

Minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 29 November 2019 at Fire and Rescue Headquarters, St Asaph Business Park

Present

Julia Hughes (Chair)
Sally Ellis
Gill Murgatroyd
Gareth Pritchard
Cllr Dylan Rees, Anglesey County Council
Cllr Owen Thomas, Flintshire County Council

Gareth Owens, Deputy Clerk
Matt Georgiou, Flintshire County Council
Alwen Davies, Member Liaison Officer

Apologies

Antony P Young

The Chair welcomed the new members to the meeting and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

1.1 None.

2 NOTICE OF URGENT MATTERS

2.1 None.

3 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2019 were approved as a correct record.

4 MATTERS ARISING

4.1 There were no matters arising.

5 ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

5.1 The report was presented in order for members:

- to review the terms of reference for the Standards Committee;
- to review how the Committee should fulfil those functions; and
- examine the support and development Members require in their role.

5.2 Members were content with the revised terms of reference and following a discussion about support and development members required, it was agreed that the Deputy Clerk deliver training on the following areas at the next meeting:

- dispensations
- the Committee's responsibility on the Service stage 3 complaints
- increased understanding of the six protocols that the Committee has reviewed over the past year.

5.3 Members also requested that the whistleblowing policy be included on the next agenda for it to be reviewed in terms of the Authority's involvement.

5.4 **RESOLVED to**

- (i) recommend the revised terms of reference for the Standards Committee to the Authority with the minor updating amendments as shown in the report presented;**
- (ii) have training on the three matters noted above at the next meeting.**

6 ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

6.1 The report was presented for members to consider and address poor attendance at meetings by some councillors.

6.2 It was noted that Members of the Authority are expected to attend between 7 and 10 meetings a year depending upon the committees they attend. Levels of attendance by members vary from 0% to 100% of the meetings to which they are invited. Failure to attend meetings represents a significant issue for the Authority as it reduces its capacity and creates gaps in Members' understanding that can take time to overcome. It was also noted that the so-called "6 month rule" used in councils does not apply at the Fire and Rescue Authority and so different methods of encouraging attendance are required.

6.3 **RESOLVED to agree**

- (i) that a letter be sent to those with over 50% attendance in 2019/20 thanking them for their attendance;**
- (ii) that a letter from the Standards Committee be sent to Members of the Fire and Rescue Authority with an attendance rate of maximum 50% asking them to improve their attendance; and a copy of the letter to be sent to the Group Leader and Leader of the Council;**
- (iii) that the letter in (ii) is also copied to the Chief Executive with a covering letter explaining the rationale;**
- (iv) if attendance rate does not improve by April, it was agreed to delegate authority to the Deputy Clerk to arrange for the Fire and Rescue Authority to contact the relevant constituent council asking for a replacement representative.**

7 STANDARDS FORUM FOR NORTH AND MID WALES

- 7.1 The report was presented to share the minutes from the last meeting of the Standards Forum for North and Mid Wales and to nominate delegates to attend its next meeting.
- 7.2 It was noted that the authorities in North and Mid Wales have established a forum for the independent members of their Standards Committees. The forum provides an opportunity for members to share experiences and good practice. Julia Hughes commented that she had attended the last meeting and found it useful.
- 7.3 At the Forum, the Committee on Standards in Public Life (formerly “the Nolan Committee”) published a report in January 2019 on Local Government Ethical Standards. Set out below are the recommendations and good practice suggestions that are potentially relevant to the Fire and Rescue Authority. It was noted that although the Authority cannot change legislation it could nevertheless adopt the recommendations voluntarily where they are not already in effect.

Recommendation	Members’ Comments
R6 Code to require registration of gifts / hospitality over £50 or over £100 pa from a single source	Agreed to recommend that the single source be included in the policy; however, the Authority’s minimum amount to register is currently £25 – Deputy Clerk to collate feedback on the amount from other authorities and report back at the next meeting.
R15 LAs required annually to publish complaints data and outcomes (<i>we do this already</i>)	This is already in place within the Fire and Rescue Authority.
R23 LAs required to ensure whistleblowing policy and website specifies named contact for external auditor	Members were minded to agree with this recommendation but that it be done simultaneously with reviewing the policy.
BP3 LAs to review code annually (<i>we do this on a rolling 5 yearly basis</i>)	This is already in place within the Fire and Rescue Authority, but Members felt it should be reviewed every 3 years .
BP4 Code readily accessible in prominent position on LA website (<i>we do this already</i>)	This is already in place within the Fire and Rescue Authority.

BP5 LAs to update registers of gifts and hospitality quarterly and make accessible	Register of Gifts and Hospitality should be available on the website as a matter of good practice. Send an annual reminder to all Members to remind them to declare any gifts/hospitality received.
BP10 LA websites to have clear complaints guidance and information (<i>we do this already</i>)	This is already in place within the Fire and Rescue Authority.
BP15 Senior officers to meet regularly with group leaders or whips regarding standards.	Suggested that the Chair of Standards Committee could meet with the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Authority, Chief Fire Officer and the Deputy Clerk to discuss the annual report prior to its submission to the full Authority meeting in March of every year.

7.4 **RESOLVED**

- (i) to note the minutes of the forum meeting on 24th June 2019;**
- (ii) to note members' comments noted above in relation to the recommendations made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life;**
- (iii) that the Deputy Clerk inform members of the date of the next Forum meeting and for members to decide who attends based on availability.**

8 JOINT STANDARDS COMMITTEE(S) IN NORTH WALES

- 8.1 The report was presented for members to consider the issues and options associated with adopting one or more joint Standards Committees across North Wales.
- 8.2 It was noted that at present there are eight Standards Committees across the authorities in North Wales. There are an increasing number of members who serve on more than one authority which can help to reduce the cost of development/training (or maximize the benefit from it). However, it is legislatively possible to have a joint committee that serves two or more authorities. The report contained an analysis of the issues and options for one or more such joint committees.
- 8.3 Members discussed the possibility of joining a national park authority standards committee or linking in with the Clerk's constituent council.
- 8.4 **RESOLVED to postpone discussion on this matter until further information is known about the Welsh Government's plans for the reform of governance within FRAs. In the meantime, members asked the Deputy Clerk to make enquiries with the national park authorities to see if there is any merit or interest in pursuing the concept of a shared Standards Committee.**

- 9 PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES CASEBOOK
- 9.1 The report was presented to share the two most recent ethical casebooks published by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW).
- 9.2 The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) considers complaints that Members of local authorities in Wales have broken the Code of Conduct (the Code).
- 9.3 The latest editions published highlight that 17 complaints were investigated by the PSOW during April to September 2019, of which 8 investigations led to findings of no evidence of breach, 5 led to findings of no action necessary, 3 led to referrals to the relevant Standards Committees and 1 led to a referral to the APW.
- 9.4 **RESOLVED to note the findings of those complaints that were investigated by the PSOW during April to September 2019, as summarised in issues 21 and 22 of the Code of Conduct Casebooks.**