
STANDARDS COMMITTEE, 08/06/26

Present:-

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

Independent Members: Mr Hywel Eifion Jones (Chair), Ms Non Gibson, Mr Mark Jones, Mrs Carys Edwards and Mr Neil Hawkins.

Community Committee Member: Mr Richard Parry Hughes.

Also in Attendance: Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Siôn Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager), Gwen Roberts (Democracy Services Officer), Annes Sion (Democracy Team Leader).

1. APOLOGIES

No apologies were received.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

None to note.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chairman signed the minutes of the meeting of this committee held on 23 February, as a true record.

5. THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE'S ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26

The report was presented by the Propriety and Elections Manager.

It was confirmed that this report was an item that came before the Committee annually, and that its submission was now a statutory requirement. It was intended to add a word of thanks to the former Committee member, and a word of welcome to the new Committee members to the Report's foreword.

It was highlighted that the Report would be submitted to the Full Council, and that the Ombudsman would also receive a copy in due course. Attention was drawn to the Report's content in relation to the statutory duties of the Political Group Leaders to maintain and promote the standards of conduct of the group's members. It was confirmed that this procedure was still working, highlighting the healthy and constructive relationship that existed between the Group Leaders and the Monitoring Officer when discussing any issues that arose. It was reiterated that the Group Leaders also met annually with the Standards Committee to report on this.

With the Council Elections due to be held in May 2027, the increasing use of artificial intelligence, its potential misuse and its impact on members or prospective elected members was discussed. There was concern that some people would be hesitant in applying due to the risk of their characters being stained through these means. In response, the Monitoring Officer confirmed that he was increasingly aware of artificial intelligence in several contexts. Should a Member make inappropriate or misleading comments on the internet, it was highlighted that such an issue would be matter for the code of conduct. It was stated that campaigns were underway to keep political discussion healthy in relation to the Election, but the increasingly prominent role of social media and artificial intelligence within society was acknowledged.

A question was raised regarding how candidates who were not members were held to account, and concern was expressed that there was no standards process applicable to them if there was inappropriate behaviour. In response, it was noted that this would probably be a common law matter. It was further explained that there were laws in relation to misleading statements by candidates, but it was acknowledged that regulatory boundaries around issues such as these varied and were somewhat ambiguous. It was noted that there was an intention to bring a report to committee on induction for members on the code of conduct. As part of this, it was suggested that issues relevant to the Election could be outlined, so that the committee was aware of the public standards procedures involved with Local Government Elections.

DECISION

To approve the Committee's Annual Report.

6. WHISTLEBLOWING POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR MEMBERS

The report was presented by the Monitoring Officer.

It was explained that this policy stemmed from the response to the crimes of the former headmaster of Ysgol Friars and the response to the Our Bravery

Brought Justice report. Reference was made to the Council's extensive work programme as part of its response, noting that reviewing and reinforcing the whistleblowing procedure was one element.

It was further explained that the whistleblowing procedure for staff stemmed from the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, and that the act added clauses to the Employment Rights Act which conferred statutory protection for staff in cases of whistleblowing in relation to misconduct. It was confirmed that the Council had adapted and amended its Whistleblowing Policy for staff to improve aspects such as communication, the response method, and the approach to identifying whistleblowing when it occurred.

It was stated that creating a confidential reporting system and pathway for elected and co-opted members was essential for good governance and transparency. It was emphasised that this Policy for members could not be the same as the Whistleblowing Policy for staff, as the policy for staff was associated to staff employment contracts and conditions. It was explained that the Council had also examined other councils' procedures as part of developing this whistleblowing procedure. It was confirmed that the aim of this policy was to highlight to members how they could raise concerns about serious or criminal behaviour, in an atmosphere of confidentiality. It was mentioned that members could raise any concern with the Monitoring Officer, and that the policy also offered alternative routes to contact other officers should the need arise. In a situation involving a conflict of interest, where one of the three principal officers listed was unable to act, Audit Wales had been identified as the next point of contact to raise concern.

It was noted that the policy excluded certain issues as there were other procedures for raising such concerns, and reference was made to part 3 of the policy where those issues were listed. The statutory duty of members to bring any breach of the code of conduct to the attention of the Monitoring Officer was mentioned. In relation to child or adult safeguarding issues, concerns should be directed in accordance with the Corporate Safeguarding Policy. Assurance was given that confidentiality was also protected within the safeguarding process, although it was noted that this would depend on the nature of the complaint and the need for evidence.

The committee was informed that the Monitoring Officer had consulted on the draft policy with all Council members, and that he had received one response. Additionally, it was reported that feedback had been received from the Protect charity on the draft policy, with their recommended changes incorporated into this policy. It was noted that the list seen in part 2.2 of the policy had been retained, as it provided context of how wide-ranging concerns of this kind could be.

It was highlighted that the policy would go before the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee at its next meeting, with the intention that it would proceed to the Full Council for adoption.

Thanks were expressed for the work, noting that the substantial consultation that had taken place provided assurance to members in relation to this work.

The view that this was a clear policy was endorsed, and pride was expressed that the scope of the policy had been extended.

Clarity was requested in terms of extending this policy to members of the public. It was explained that part 2.2 of the policy listed those who were applicable under the policy in relation to the alleged conduct that could be raised as a concern. This was further explained by reference to part 1.5 of this policy which contained a paragraph regarding the code of conduct for members, and it was reported that part 2.2 of this policy added to that. An example was given of a situation where a concern about a member of the public could be raised under this policy by an elected or co-opted member; if a member of the public committed fraud against the Council. It was stressed that it was a policy for members, and it was added that there was a specific and separate whistleblowing policy for staff.

A question was asked on the position regarding the DBS of individuals who transported children to school, and how much information the Council had about them. It was confirmed that an appropriate DBS check was contractually required in taxi contracts for example, and they were reviewed every three years. It was added that a report would be regularly submitted to the Strategic Safeguarding Panel regarding delivery in this field. The Monitoring Officer noted that only an outline explanation had been provided as he did not work in this field on a day-to-day basis, but assurance was given that there was an appropriate procedure in the field of education to deal with this, and it was noted that there was also a system that extended to contractors. The clear emphasis on safeguarding matters across the Council was stressed, and that reports were submitted which examined this issue.

DECISION

To support the Report.

7. ALLEGATIONS AGAINST MEMBERS

The report was presented by the Propriety and Elections Manager.

It was reported that this item would be regularly submitted to this committee, and that the report encompassed the Ombudsman's decisions on formal complaints against members. The purpose of the report was noted, namely, to inform members about the types of complaints made, and how the Ombudsman came to a decision on these cases.

It was explained that the backlog of cases was now starting to be cleared by the Ombudsman. It was recognised that the time taken for complaints to be investigated was stressful, and it was noted that they had mentioned a prioritisation system for cases to assist with this.

The lack of evidence in relation to numerous complaints was highlighted, and it was questioned why there was no process to present evidence when the complaint was lodged so that it could be ascertained whether or not the complaint would go further, thereby saving some of the backlog. It was clarified that it was not possible to prevent people from submitting complaints, and that there was a form on the website to gather evidence. Furthermore, it was noted that the Ombudsman had a team that assessed and sifted through the complaints, and therefore some of the complaints that did not proceed due to a lack of evidence could be filtered out quickly. On the other hand, it was stated that it was the cases that were fully investigated that were time-consuming.

It was recognised that members are now informed when a complaint was lodged against them, following a change in procedure. In some cases, it was possible to explain any misunderstanding or to provide some context, if a member was aware that a complaint had been made against them.

DECISION

To note the information.

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 11.20am.

Chair