

The Monitoring Officer submitted a confidential report (previously circulated) providing an overview of complaints against members lodged with the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) since 1 April 2023.

The Monitoring Officer provided a summary of two ongoing investigations.

RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

The Chair thanked members for their attendance and contributions and conveyed her thanks to the support staff.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1.00 PM