



## Report of the Head of Democratic Services

Special Standards Committee - 4 December 2020

### Meetings with Political Group Leaders, Chairs of Committee & Chief Executive

<b>Purpose:</b>	To outline the themes / issues raised during the Meetings with Political Group Leaders, Chairs of Committee and Chief Executive.
<b>Report Author:</b>	Huw Evans
<b>Finance Officer:</b>	Ben Smith
<b>Legal Officer:</b>	Tracey Meredith
<b>Access to Services Officer:</b>	Rhian Millar
<b>For Information</b>	

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 During 2018-2019, the Standards Committee invited each Political Group Leader, a selection of Chairs of Committee and the Chief Executive to attend the Committee to seek their understanding and opinions on the work of the Standards Committee.
- 1.2 The Leader of the Largest Opposition Group, Councillor C A Holley and the Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor L R Jones were interviewed on 20 April 2018.
- 1.3 The Chair of Democratic Services Committee, Councillor P M Black and the Chair of General and Statutory Licensing Committees, Councillor P M Matthews were interviewed on 20 July 2018.
- 1.4 The Chief Executive, Phil Roberts was interviewed on 16 November 2018.
- 1.5 The Leader of the Council, Councillor R C Stewart was interviewed on 12 November 2019.

## **2. Discussion Themes & Councillor Responses**

2.1 The interviewees were provided with the following discussion themes in advance of the meeting in order to stimulate debate. A summary of views/discussion are set out below:

### **2.2 Do you consider that it is still appropriate to have a Code of Conduct in Wales, which applies to all Councillors and Co-opted Members?**

- i) It was unanimous that the Code of Conduct remained appropriate for Councillors and Co-opted Members throughout Wales. The Code was based on the Nolan Principles which formed a solid base for standards in Office and in public life.
- ii) As the Head of Paid Service (Chief Executive) has a duty of care to all Officers of the Authority; the Code provided an important framework ensuring the appropriate behaviour of all.
- iii) A large number of Councillors had signed the “Swansea Pledge” on Standards. This sends out a positive message of their commitment to maintaining high standards.
- iv) Local Government is changing rapidly, with austerity becoming more and more of an issue. Budgets were being reduced, experienced staff have left and services were being reduced. As a result, the Authority needed to be open, honest and transparent to the public so the Code of Conduct would be far more important in the future.

### **2.3 What do you understand the role of the Standards Committee to be?**

- i) To ensure that standards of Councillors were maintained and to investigate any breaches referred to it.
- ii) To police the Code of Conduct and to promote and safeguard the integrity of Councillors and its staff.

### **2.4 Is there any work you feel the Standards Committee should be undertaking over the next year?**

- (i) Continue to assist the Authority and members as per terms of reference.

### **2.5 How can Political Group Leaders / Committee Chairs promote standards and good governance through Leadership?**

- i) Leading by example via good decision making and being open and transparent and ‘living’ the principles of the Code. The Political Group “Whips” can also assist in the process.
- ii) Two or three Swansea Councillors attend the Annual Leadership Programme provided via the Welsh Local Government Association to develop and enhance leadership skills.

- iii) Many Political Group Leaders spend time dealing with disciplinary matters and most will try to resolve any relevant issues through good governance.
- iv) It is the responsibility of Individual Councillors and Political Group Leaders' to ensure that standards are maintained.
- v) Group Leaders and Committee Chairs should promote standards and good governance via firm leadership.
- vi) The Chief Executive introduced regular meetings between the Corporate Management Team and the Cabinet Members as well as regular 1-2-1 meetings with the Political Group Leaders in order to encourage better communication. Due to these discussions any issues that arose were now resolved at an early stage.
- vii) There had been many other positive changes in the Authority over recent years and this was in part due the establishment of a more inclusive culture. In addition the favourable relationships that now existed between the Political Group Leaders was much improved. Robust political debate still existed but there was now more mutual respect between Political Groups.
- viii) A buddying system was in place for newly elected Councillors, but it was organised within the political groups – there was scope to develop this further at the next Local Government Elections.

## **2.6 How can the Standards Committee become more active in promoting ethical conduct among Councillors / Co-opted Members?**

- i) By continuing to circulate cases considered by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales' (PSOW) Code of Conduct Casebook and any other relevant documentation that promotes ethical conduct.
- ii) By continuing meetings with Political Groups Leaders, Chairs of Committee and the Chief Executive in order to raise their profile.
- iii) By keeping abreast of any Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) "good practice" examples.

## **2.7 The Ombudsman, Adjudication Panel for Wales and the High Court has taken a view on politicians (and in some cases senior officers) having a "thick skin" and on political banter being part of the political landscape. What are your own views and how would you as a Political Group Leader ensure that the line is not crossed?**

- i) Political banter is part of the political landscape; however political debate should never turn into personal debate. Current relationships between Councillors in Swansea allow good political debate.
- ii) Agree with PSOW that those in the Political arena do need a thick skin. Many have strong views and occasionally some can cross the line but those that overstep the mark should be dealt with appropriately by the PSOW.

- iii) Most Councillors try to do their best for their constituents.
- iv) Political debate was healthy in Swansea but needs to stay in the Council Chamber. Respect is key.

**2.8 What are your views on the Authority's Code of Conduct training? How could it be improved so as to raise the ethical standards of Councillors / Co-opted Members?**

- i) Code of Conduct training is excellent and comprehensive, however refresher training should be held in relation to Declarations of Interests as a number of Councillors routinely declare interests unnecessarily at Committee.
- ii) Development of on-line training or more interactive training. PowerPoint training can be disengaging.
- iii) Improve the Gifts & Hospitality Policy by simplifying the online form and providing guidance and clarification as to what should be declared.

**2.9 Training for Councillors / Co-opted Members is vitally important. How can the Standards Committee tackle those that do not see training as important?**

- i) Most Councillors embraced training as an important element of their personal development and there was reasonably good attendance at sessions. Some topics had been mandated and Political Group Leaders were informed of non-attendance.
- ii) Refresher training on the Code of Conduct after 18-24 months of being elected / re-elected in order to re-inforce the standards. Roll out of e-learning where possible.
- iii) Provide Councillors & Co-opted Members with certain "skills" training such as how to scrutinise / interrogate documents, how to manage a Councillors' workload and Social Media Training.
- iv) Induction training was key and all training, including refresher training should be actively encouraged. Councillors should be seen to be maintaining good standards. In addition, regular updates to legislative changes were required.
- v) Political Group Leaders should take a lead in encouraging Councillors to attend relevant training sessions.

**2.10 The Authority's Internal Dispute Resolution Process (IDRP) (Cllr v Cllr) has not yet been utilised. In the event of a dispute will you be encouraging your party to use the process? Do you consider the lack of referrals to the IDRP demonstrates that Councillors are behaving within the Code?**

- i) This is a true measure of improved Councillor behaviour over recent years.

- ii) The Internal Dispute Resolution Process needs to be reviewed in order to outline the procedure to be followed should a dispute arise between members of the same Political Group.
- iii) It can be difficult for Councillors to find details of the Internal Dispute Resolution Protocol.

### **2.11 What is the future role of the Standards Committee?**

- i) To raise its profile so that more staff understand the content of their work. The Chief Executives Weekly “Blog”, articles on StaffNet and reference to the Standards Committee in Officer Induction could assist in this.
- ii) Assisting in promoting standards and good governance through leading by example.
- iii) Promote its role via the publication of the Standards Committee Annual Report online for all Officers.
- iv) Could the Committee consider whether candidates for Local Government Elections should be asked to sign up to the Code of Conduct or similar standard prior to being elected?
- v) The role of the Standards Committee had changed dramatically over the years, with it now having more of a scrutiny type of function.
- vi) Suggested that the Standards Committee look at:
  - a. The membership of Swansea’s representation on the Welsh Local Government Association;
  - b. Compliance and consistency of the reporting of information across the Council.

## **3. Equality and Engagement Implications**

- 3.1 There are no equality and engagement implications associated with this report.

## **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## **5. Legal Implications**

- 5.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report.

**Background Papers:** None.

**Appendices:** None.