

Report To: Standards Committee

Date of Meeting: 23rd January 2015

Lead Member / Officer: Gary Williams, Monitoring Officer

Report Author: Gary Williams, Monitoring Officer

Title: North Wales Standards Committees Forum

1 What is the report about?

- 1.1 The report is about the meeting of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum on 26th November 2014.

2 What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1 To report to Members the discussion that took place at the Standards Committees Forum on 26th November 2014 which was attended by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (the Ombudsman).

3 What are the Recommendations?

- 3.1 That Members note the contents of this report.

4 Report details.

- 4.1 The latest meeting of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum took place at the office of the Isle of Anglesey County Council in Llangefni on 26th November 2014.
- 4.2 The primary business of the meeting was to meet the new Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, Mr Nick Bennett, and to seek his views on current issues facing Standards Committees in Wales.
- 4.3 In preparation for the meeting the North Wales Standards Committees Forum had posed 13 written questions in order to structure the discussion with the Ombudsman.
- 4.4 A copy of the questions put to the Ombudsman together with a note of his responses is set out in Appendix 1 to this report.
- 4.5 In summary, the Ombudsman was keen to meet with representatives of Standards Committees and to listen to their views and concerns about current issues. The Ombudsman was very supportive of the work of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum and the support that the Standards Committees in North Wales provided to each other through the Forum.

- 4.6 The Ombudsman set the work of his office into the context of diminishing public resources and the need for the work of his office to maintain public confidence in the democratic process while prioritising the scarce resources at his disposal. The Ombudsman stressed the dim view that he took of vexatious complaints and the need for investigations conducted by his office to be proportionate with the public interest in the matter under investigation.
- 4.7 The Ombudsman was keen to support the local resolution of complaints in respect of the Code of Conduct which would increase the speed at which complaints were dealt with.
- 4.8 The Ombudsman confirmed his intention to issue revised guidance to local authorities in light of a recent judgement and to simplify the guidance provided to Members, particularly in respect of the declaration of interests.
- 4.9 The Ombudsman also confirmed his intention to introduce a public interest test into his consideration of whether or not his office would investigate complaints made to it about breaches of the Code of Conduct. This public interest test is the subject of a separate report to Committee.
- 4.10 Following the discussion with the Ombudsman the Forum considered one other item which related to the training being provided to Town and Community Councils in respect of the Code of Conduct. The Forum was informed of the approach taken by the Isle of Anglesey County Council which had been to provide tailored training to the clerks to Town and Community Councils to enable them to be the first line of advice to their members in respect of issues relating to the Code of Conduct. This approach had resulted in a development of the relationship between clerks and the Monitoring Officer and following the training several clerks had taken the opportunity to contact the Monitoring Officer to discuss issues concerning their Councils. There followed a discussion of the merit of other authorities taking a similar approach to the provision of training to Town and Community Councils.

5 How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

- 5.1 The Committee is not asked to make a decision in respect of this report.

6 What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

- 6.1 There are no direct costs associated with this report.

7 What are the main conclusions of the Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) undertaken on the decision? The completed EqIA template should be attached as an appendix to the report.

- 7.1 There is no requirement for an Impact Assessment in respect of this report.

8 What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

8.1 This matter has not been the subject of reports or consultation with others.

9 Chief Finance Officer Statement

9.1 There are no direct cost implications arising from this report

10 What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

10.1 There are no direct risks associated with this report.

11 Power to make the Decision

11.1 Article 9.2 of the Council's Constitution