

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

3 APRIL 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Clwyd Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Monday, 3 April 2017

PRESENT: Edward Hughes (Chairman)

Councillors:

David Cox and Arnold Woolley

Co-opted members:

Robert Dewey, Jonathan Duggan-Keen, Phillipa Earlam and Ken Molyneux

APOLOGY: Councillor Hilary McGuill

IN ATTENDANCE:

Monitoring Officer, Deputy Monitoring Officer and Committee Officer

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None were received.

34. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6 March 2017 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

35. DISPENSATIONS

None were received.

36. WHITE PAPER - REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT: RESILIENT AND RENEWED

The Monitoring Officer presented a report on the proposals set out in the Welsh Government (WG) White Paper 'Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed' which was out for consultation. The aim of the White Paper was to set out a broad programme of local government reform including improvement in the quality of leadership and accountability in councils. The implications of the proposals relating to the duties and business of standards committees were summarised and views were sought to respond to WG by the deadline.

(i) Duties on members of County Councils to show how they communicate and engage with their electorate and the role of standards committees in providing advice and training to members about their new duties

Robert Dewey felt that the document implied that WG was adopting its own view on how best to deal with constituents and that the 'appetite for reform supported by greater regional working' did not conform with the general opinion.

During discussion on the proposal for a councillor to be removed from office in the event of a breach of duties, the threshold of more than 20% of the electorate signing a petition was questioned as election turnouts often failed to achieve that level.

Phillipa Earlam sought clarity on funding for the additional duties and training, as well as details on the process for a petition and whether this would be available electronically, which gave rise to concerns about the authenticity of signatures. The Monitoring Officer advised of comparative legislative provisions on petitions in England but said that such petitions could involve logistical issues when checking the authenticity of signatories.

With regard to advice and guidance on the new duties for members, a number of training sessions had been scheduled after the forthcoming Elections with which members of the Standards Committee could be involved if they wished. Robert Dewey expressed an interest in taking part.

Councillor Arnold Woolley felt that a basic training framework should be adopted for councillors to achieve or train towards an appropriate standard. He went on to share his concerns on other aspects of the White Paper such as the proposed restructuring of Overview & Scrutiny and Audit Committees, the reduction in town/community councils and the impact on county councils if the role of town/community councils was strengthened. He also felt that the practice of holding councillor surgeries was not successful in engaging with constituents. On the aim to encourage a broader range of councillors to better represent the demographics, he pointed out the time needed to carry out the role which presented challenges for those in employment.

(ii) Duties on leaders of political groups to promote good standards of conduct amongst their members and to co-operate with standards committees in exercising their functions

The Monitoring Officer explained that the proposals in relation to Group Leaders were to be welcomed though there were already strong Group Leaders who tackled such issues anyway. He suggested that the Committee may wish to explore this proposal further by meeting with Group Leaders regularly to discuss a range of ethical issues, raise any concerns and promote the work of the Committee. This would also establish strong relationships that would be an advantage if particular problems needed to be resolved.

(iii) Training requirements for Town and Community Councillors

The Committee discussed the requirement for town/community councils to publish a training plan and acknowledged the challenges in recruiting skilled members, Chairs and Clerks.

The Chairman raised concerns about resources needed to undertake a training analysis. In response, the Monitoring Officer said that bodies such as

One Voice Wales or the Society of Local Government Clerks may need to provide skills development but that it would be for the town/community councils themselves to fund such development.

On actions to help build resilience and renewal into town/community councils, the Monitoring Officer drew attention to the WG 'agenda for action'. He referred to challenges in encouraging participation and said that reduced levels of resources limited growth potential, but that ability for councillors to serve at both county and town/community council level could be a way of increasing capacity. Jonathan Duggan-Keen stated that town/community councils did encourage participation and that there was a shortage of suitably qualified Clerks to identify training requirements.

(iv) Annual reporting requirements for standards committees

The proposal for standards committees to produce an annual report was not currently the practice in Flintshire, however it was felt that this could be easily achieved and would help to raise the profile of the Committee.

(v) Summary of responses by the Committee

- The relaxation in some proposals was welcomed, as they were less prescribed and encouraged a broader framework.
- Concern was expressed if there was any appetite for regionalism.
- Whilst the principle of calling a by-election in the event of a breach of duties could be supported, the threshold of 20% of the electorate signing a petition was brought into question due to the general low electorate turnout. Also, more detail would be required on how the petition would work and if electronic methods were to be used. The latter would require some assurance on authenticating signatures.
- Clarity required on funding to carry out the new duties.
- The requirements for councillor training were welcomed, with a suggestion for a minimum core competency (which could possibly be explored through the Welsh Local Government Association).
- Concerns about the independent review of town/community councils where functions could overlap with those of county councils.
- The broadening cross-section of councillors was welcomed but may require changes to regulations to accommodate the working arrangements of some candidates.

RESOLVED:

That the views on the proposals within the White Paper relating to the business of the Standards Committee be reported in response to the consultation.

37. TRAINING MATERIALS FOR NEW AND RETURNING COUNTY COUNCILLORS AND TOWN & COMMUNITY COUNCILLORS

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented a report on training materials produced by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) for new and returning councillors to assist them in understanding the implications of the Code

of Conduct. These were intended to be a generic Member training framework to be adapted locally by councils for their own use.

Phillipa Earlam indicated her interest in the forthcoming Member training sessions, as had Robert Dewey earlier in the meeting. It was agreed that the Committee Officer would circulate details of the sessions.

Councillor Arnold Woolley said that Member attendance at training sessions should be published online. Ken Molyneux felt it would be useful to display the general principles of Member conduct on a reference card.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the training materials for the purpose of providing training to new and returning county councillors, and town and community councillors, be approved.

38. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. Officers noted Robert Dewey's request to confirm the date for the joint meeting in October 2017 as soon as possible.

As this was the last meeting of the Committee before the Elections, the Chairman took the opportunity to thank all the members for their contributions and to wish them well.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be noted.

39. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

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

(The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.25 pm)

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Chairman