

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

28th January, 2022

PRESENT: MR. S. WILLIAMS (CHAIR)

Councillors K. Hayden, M. Moore & G. Thomas

Ms. S. Rosser

Mr. F.R Lynch

Town Councillor J. Thomas

WITH: Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance (Monitoring
Officer)

Data Protection & Governance Officer

CHAIR

In the absence of the Chair and the Vice-Chair, it was agreed that Mr. S. Williams chair the meeting.

1. SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION

No requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.

2. WELCOME & APOLOGIES

The Acting Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, and the following apologies for absence were reported:

Mr. R. Alexander, Chair of the Standards Committee

Miss H. Roberts, Vice-Chair

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS

No declarations of interest or dispensations were reported.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the Standards Committee held on the 14th July, 2020 were submitted.

Matters Arising

Raising awareness of the availability of dispensations

The Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance referred to previous discussions and concerns raised by the Chair that the Council did not utilise the dispensations scheme as much as other LA's. The Officer said this was due to the political circumstances of the Council, and the fact that there was a clear majority group. However, in terms of raising awareness of the availability of dispensations the Officer said this could be included as part of the training for elected Members following the local elections in May. The training session would be held on 11th May, 2022 by an independent provider and the Officer undertook to ensure that invitation be extended to Members of the Standards Committee.

Webcasting of meetings

The Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance reported that prior to the Covid pandemic webcasting of meetings was being considered. However, in response to the pandemic the Council put in place a new operating system to hold meetings which included a facility to record meetings which were then published on the Council's website for the public to view.

The Officer reported that a new Head of Democratic Services had been recently appointed and would be working on options for live broadcasting of Council meetings.

The Standards Committee agreed, subject to the foregoing, that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.

5. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN (CONDUCT ELEMENT)

The Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance presented the Annual Report of the Public Services Ombudsman for information. The report did not raise any conduct issues for Blaenau Gwent, however, the Officer confirmed that a report was submitted to Council annually on the Council's performance in relation to conduct issues.

A small element of the report highlighted each LA's performance on code of conduct issues and the Officer said she was pleased to reported that Blaenau Gwent had an excellent record with the minimum number of complaints referred to the Ombudsman. She said Members would be aware that the Council operated a Local Resolution Policy which had proved successful in early resolution and preventing issues being referred to the Ombudsman.

The Officer also reported that the Council's Managing Director would be leaving the Council shortly to take up her new role as the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales.

The Officer concluded that the Ombudsman Report on the conduct element reflected the very low number of complaints referred to the Public Services Ombudsman in Blaenau Gwent, and since July 2021 there was only 1 complaint taken forward and investigated, and that was in relation to a Town & Community Council matter. The outcome of the complaint was awaited.

6. PENN REPORT

The Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance presented the report on the independent review undertaken of the Ethical Standards Framework in Wales. The report had been considered and was supported by the Monitoring Officers' Group.

The Officer then went through the report in detail and highlighted the main points contained therein.

Councillor M. Moore left the meeting at this juncture.

7. FUTURE WORK PLAN - TRAINING ARRANGEMENTS

A Member asked whether a review of the Council's Whistleblowing Policy could form part of the future work plan, and also whether the recent case before the Adjudication Panel could also be considered.

In response the Head of Legal Corporate Compliance explained that the Whistleblowing Policy generally related to staff rather than elected Members, and the Policy was considered by Council.

In relation to the case before the Adjudication Panel the Officer confirmed that Clerks of the Town & Community Councils had been contacted and regular updates were provided, and their legal support was provided by One Voice Wales. She pointed out that the Council did not offer the Local Resolution Policy to Town & Community Councils as they had their own processes in place via One Voice Wales. However, they were invited to the Council's Code of Conduct training sessions.

The Member also asked whether an overview of Members' declarations of interest could be brought to the Committee.

The Officer raised no objection to the request as Members' declarations of interests were in the public domain. However, the Officer explained that

there were two elements, i.e. a declaration of interest when an elected Member takes office; and declarations of interest reported at meetings when a Member may have a particular interest in the matter being considered, and this was recorded in the minutes and a record of the declaration of interest was kept within Democratic Services.

The Member asked if an electronic version was available and the Officer confirmed that this was being considered.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

In response to comments made by a Member regarding the frequency of meetings etc. the Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance confirmed that this had been impacted by the Covid pandemic, however, it was anticipated that a schedule of meetings for the year would be developed following the Annual Meeting of the Council.

The Chair thanked everyone for attending and declared the meeting closed.
