

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

5TH JULY, 2019

PRESENT: Mr. R. Alexander (CHAIR)

Councillor K. Hayden

Mr. J.B. Evans

Mr. S. Williams

Mr. J. Price

Miss. H. Roberts

Town Councillor J. Thomas

WITH: Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance
Data Protection & Governance Officer

1. **SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION**

No requests for the simultaneous translation service had been received.

2. **WELCOME & APOLOGIES**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor G. Thomas.

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS**

No declarations of interest or dispensations were reported.

The Chair reported that since the last meeting he had become a member of the South Wales Fire & Rescue Standards Committee and also the Vale of Glamorgan Standards Committee.

4. **NOMINATION AND APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR**

The Chair nominated Miss Helen Roberts for the role of Vice-Chair.

It was AGREED that Miss Helen Roberts be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee.

5. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the Standards Committee held on the 8th September, 2017 were submitted.

It was AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.

6. MONITORING OFFICER'S OVERVIEW OF MEMBER CONDUCT 2018

The Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance provided a verbal update on Member Conduct during 2018. She reported that since the annual meeting held in October last year, the complaint that was referred to in the minutes of the meeting had now been investigated by the Ombudsman Office. The conclusion of the Ombudsman was that there was no breach of the code of conduct. As no breach was found, the Officer was unable to report on the details of the investigation, but confirmed that a complaint was made by a member of the public. She confirmed that since the conclusion of the investigation discussions have taken place with the Member concerned, and training was offered, and this was accepted by the Member.

In terms of the data for the Local Resolution Protocol, the Officer confirmed that one case had recently been investigated where a Member inadvertently caused offence, and this was resolved by way of an apology.

Overall conduct within the Council was excellent and standards continued to rise at Blaenau Gwent. The majority of Members sought advice and followed the advice provided, particularly in relation to declarations of interest.

A Member said this was a very positive report, and it was clear that Members were working with Officers to ensure they maintained the highest standards. It was also pleasing that the individual referred to the Ombudsman had taken on board the issues and accepted training, and the Local Resolution Policy was also helping the Council to ensure the highest standards are kept. She commended the Officers involved and said she was very pleased to receive such a positive report from the Monitoring Officer.

Another Member said he was aware of several complaints of Officers conduct with the community that was not reported, and he felt that people were unaware of the Standards Committee, and their right to complaint.

In response the Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance said Officer conduct was not within the remit of the Standards Committee, however, she was confident that the Council's corporate complaints procedures were sufficiently highlighted on the Council's website, with a 'complaints and

compliments' section with information about how to report a complaint. In addition, the Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance was willing to have a discussion with the Member regarding the appropriate route to register his concerns.

A Member said there was plenty of information on the roles of Committees on the Blaenau Gwent website, including the Standards Committee, and people always had the option to report a complaint via the telephone.

AGENDA ORDER

It was AGREED that the Item No. 8 would be considered next on the agenda.

8. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Corporate & Legal Compliance said this agenda item was open for Members to suggest any training they feel may be beneficial, or work they considered appropriate for the Standards Committee. There had been some discussion previously regarding Members of other Councils' Standards Committees observing Council meetings. However, the Officer felt this would not be a particular requirement for Blaenau Gwent, as she attended various Council meetings and any concerns of conduct would be addressed very quickly.

The Chair reported that both the South Wales Fire & Rescue Standards Committee and the Vale of Glamorgan Standards Committee were currently both considering the appropriateness of visiting other Council meetings, and hopefully he would be in a position to report back on this in due course.

A Member said having spoken to many people at the training event held for members of Standards Committees, particularly Councillors, it was his opinion that Standards Committees needed some form of additional remit.

Another Member said she found the information provided by Officers was extremely useful, particularly the information provided from the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales and links to case studies.

In response to a question raised by the Chair regarding the new Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) Bill, the Officer said she understood that the implementation date was the end of the month, and the Ombudsman office was currently rolling out training and highlighting the new Bill. The Officer explained that the Bill was geared more towards service complaints rather than conduct, but there were some elements crossing over, e.g. they would now accept oral complaints in some circumstances;

and were now also able to investigate some elements of private medical health care as well as public health care. However, the impact on the Standards regime was minimal at the moment.

The Chair asked when the Public Services Ombudsman Annual Report was published, and the Officer said this was usually received at the end of the Summer beginning of the Autumn, which conflicted with the timing of the Standards Committee held in July. She said a change in the meeting cycle to September/October may be of benefit to coincide with publication of the Ombudsman Annual Report, or another option was to consider it virtually. Alternatively, consideration could be given to another meeting being held in November to receive the Annual Report, and part of that could include a training session to review the Ombudsman case book.

A Member expressed concern regarding the number of Standards Committees that had been held during his time as a Member, and felt that the Standards Committee could be better used to support other work of the Council.

7. THE FUNCTION OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE AND REVIEW OF OTHER COUNCIL COMMITTEE ROLES

A Member said he felt that the Standards Committee had a lack of ambition, whereas other Standards Committees seemed more proactive and met more regularly. He referred to a suggestion made previously to meet with Monmouthshire County Council Standards Committee and asked why this was deemed as having no value.

In response the Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance stated that the Standards Committee dealt with business when required. If behaviour was poor within the Council, then more meetings of the Standards Committee would be required to address problems, but fortunately behaviour in Blaenau Gwent was good. She said resources were limited, and it would be inappropriate to call a meeting unless there was a real need to do so.

In terms of the comment that the Standards Committee had a lack of ambition, she disagreed and pointed out that a joint training session was held with Torfaen CBC and Monmouthshire CC which was an excellent opportunity for Members to speak with other Members of Standards Committees, and it was agreed that this joint approach would continue.

Another Member said the training session was extremely beneficial and provided opportunity to discuss best practice with other Members.

In response to a question raised, the Officer explained that the Council's Constitution indicated that the Standards Committee should meet at least once a year.

A discussion ensued when a Member said she understood that the remit of the Standards Committee was governed by regulations made by Welsh Government. The Officer said the fact that other Standards Committees met more regularly, was likely due to a greater need, whereas Blaenau Gwent did not have that need.

A Member said that Blaenau Gwent Standards Committee was being conducted very much like other Standards Committee she had been a member of, i.e. meetings called when there was business to be conducted.

In response to a question raised regarding training, the Officer confirmed that Members of the Committee had attended WLGA Standards Committee training, and a refresher of that would be rolled out in due course. Training on the Council's Constitution had also offered to Members.

A further discussion ensued when the Officer said she could make enquiries via the All Wales Monitoring Officers Group in terms of how often other Standards Committee met, and the nature of their business, and report back to Members.

A Member then proposed that further consideration be given to a meeting with Monmouthshire County Council.

Upon a vote being taken the Standards Committee AGREED the following:-

- I. That the Head of Legal & Corporate Compliance make enquiries regarding the position of other Standards Committee as to their frequency of meeting and nature of business and report back
 - II. The Chair provide feedback from the South Wales Fire & Rescue Standards Committee, and the Vale of Glamorgan Standards Committee when practicable to do so
 - III. A meeting be held early in the New Year for the purposes of training and consideration of the Ombudsman Annual report; and
 - IV. Information be provided on the terms of office for all Members of the Standards Committee.
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