

Standards Conference Wales 2015.

Thank you for allowing me to attend the Conference on 20 October.

On arrival we met the Lord Mayor at The Mansion House a gift of a benefactor which has been furnished by gifts from local people and continues to receive gifts now. It appears like a museum but performs a valuable function for both ceremonial and civic events. It is used to entertain and accommodate foreign and other guests of the City Council.

The Conference took place in the City Hall and was attended by around 120 representatives drawn from every Welsh Council.

The keynote speech was from Nick Bennett the Ombudsman. He challenged us to consider whether the Nolan principles are still fit for purpose and whether they would be valid for the next twenty years. He reminded us of the principles - selflessness, integrity, accountability, objectivity, openness, honesty and leadership.

He reflected on societal changes in the last twenty years and some examples where there had been no change. He believes that the present time is the most challenging period for many years and noted possible changes such as NHS/Social Services integration. He expressed concern that recommended reorganisation of local government almost two years ago now seems unlikely to happen before the next assembly elections.

He suggested that after 20 years of transparency in local government, the public by and large do not generally feel that matters have improved.

He reported that last year there had been 231 code complaints yet only 17 had resulted in a breach warranting action. Which is a very small percentage.

He would like a new Ombudsman Act which could allow complaints to be made orally or using social media. He hoped it would allow him to initiate investigations without having to wait for a complaint to be received and he looked for better exchange of national data to allow comparisons to be made.

A panel discussion with Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales), Peter Davies (President of the Adjudication Panel) and Jan Williams (Independent police complaints commissioner) followed. Lyn referred to concerns about how Community Councils will be able to handle increased responsibilities without cultural change. There is a need for CC web sites to be up to date with relevant information and for a clearer demarcation of responsibility so that the public know who is responsible for what. Training will be vital and his organisation has expanded to provide a variety of modules and they now offer a consultancy service. It will be vital to enhance the trust and confidence of the public. Peter Davies announced his imminent retirement and reported that the Panel had only to adjudicate on two cases in the last two years. (in the last 13 years it had averaged at 5 p.a. He posed the question as to whether local standards committees were too close to be impartial or whether matters are best dealt with at the local level. Jan Williams spoke about her experiences of police complaints. Policing had to be by consent and failure to be reasonable and fair

destroys that trust. There should be no need for more policies – all public servants should think about doing the right thing routinely every day.

We were able to attend two workshops: the first was about Nolan principles. A lively discussion took place and amongst the suggestions put forward were:

- Standards Members should attend other committee meetings to enable them to assess behaviours.
- Recommendation that Members should be advised to attack the issue rather than the person
- Where behaviours were seen as being right on the line of acceptability gentle warning might be a useful approach
- The Standards Committee meeting could move round the community councils to remind them of the importance of appropriate behaviour.
- Set up training and invite all the Clerks to attend.
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The second workshop I attended dealt with Community Council behaviours. The new White Paper on Town & Community Councils – “Power to Local People” encourages higher standards of governance, more consistency, better democratic accountability and seeks thereby to encourage communities to have more confidence in T&CC.

The paper suggests certain benchmarks to allow a T&CC to be “accredited”.

- Democratic – at least 2/3rds of councillors should be elected (not co-opted)
- Capability – Clerks should have recognised professional qualification
- Capacity – budget should be £200K (this has now been deleted)
- Governance- have own web site, appropriate financial management in place.

There is the suggestion that the T&CC could be linked to other community organisations to make a ‘community body’ but this is not very clear at present.

If functions are to be delegated from CBC/CC to local level, there should be a need for a competency test which could impose the need for appropriate training to replace the skills presently held at the higher level.

It was also concern that some of the advertised savings in local government have only been achieved by the T&CC taking over responsibility but without gaining the necessary resources.

Overall, I found the conference useful and it was good to meet Standards Committee members from other authorities and share experiences. Some of them seemed to be relatively new to the responsibility and perhaps had limited ability to add to the discussions. The Welsh Government was, I thought, notable by its absence .Given the impact of changes in local government and the effect of austerity, it might have helped to have heard the concerns from Standards Committee members at first hand.

Robert Dewey.