

STANDARDS COMMITTEE 4/11/19

Present:-

Elected Members:- Councillors Anne Lloyd Jones and Beth Lawton.

Independent Members:- Mr Aled Jones, Mr Hywel Eifion Jones, Miss Margaret E.Jones, Mr David Wareing and Dr Einir Young (Chair)

Community Committee Member:- Mr Richard Parry Hughes

Also in Attendance: Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Siôn Huws (Senior Solicitor - Corporate) and Eirian Roberts (Democratic Services Officer).

Mr Hywel Eifion Jones was welcomed to his first meeting, following his appointment as an independent member of the Standards Committee.

Reference was made to the recent death of Mr Sam Soysa, who had been a committed member of the Standards Committee for a number of years, and the committee's Vice-chair between 2012 and 2015. Condolences were extended to the family in their loss.

1. APOLOGIES

Councillor Dewi Roberts.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent matters were raised.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 17 June 2019, as a true record.

5. GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY REGISTER

The Monitoring Officer presented the report to the committee as part of its work of monitoring standards within the Council. Members were invited to note, accept and offer any observations on the contents of the report.

During the discussion, it was noted that:-

- Members were unsure when it was necessary to register a gift / hospitality. In response, it was explained, e.g. that refreshments provided as part of a body's normal meeting, such as Adra's Board (*Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd*), did not constitute hospitality, but that refreshment provided, for example, by a private company, as part of a pre-planning application exhibition, was a different matter, as there could be an effort here to influence the member.

- There was a perception that councillors received far more gifts and hospitality than happened in reality.
- By now, it was Cabinet Members that held the right to make the majority of decisions, and other members did not have much of a deciding role, with the exception of matters, such as planning.
- A note should be included in the next Standards Committee annual report, reminding members of the need to register any offer of gifts / hospitality above the value of £25, whether or not the offer was accepted.

RESOLVED to note and accept the contents of the report with the observations presented during the discussion.

6 ALLEGATIONS AGAINST MEMBERS

Submitted, for information, the report of the Senior Solicitor (Corporate) presenting information about the Ombudsman's decisions on formal complaints against members.

During the discussion, it was noted that:-

- There was concern that members did not realise the importance of submitting evidence when making a complaint. In response, it was noted that many complaints related to comments made on social media, and that it was important to take a screenshot or print the evidence immediately in case the post disappeared. It was also noted, although there was fairly clear evidence in some cases, that other types of cases were far more difficult to prove, relating to behavioural patterns that emerged over a period of time, and which escalated from appearing to be unremarkable behaviour at the beginning to something far more serious. Cases such as these were far more challenging as collecting evidence meant keeping records over a period of time. It was added that it was intended for members' training to include reference to the importance of keeping a record of everything.
- A note should be included in the next Standards Committee annual report, if the training had been held by then, noting that the committee had responded to the observations made in the full Council meeting when the last annual report was presented, and that a discussion had been held.
- It was noted that, although scathing and critical comments could be made against members without breaching the code, there was a threshold that should not be crossed. It was intended to submit a report to the next meeting of the Democratic Services Committee detailing the support available to members that suffered online harassment from whatever source.

RESOLVED to note and accept the contents of the reports with the observations presented during the discussion.

7. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OMBUDSMAN

Submitted for information – the report of the Monitoring Officer appending the Ombudsman's 2018/19 Annual Report.

During the discussion, it was noted that:-

- The report highlighted the workload facing the Ombudsman and his team, with health complaints and community council complaints taking up much of their time. There was scope to promote and provide support to community council members, and if a dispute arose, holding a discussion could offer a way forward.

- Reference was made to the lack of resources to investigate complaints, and the relevance of the full code to small councils was questioned. It was noted that the size of community councils varied greatly, and when considering the nature of some complaints relating to the smallest councils, it was suggested that a smaller-scale and clearer code would be more suitable.
- It was noted that some community councils were run very professionally, with no vacant seats, but this was not true for all the councils. The clerks were responsible for adherence to the standards, and clerks and community council members had a duty to attend the training provided for them.
- It was suggested that a review should be undertaken of the community councils as there was too great a gap between them and the County Council. It was reported that an investigation conducted into the sector recently had not produced recommendations for a revolutionary change. It was noted that at the last meeting of the North Wales Standards Committee Forum, reference had been made to the fact that the varying levels of councils posed a challenge.
- The reference in the report to the opening of an office in Bangor was welcomed, although there were no further details, and a question was asked about why the Ombudsman's main office had to be located in Cardiff.

RESOLVED to note the report.

8. NORTH WALES STANDARDS COMMITTEES FORUM

Submitted, for information – the minutes of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum meeting held on:-

- (a) 29 June 2018
- (b) 26 June 2019

It was noted that interest had been expressed in joining the Forum from South Wales.

With specific reference to item 7 of the minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2019, it was noted that an initial discussion had been held in the Forum about the idea of establishing a North Wales Joint Standards Committee. It was emphasised that this was in its infancy, and that it was not yet clear whether this was the right direction, and whether or not such a joint committee would add value.

During the discussion, it was noted that:-

- There were challenges in relation to joint working, although the idea sounded positive on paper. Gwynedd was a geographically challenging county as it was, without adding the other counties in North Wales, and such a committee could be unwieldy as everyone had their own different arrangements and systems. The Welsh language was another element that could not be disregarded.
- There should be joint working within the boundaries of Gwynedd in the first instance, e.g. jointly with Snowdonia National Park Authority, before consideration was given to extending to other counties.
- Although there were doubts about collaborating too closely, there was scope for the councils to share themes, expertise, etc., possibly through on-line arrangements.

RESOLVED to note the contents of the minutes.

The meeting commenced at 11.00 am and concluded at 11.55 am

CHAIRMAN