

CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

**HELD AT THE CIVIC CENTRE, SWANSEA ON TUESDAY 18 MARCH 2014
AT 2.00 P.M.**

PRESENT: A Novis (Chair) presided

Councillor(s):

P Downing

Councillor(s):

C E Lloyd

Councillor(s):

G Thomas

Independent Members:

J Burgess

J Gomes

M Howells

C G Walton

Officers:

J Hooper - Directorate Lawyer

G Borsden - Democratic Services Officer

68. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor R A Clay.

69. **DISCLOSURES OF PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTERESTS**

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

70. **ANNUAL MEETING WITH POLITICAL GROUP LEADERS AND
CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

The Chairman welcomed Councillor E W Fitzgerald to the meeting and explained that she had been invited as Leader of the Independent Group to give her views regarding the role of the Standards Committee and how the work undertaken by this Committee could ensure high standards of behaviour. The Chairman explained that the role of the Standards Committee was both proactive and reactive and stated that it had been agreed that Annual Meetings be held with Group Leaders and the Chief Executive. The Chairman indicated that views were sought regarding the following:

- How you see the role of the Standards Committee.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Standards Committee
(18.03.2014) Cont'd

- Your understanding of this role.
- How could you help to promote standards and good governance?
- How do you see the future role of the Standards Committee?
- Your views regarding training in respect of the Code.
- How do you consider the dispute resolution process is working?
- Your views in respect of the Swansea Pledge.
- Your views regarding the possible merger of the Standards Committee with the Community / Town Council Standards Sub-Committee.
- Do you think that incorporating the Community Council would / could bring benefits?

Councillor Fitzgerald outlined the following in response:

- No direct contact with the Standards Committee for a number of years, therefore, was only aware of the work undertaken by the Standards Committee through the Annual Report at Council. However, had not had good experiences in dealing with Standards Committee back in 2003.
- The Independent Group had produced their own pledge and they as a group did not feel that it was necessary to sign up to the City and County of Swansea Pledge. No follow-up had been carried out as to those who had signed up to this. The purpose of this pledge was questioned.
- As all Councillors have signed the Code of Conduct it was hoped that within the Group behaviour and conduct was in keeping with the Code.
- The introduction of the local dispute resolution had been beneficial and it was considered that generally behaviour had not got worse.
- One of the main aspects of the Code of Conduct was to treat people with respect and in our Group we try to conduct ourselves in a good manner.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Standards Committee
(18.03.2014) Cont'd

- It was suggested that one of the reasons that there were considerably less cases now referred to the Ombudsman, was the significant political majority under the new administration and maybe the improved conduct of newly elected Members.
- Had no firm views in relation to the merger of the Standards Committee and the Community/ Town Councils Standards Sub - Committee, however this would probably be a sensible move.

The Leader of the Independent Group was thanked for her views.

The Chairman then welcomed Councillor C Holley, Leader of the Main Opposition Group. He explained that he also had been invited to give his opinion regarding various aspects in relation to the potential role of the Standards Committee.

C Holley outlined the following in response to the views sought as indicated above:-

- The Standards Committee in his view had not altered in the last few years.
- The local dispute resolution has worked to a certain extent but was limited.
- It was suggested that a more proactive role could be achieved by attending both Council meetings, Cabinet, as well as Scrutiny. It was considered that the role of the Standards Members should cover the entire workings of Council.
- Difficulties are now being experienced by Members in that there are a large number of declarations of interests at each meeting as a precaution against being reported to the Ombudsman.
- It was considered beneficial that the Code of Conduct and guidance in respect of this be reviewed regularly to take into consideration changes to legislation.
- It was explained that this Group had not signed up to the City and County of Swansea Pledge as they considered this to be an election manifesto pledge and felt that the Code of Conduct was adequate.
- It was suggested that it could be beneficial if Standards Committee look at Governance and best practice in other Local Authorities.

Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Standards Committee
(18.03.2014) Cont'd

- He would have no objection if there was a merger of the Standards and Community/ Town Council Standards Sub Committee.
- The local dispute resolution had helped lower the number of cases referred to the Ombudsman and queried the Ombudsman's inconsistency in some of his decisions.

The Leader of the Main Opposition Group was thanked for his views.

The Chairman then welcomed Councillor P Hood-Williams, Leader of the Conservative Group. He explained that he also had been invited to give his opinion regarding various aspects in relation to the potential role of the Standards Committee.

P Hood-Williams outlined the following in response to the views sought as indicated above:

- It was considered that guidance from the Ombudsman was contradictory and difficult to interpret.
- It was suggested that when the new Ombudsman had been appointed it may be an opportunity for this person to be invited to the Standards Committee.
- The principle in respect of the Pledge was agreed.
- All Members in this Group were fairly experienced and understood the code and it was hoped that they would act in an appropriate manner.
- It could be beneficial having one encompassing committee but the effectiveness would depend on the experience of the Community Councillor appointed.
- The main factor would be that the Committee maintains high standards.

The Leader of the Conservative Group was thanked for his views.

The Chairman indicated that the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive would be invited to future meetings for their views and a report of all these discussions would then be submitted to the Committee.

The meeting ended at 3.40 p.m.

CHAIR