

STANDARDS COMMITTEE
2nd JULY 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee of Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold on Monday, 2nd July 2018

PRESENT: Edward Hughes (Chairman)

Councillors:

Patrick Heesom, Paul Johnson and Arnold Woolley.

Co-opted members:

Jonathan Duggan-Keen, Phillipa Earlam, Julia Hughes and Ken Molyneux.

IN ATTENDANCE:

Deputy Monitoring Officer, and Team Leader – Democratic Services

APOLOGY:

Rob Dewey.

9. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None.

10. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4th June 2018 were submitted and, subject to the typographical errors being amended, were confirmed as a correct record.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record subject to the typographical errors being amended.

11. DISPENSATIONS

The Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that none had been received.

12. REPORT BACK FROM THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE FORUM – 29TH JUNE 2018

The Standards Committee representative, Phillipa Earlam, provided a verbal update on the topics that had been discussed at the Standards Committee Forum on 29th June 2018, hosted by Gwynedd Council, which were as follows:

Prior to the Forum, Flintshire's Monitoring Officer had circulated the first draft guidance from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) on the use of social media for Members, the content of which was mirrored in many respects by a presentation delivered by the Communications Director at Gwynedd Council. Some of the points discussed were:

- Social media could be a good means of communication between a Councillor and their electorate but the risks and downsides were emphasised;
- The use of public and private accounts;
- How to respond to criticism;
- Online discussions;
- You can't control a conversation;
- If you set up a facebook account by way of a means to be contacted, you needed to ensure you kept a regular check on the account to ensure timely responses;
- Data Protection breaches, particularly in relation to photographs and gaining consent for use; and
- Thinking about your audience.

The Communications Team in Gwynedd provided regular workshops for Members where they could help them set up social media accounts and provide them with advice and guidance on how to take care online.

It was agreed that the issues discussed would be reported back to Standards Committees and a discussion to follow with the Monitoring Officer, IT and the Communications Team on the draft Social Media Policy and discussions would follow between the respective Monitoring Officers, IT and Communications teams on the draft Social Media Policy. It was not yet a formal draft and the date for when it would be sent out for consultation was not yet known. Comments could possibly be fed back to the Conference in September.

Anglesey had tabled questions in relation to the proposed merger of local authorities, which had since been superseded, and raised that if Gwynedd Council and Anglesey County Council merged there would be in excess of 100 town and community councils and this was where the majority of their current issues came from. They also asked if the number of town and community councils needed to be reduced.

Denbighshire County Council commented that they had seen a decrease in complaints relating to town and community councils and they felt this was due to the effective training of Clerks by the Monitoring Officer which saw an improvement in procedures.

A question was asked by Anglesey County Council as to how other Councils appointed a town or community council representative to their Standards Committee, commenting that it had been a long process for them.

On the Local Resolution Protocol, a Chair of a Standards Committee had been encouraged by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) to undertake dispute mediation training with a view to providing mediation direct as opposed to going to the Ombudsman. Feedback was it was a difficult role to undertake and could possibly undermine the Standards Committee in the future as if mediation did not work, the case could be reported to the Standards Committee and the mediator would have to stand down.

David Richards, the Director of Governance at Welsh Government had delivered a presentation to Anglesey County Council which had been well

received. It was felt it would be useful to receive a presentation at the Standards Committee Forum. It was suggested that the Monitoring Officer from Anglesey circulate the slides to other Monitoring Officers so that they could recommend where it could be tailored specifically.

The Standards Committee Conference was scheduled for 14th September 2018 and there would be a maximum of four delegates per authority at a cost of £70 per delegate.

On dealing with claims of misconduct a flyer had been handed out from the PSOW and covered a lot of points that had concerned the group; Anglesey's representative felt it covered a lot of the points but not all. It was felt that Monitoring Officers would be looking at the paper and would provide feedback. There was a general feeling that when a Councillor was accused of something, the standard procedure should be for them to stand down whilst the ombudsman's investigation took place.

RESOLVED:

That the feedback from the Standards Committee Forum on 29th June 2018 be noted.

13. STANDARDS CONFERENCE

The Deputy Monitoring Officer explained that the Standards Conference was scheduled to take place on 14th September 2018 in Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion.

The Chair said he was annual leave on that date so it was agreed that an email would be sent to seek expressions of interest in attending. The Council would be allocated four places.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the details be received;
- (b) That an email be sent out to seek expressions of interest in attendance at the Conference.

14. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman introduced the Forward Work Programme and invited suggestions for any items.

Julia Hughes said she thought at a previous meeting it had been agreed that a report on the Overview of Ethical Complaints would be put on the agenda for each meeting. The Deputy Monitoring Officer said he would check the resolution from when that item was considered. If it had not been resolved to include it on the agenda for each meeting it could be discussed at the next meeting to agree a frequency of reporting.

Councillor Johnson said it had been agreed in April 2018 that a template annual report would be sent to Councillors but he had not received it. The Deputy Monitoring Officer said he would follow that up.

Julia Hughes suggested the following for the Forward Work Programme:

- Feedback from visits to town and community councils to be on the Forward Work Programme for October, December, February, April and June;
- Consultation on Social Media Guidance – to be included on the Forward Work Programme once the consultation date was known;
- Upcoming vacancy in November – consideration of the process; and
- Verbal update from the Standards Committee Conference

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted, including the suggestions above.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 – TO CONSIDER THE EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

That the press and public be excluded for the remainder of the meeting for the following item by virtue of exempt information under paragraph 18a of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

15. REVIEW OF THE MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT

The Deputy Monitoring Officer introduced the Review of the Members' Code of Conduct report following a request at the last meeting for the Committee to see the outcome letters from the two complaints considered by the Ombudsman against County Councillors in 2017.

Councillor Woolley said the report demonstrated that the current processes and existing systems worked well.

Phillipa Earlam said she felt the letters appended to the report were not in "plain English" and complainants could find it difficult to understand the content.

RESOLVED:

That it be noted that the evidence indicates that existing systems seem to be working and that the Members' Code of Conduct does not need revision.

16. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 7.15pm)

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Chairman