

Standards Committees Chairs Forum - Wales

Monday, 23rd June 2025 @ 2pm, via Teams

Notes

1. Notes of previous meeting – 27th January 2025.

Actions confirmed as completed. The Forum discussed notes 3(a) and 9 at today's meeting – See notes 2 & 3 below.

2. Future engagement with the Welsh Government (WG), Local Government Policy Division, Climate Change and Rural Affairs (item 3(a) from notes of previous meeting).

JC confirmed that she and CT had met with PL from the Welsh Government Policy Division and recommended that contact with the Chairs who were prepared to participate in consultation/feedback sessions organised by her Division would best be made via their respective Monitoring Officers.

3. Remuneration – update on engagement with the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru (D&BCC) (Item 9 from notes of previous meeting).

CW confirmed that he had written to the Chief Executive of the D&BCC outlining his frustration with the payments to co-opted Members i.e., that the rates had not been increased for some time and the inconsistency of how the payments were applied across Wales. The CEO confirmed that she would be pleased to attend a meeting of the Forum although that was unlikely to be at the June 2025 meeting. It was more probable to be the meeting thereafter, to allow for confirmation of the D&BCC work programme with her Commissioners, which included the responsibilities transferred from the IRPW.

4. Michelle Morris (MM), Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) – Update.

MM updated the Forum on the following.

- a) Notification of a complaint (note 5c from previous meeting). The PSOW, following consultation with stakeholders, had from 1 April 2025, reverted to notifying Members at the point when they had been complained about and not later in the process, when an assessment had been made if there may be a case to answer.

b) Casework.

- Caseloads for code of conduct complaints were fewer than last year although the level remained high, 315 cases, compared to previous years.
- 60% related to Town and Community Councils (7% increase on the previous year) and 40% to Local Authorities. A lack of equality and respect was the main complaint theme.
- The PSOW investigated 49 cases during the previous year, of which 15 had been referred to Standards Committees or the Adjudication Panel for Wales. That remained at a high level despite being lower than 20 referrals the previous year. Notably 85% of the referred breaches were upheld which was a positive indicator for the PSOW i.e. the application of the two-stage test to indicate that there may be a case to answer was working effectively.
- The previous year, 2024- 2025 had been a busy one for the PSOW and a summary will be included in the Annual Report and published at the end of July 2025.

c) Local Resolution Protocols (LRPs).

- It was very important for low level issues to be resolved locally wherever possible.
- Local resolutions meant that matters would be dealt with quickly before relationships were affected and situations escalated unnecessarily. The more serious cases could then be dealt with by the PSOW which was a much better use of their resources.
- The PSOW were working on developing good practice with LAs including Monitoring Officers.

d) Responses to questions/observations from the Chairs.

- There was a concern that some cases were taking a long time to consider. MM acknowledged that some cases had been ongoing for more than a year, which was too long and the PSOW was working to reduce it. The reasons for this were due to a high number of complaints and not enough staff to process them. There was no funding for additional support although a temporary member of staff and one other staff member had been allocated to deal with the issue. A dedicated officer for assessment work was focussed on this area and it was hoped that next year, more cases would be dealt with within 12 months.
- For consistency, would it be better for a single “top-down” approach for a LRP model, rather than leave it to individual Standards Committees which inevitably resulted in inconsistent procedures. In response MM highlighted it was not straightforward because these matters were part of each Council’s constitution. The intention was

to issue best practice, as opposed to imposing a procedure, with a view to achieving consistency.

- MM will continue to try and make the PSOW Annual Report an “easy and interesting” read. MM will also check and confirm if it is possible to show trends over time i.e., to place current year figures into context, e.g., 315 code of conduct complaints compared to previous years.
- Points were raised by the Chairs about complaints involving Town and Community Councils; it was not clear how many had completed the One Voice Wales training and signed the civility and respect pledge, given the number of complaints in this sector, was it timely for the training to be reviewed; there were too many vacancies for Clerks and not enough candidates were standing for election as a T&CC councillor, should Welsh Government consider merging smaller community councils; where multiple Councils appoint a shared Clerk that can leave a significant gap if they leave, could a local authority employ a pool of Clerks to provide greater resilience and lastly a community review was underway in one area whereby a Council was reviewing the number and size of T&CCs. It was recognised that this was a sensitive area. The Forum were informed about the Welsh Government (LGH Committee) inquiry which was due to report on this area and the Welsh Government Democratic Health Task and Finish Group that focussed on improving participation and diversity in Town and Community Councils.

5. Matters raised by exception by the Chairs.

Dispensations, individual committee approaches: (CD, Chair Ceredigion Standards Committee).

- a) Are councillors required to attend to present their application; views on duration of dispensation e.g. annual/length of term; acceptance of late applications; any written advice to councillors on these aspects; delegated authority to the Monitoring Officer.**
- b) Is there written guidance for committee members on how to approach making a decision e.g., what to consider/allow e.g. when to allow voting or not.**
 - JC advised that there are differences between the way dispensations are dealt with in Wales and England.
 - Refer to the Local Government Act 2000 s.81(4) for a list of dispensations, lots of latitude – it is very wide.
 - In Wales procedures are a matter for local constitutions, and they do differ. Chairs confirmed this e.g., in some cases it is

mandatory for a Member to appear before a Standards Committee whereas in others it is not.

- Dispensations are granted for varying lengths of time e.g., a year and are subject to review, whereas in other cases they may be for longer or even for a single meeting.
- It is possible to make urgent decisions e.g., in consultation with Chair of Standards who discuss it with the Monitoring Officer.
- JH offered to circulate the standard form that is used in her Council.

Action JH to circulate via CT.

6. Recent cases of interest - Adjudication Panel for Wales (APW) and Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) in previous 6 months – JC.

- a) Consistent with the Forum's purpose as a learning network, the Chairs appreciated the opportunity to discuss several cases of interest and learn from cross sector experiences.
- b) Chairs reiterated comments made at the previous meeting about the complexity and time commitment required for conduct hearings. Some Councils have a formal written protocol.

Action CD to share her Standards Committee Chair's briefing document for hearings. CT to circulate to the Forum.

- c). Important that Standards Committees are clear about the reasons for their decision. Some appeals are allowed because the decision has not been given properly in writing in full. The presentation slides of the former President of the APW (circulated with the notes of a previous meeting) were very helpful on this.

Action CT to re-circulate the APW slides.

Action JH to share her Committee's considerations when setting out their Hearing decisions.

- d). Some Chairs might appreciate a "buddy" approach with Chairs with previous experience of hearings.
- e). To avoid a case where the Monitoring Officer has a conflict of interest, they can pass the matter to their deputy or it is not unusual, as standard practice, for Deputy Monitoring Officers to receive a complaint initially to avoid this scenario.

7. Forum Chair

As indicated at the previous meeting CW will remain in the role as Chair until his successor is appointed at the next scheduled meeting on 26 January 2026. CW was thanked for performing the role as the Forum's first Chair since it was established. His commitment and support had ensured the Forum had got off to a good start by establishing itself as intended i.e., a learning forum for Chairs to share experiences from across the sector and developing best practice.

Action: JC and CT to facilitate the arrangements for the appointment of Forum Chair and Vice Chair with effect from 26 January 2026. Anyone interested in the role will be asked to submit a 250-word pen picture and it is likely the appointment will be for 2 years.

8. Dates of next meeting.

- Monday 26 January 2026, 2pm – 4pm on Teams.
- Monday 22 June 2026 or 29 June 2026 (to be confirmed), 2pm – 4pm online.