



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Standards Committee**

Remotely via Microsoft Teams

Friday, 21 January 2022 at 9.30 am

Present: Jill Burgess (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

M B Lewis

Councillor(s)

O G James

Councillor(s)

L G Thomas

Co-opted Member(s)

Philip Crayford

Michaela Jones

Co-opted Member(s)

Mike Lewis

Margaret Williams

Officer(s)

Tracey Meredith

Huw Evans

Allison Lowe

Chief Legal Officer / Monitoring Officer

Head of Democratic Services

Democratic Services Officer

Apologies for Absence

Nil

14 Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

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

15 Annual Meeting with Political Group Leaders. (Verbal)

The Standards Committee invited the Political Group Leaders to the Standards Committee to discuss relevant legislation in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

The themes for discussion, which had been circulated in advance were as follows:

Question 1 – The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act provides that Leaders of political groups must take reasonable steps to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the members of their group. We are interested to hear as to what actions you take now in terms of maintaining standards within your own group and how are you proposing to meet the new duty going forward?

Question 2 – The Standards Committee also has new functions under the Act to ensure that group leaders have access to advice and training to support their new duties and to monitor group leaders' compliance with those duties. Is there any support that you feel would be beneficial either from the Standards Committee/Chief

Executive/Monitoring Officer in carrying out your duty and whether we can assist you in any way.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Chris Holley, Leader of the Liberal Democrat & Independent Group to the Committee who responded as follows:

Councillor Holley stated that there were various situations that could arise within political groups and the action he could take would be dependent on the particular circumstance that arose. He explained that his Group did not have “political whips” like some other parties.

He went on to say that he was aware of only one historical serious issue in another political party that had warranted serious action. However, he did acknowledge that legislation always required refreshing in order to suit the modern world. He went on to say that the role of a Councillor had changed over the years and they were expected to do far more than they used to, therefore problems could be encountered unintentionally, for example via social media. He stated that Group Leaders should act as “Gatekeepers” within their political groups and the Code of Conduct was part and parcel of how to show respect to all.

Councillor Holley welcomed the annual discussions with the Standards Committee so much so that he recommended a twice yearly invitation. He agreed that seeking advice from others was extremely important. He added that the small number of Councillor –v- Councillor complaints would be dealt with using the Local Dispute Resolution Protocol, with the number of complaints dramatically reducing over recent years.

In the event that a complaint was made, Councillor Holley would speak to the individual concerned, where most issues could usually be resolved. However, he was aware that, depending on the seriousness of the issue, Members could be removed from the membership of certain Committees within the Authority or even be suspended from the Group.

He concluded by thanking the Committee for inviting him and giving him the opportunity for this peer review discussion.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Rob Stewart, Leader of the Labour Group to the Committee who responded as follows:

Councillor Stewart commenced by explaining the vetting process undertaken by the Labour Party in advance of an election and prior to the candidate selection process.

He went on to outline the various stages undertaken in the period prior to an election, where a series of induction sessions were provided in order to explain the “Life of a Councillor” and the challenges they may face. The “Nolan Principles” would be explained, as well as preparing candidates for the change of role from an ordinary citizen to a Councillor. He explained that they would experience a higher level of expectation from the public and were advised on how to deal with both social media and conflicts of interest.

Once they were elected, the Labour Group supported Councillors through the “Party Whip” process. They would also be required to sign a Labour Group contract which committed them to certain standards of behaviour.

Once Councillors were elected, there were various protocols in place such as the Internal Dispute Resolution Process, where issues could be raised in order to preclude a complaint to the Ombudsman. This process had been extremely useful over recent years.

Councillor Stewart acknowledged that it would have been useful to have been in receipt of the still awaited guidance around Group Leader duties from Welsh Government for today’s discussion, however he stated that he always received appropriate advice from the Standards Committee and Monitoring Officer and would be grateful for that to continue.

He did however, highlight a concern that he had raised previously in relation to the lack of support for independent candidates prior to an election as the Ombudsman’s remit did not apply to election candidates if they weren’t currently a sitting Councillor. He felt that support or guidance was required for independent Candidates in relation to appropriate behaviour in the run up to an election as some candidates might not be aware of what would be deemed a Code of Conduct issue. He hoped that more could be done in advance of the next Local Government Elections in 2027.

The Chair thanked Councillor Stewart for his contribution.

The Chair welcomed Councillor Lyndon Jones, Leader of the Conservative Group to the Committee who responded as follows:

Councillor Jones commenced by stating that the Conservative Group had signed up to the Authority’s “Councillors Pledge on Standards” in order to go that extra mile. He felt that the main focus should be on respect and respecting both members and staff and he was pleased that there had been no particular instances in his political group. He felt that people should be treated as you would like to be treated yourself and that communication was key, with any issues raised being discussed within the group.

Whilst the new guidance was still awaited from Welsh Government, he was comfortable with the legislation and agreed that we should all work towards a certain standard, with “respect” for Councillors, Staff and the Public being at its core. He went on to say that prior to an election he would liaise with candidates about what was expected from them and remind them to be respectful at all times.

Councillor Jones agreed that it was extremely important for new Councillors to receive the appropriate training, as well as refresher training for returning Councillors. He would also encourage asking for support when required in order to raise standards.

He confirmed that the Conservative Party also adopted a selection process for vetting potential candidates, with Councillor Jones being a member of that selection panel.

The Chair thanked Councillor Jones for his time and responses.

16 Review of Ethical Standards Framework.

The Monitoring Officer presented a report to update the Committee on the Welsh Government review of the Ethical Standards Framework.

In March 2021 the Welsh Government commissioned Richard Penn to review the ethical standards framework for local government in Wales to ensure it remained fit for purpose and was effective in fostering high standards of conduct and public confidence in local government. A copy of the review was attached at Appendix A.

Resolved that:

- 1) The Standards Committee note the contents of the review pending any formal consultation;
- 2) The Standards Committee supports the creation of a National Forum for Independent Chairs of Standards Committee.

17 All Wales Standards Conference. (Verbal Update)

The Monitoring Officer reported that the All Wales Standards Conference would take place virtually between 10 am and 4 pm on 9 February 2022.

Should any Member of the Standards Committee be interested in attending, they should inform the Monitoring Officer who would arrange for the link to the meeting to be shared with them.

The meeting ended at 10.36 am

Chair