

Minutes of the Standards Committee held on 4th May 2010 at North Wales Fire and Rescue Service Headquarters, St Asaph

Present

Simon Fysh
Celia Blomeley
Jane A Eyton-Jones

Also in attendance

Colin Everett, Clerk
Alwen Davies, Member Liaison Officer

Apologies

Cllr Merfyn Thomas
Cllr Glyn Williams

- 1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
 - 1.1 None.
- 2 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18TH FEBRUARY 2010
 - 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 18th February were approved as a correct record.
- 3 MATTERS ARISING
 - 3.1 It was confirmed that a copy of the Clerk's letter in response to members' concerns raised at the last meeting had been circulated to all past and present Members.
 - 3.2 Appointments of the new independent members had been reaffirmed at the Fire and Rescue Authority meeting on 15th March 2010.
 - 3.3 The Fire and Rescue Authority had agreed to reconsider the remuneration proposal for independent members and this will be discussed at the annual meeting in June. Members acknowledged that it needed to be commensurate with the commitment of the individual to the committee.
 - 3.4 Members had suggested that the Standards Committee as part of its work programme could look at the travel and subsistence claim forms of Authority members, but the Clerk advised them that Members only claimed mileage to attend meetings and that it was rare for members to be away overnight on Authority business. This work would not be pursued.
- 4 MEMBERSHIP ISSUES
 - 4.1 The Clerk informed Members that due to family commitments, Samindre Soysa had resigned from the Committee. The Chair wished to formally record the committee's thanks to Samindre Soysa for his work on the committee and asked the Clerk to send a letter to him on behalf of the Committee.

- 4.2 The procedure to recruit a new member will be the same as the last time and the Clerk will ensure that the selection panel will have full delegated authority to appoint a new member.
- 4.3 The Chair raised an issue about the selection panel consisting of people who the Standards Committee may have to criticise if a complaint was made against them and questioned if there was an issue with independence. Other Members did not think this was an issue of concern especially as there was a lay member on the selection panel.
- 4.4 As Samindre Soysa had been nominated vice-chair at the last meeting, the committee had to nominate a new vice-chair.
- 4.5 **Celia Blomeley proposed that Jane Eyton-Jones be the vice-chair and this was seconded by the Chair.**

5 TRAINING

- 5.1 The Clerk felt that the best training for independent members would be to attend meetings of the Fire and Rescue Authority. It was also noted that a training session is held prior to Authority meetings which may be of interest.

6 COMPLAINTS POLICY AND FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

- 6.1 Copies of the current complaints policy, stage 3 complaint procedure and the Ombudsman's draft complaints policy had been circulated to Members of the Committee.
- 6.2 The Clerk informed Members about the two complaints that had recently reached the stage 3 procedure and which had been heard by the Chair, Vice-Chair and one other Member of the Authority. Although not an issue at the recent hearings, it was felt that having a member of the Standards Committee on the complaints panel would be helpful in ensuring independence and fairness.
- 6.3 Queries raised about the complaints policy were as follows:
- Does the complaints officer contact complainants to ask if they were content about how their complaint was dealt with and whether they were content with the outcome
 - Are lessons learnt from previous complaints and outcomes shared across the Service
 - Experiences shared with other Authorities
 - Any trends information available
 - No mention of time limits as to when a complainant has to make the complaint or when the complainant has to decide whether they are happy or not with the outcome
 - Any guidance on how investigations are conducted
 - Does not state in the policy that the onus is on the complainant to provide evidence
 - Standard of proof/balance probability not mentioned.

- 6.4 **It was agreed that some research into the above would be undertaken with the information being reported to members at the next meeting of the Committee. It was also agreed to invite the Complaints Officer to the next meeting.**
- 6.5 The complaints leaflet annexed to the complaints policy should be bigger and there were some minor issues such as repeat of telephone number and the font being too small and the wrong colour to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.
- 6.6 It was noted that the Ombudsman is in the process of creating a consistent policy for use by all public bodies in Wales. Members wanted to ensure that the policy was not a bureaucratic procedure.

7 WHISTLEBLOWING

- 7.1 Members asked about the Service's whistle blowing policy and whether the Service had one. If such a policy existed was there awareness of it within the Service. They were also keen to know if there had been any cases and the level of confidence amongst management and the Representative Unions in the policy.
- 7.2 Members felt it would be useful to see some statistics and how the policy is used and viewed culturally and whether it generates confidence in the complaints system throughout the organisation. They also queried whether the policy was used for reporting internal bad practices and whether protection existed for whistle blowers.
- 7.3 Due to the size of the organisation and the chain of command, the Clerk reminded members that it was important to keep the work on the policy in proportion with how often it is likely to be used.