

Committee:	The Standards Committee
Date:	13 February 2023
Title:	Action Plan based on the Standards Committee Consultation with a selection of Community Council Clerks
Author:	Siôn Huws, Propriety and Elections Manager
Purpose:	To approve the Action Plan

1. Background

1.1 We were asked to prepare an action plan to address the issues raised by the Report by the former Chair and the Community Committee Member on their consultation with a selection of community council clerks regarding the ethical framework.

1.2 Several issues came to light which, as already discussed, are beyond the remit of this committee although they do help to understand the wider context. (One of these issues, difficulties in contacting Gwynedd Council on matters in general, has been fed into a piece of wider corporate work which is currently being carried out.)

1.3 Focusing therefore on issues that are within the remit of the Committee, the challenge is how its functions can be carried out in the most effective manner within the practical limitations.

2. The Action Plan

2.1 The starting point is always the Committee's statutory duties. In this context the Local Government Act 2000 (s.54) sets out its functions, which includes a general function of

"assisting members and co-opted members of the authority to observe the authority's code of conduct."

and also, the specific function of

"advising, training or arranging to train members and co-opted members of the authority on matters relating to the authority's code of conduct"

2.2 The role of the clerk has already been identified as one that is key to helping maintain standards within community councils. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the Committee's duty is to provide training to the members, and that it cannot be delegated.

2.3 As members are aware, the Ombudsman when investigating a complaint will ask whether the member has attended training on the Code of Conduct. The Vice-chair report on the National Standards Forum, which is before the committee today, refers to the Ombudsman's comments that failure to attend standards training is a feature that arises

again and again. This underlines the importance of ensuring that training is available to members.

2.4 In the past this duty was carried out by holding evening training sessions in various locations across the county. This usually happened once in each council term and it is fair to say that a relatively small number of members attended, with usually around half the councils being represented. Before the pandemic, a system was established where a community council (in conjunction with other councils if possible) could invite the Monitoring Officer or a representative to present a training session, with the council responsible for making the arrangements. One pilot session was held under this procedure with Tywyn Town Council.

2.5 By now the ability to hold virtual meetings makes it possible to hold training sessions in a more effective and efficient manner. The ability to record them means that councillors can access them at any time without being dependent on being able to attend a particular session.

2.6 In addition to this, there is a Standards Committee page on the Gwynedd Council Website. This page can be developed by placing relevant documents and guidance on it together with links to other useful websites. This would create a resource for clerks and members of community councils.

2.7 Finally, clerks have access to advice on specific issues by contacting the Monitoring Officer or his Deputy and that will of course continue.

2.8 It is therefore suggested that there are 3 elements to the support that can be offered to members and clerks of community councils on matters relating to the Code of Conduct:

1. Advice on specific issues.

By continuing to contact the Monitoring Officer or Deputy Monitoring Officer.

2. Gwynedd Council website.

The Standards Committee page to include information and guidance as well as links to other useful websites. This would include documents we have prepared (e.g. 'Do I have an interest?' leaflet which provides simple guidance on declaring an interest) so that they are also available to community council members.

Action – March 2023

3. Training

Holding a virtual training session in the form of a 'webinar'. The session will include a presentation on the Code of Conduct and then the opportunity to ask questions to the presenters. Members and clerks would be invited to attend. Training was developed for the pilot session referred to above so there would be no need to create a new session.

Nevertheless, the consultation with the clerks has identified elements of the training that

could be emphasised or discussed in more detail. The intention would be to record the session so that it is available on the Council's website to ensure that it is accessible to everyone at any time. It would allow the community councils to show the recording to the members at a council meeting if they wished.

Action – Spring/Summer 2023

3. Recommendation

3.1 Approve the above plan