



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Standards Committee**

Committee Room 5 - Guildhall, Swansea

Friday, 20 April 2018 at 9.35 am

Present: Jill Burgess (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

M B Lewis

Councillor(s)

L G Thomas

Co-opted Member(s)

Gareth Evans

Co-opted Member(s)

Mike Lewis

Co-opted Member(s)

Margaret Williams

Community / Town Council Rep:

Philip Crayford

Officer(s)

Huw Evans

Allison Lowe

Tracey Meredith

Head of Democratic Services

Democratic Services Officer

Head of Legal, Democratic Services and Business
Intelligence and Monitoring Officer

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): J A Hale

Independent Member(s): Michaela Jones

28 Disclosures of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

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

29 Minutes.

Resolved that the Minutes of the Standards Committee held on 12 January 2018 be approved and signed as a correct record.

Matters Arising:

Item 27 – Workplan 2017-2018

The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that she had formally written to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) inviting him to attend a future meeting of the Standards Committee. She would update the Committee in due course in relation to his response. She also confirmed that the PSOW would be attending the Standards Conference in September.

30 Annual Meeting with Political Group Leaders, Chairs of Committees and Chief Executive.

The Chair reported that each year the Standards Committee invited each Political Group Leader, the Chief Executive and a selection of Chairs to attend the Committee to seek their understanding and opinions on the work of the Committee.

Due to the Local Government Elections 2017 and there being a new influx of Councillors, the invitations were delayed to allow Councillors to settle into their new role.

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

- 1) 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?
- 2) What do you understand the role of the Standards Committee to be?
- 3) Is there any work you feel the Standards Committee should be undertaking over the next year?
- 4) How can Political Group Leaders / Committee Chairs promote standards and good governance through Leadership?
- 5) How can the Standards Committee become more active in promoting ethical conduct among Councillors / Co-opted Members?
- 6) 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?
- 7) 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?
- 8) Training for Councillors / Co-opted Members is vitally important. How can the Standards Committee tackle those that do not see training as important?
- 9) 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?
- 10) What is the future role of the Standards Committee?

The Chair welcomed Councillor Lyndon Jones, Conservative Political Group Leader to the meeting. Councillor Jones outlined the following:

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- He agreed that it was still appropriate to have a Code of Conduct in Wales. In order to support the Code, the Conservative Group had also signed up to the "Swansea Pledge" on Standards. They felt this sent out a positive message of their commitment to maintaining high standards.
- His understanding of the role of the Standards Committee was to ensure that standards of Councillors were maintained and the Committee would investigate any breaches referred to them.
- It was the responsibility of both individual Councillors and Group Leaders' to ensure that standards were maintained.
- The Conservative Group had not encountered any standards / code of conduct / bad governance issues. In his experience, all Councillors and staff were very approachable and helpful.
- He suggested that due to recent social media cases in the press, that Social Media training should be provided.
- Group Leaders and Committee Chairs should promote standards and good governance via firm leadership.
- 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.
- Group Leaders (including himself) were responsible for encouraging members of their group to attend relevant training sessions.
- The Standards Committee should continue circulating updates to Councillors on the PSOW Code of Conduct Casebook and other relevant documentation to ensure the minimum standards required of Councillors.
- He confirmed that even though a "thick skin" was required in politics, most Councillors tried to do their best for their constituents.
- Political debate was healthy in Swansea but needs to stay in the Council Chamber - respect is key.
- The Conservative Group Members have worked very hard in their respective Committees and have met with the Cabinet Members on a range of issues. The system was working well.
- It was a credit to the current Councillors that the Internal Dispute Resolution Protocol had not yet been utilised.

The Chair thanked Councillor Jones for his attendance.

The Chair then welcomed Councillor Chris Holley, Political Group Leader – Liberal Democrat and Independent Opposition Group to the meeting. Councillor Holley outlined the following:

- It was more essential now than it had been for a number of years to have a Code of Conduct in Wales. 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.
- He felt that the role of the Standards Committee had changed dramatically over the years, with it now having more of a scrutiny type of function.
- Suggested that the Standards Committee look at:

- The membership of Swansea's representation on the Welsh Local Government Association;
- Compliance and consistency of the reporting of information across the Council.
- He felt that the behaviour of Councillors had improved over the last few years, with fewer complaints being made to the PSOW. However it was the perception of many Councillors that there was no point in reporting cases as the PSOW had stated that Councillors needed to have a "thick skin" and political banter was part of the political landscape.
- He agreed that Councillors did need to have a "thick skin" however comments should not be personal and he would happily advise his colleagues if he felt the line had been crossed. He agreed that good leadership and training had helped to improve the situation.
- He suggested that the Standards Committee should attend meetings such as Council, Planning and Scrutiny in order to view the current work being undertaken and the decisions being made.
- He explained that his group also had a "buddying" system rather than an official mentoring programme in place.
- Agreed that the Code of Conduct training was comprehensive. He suggested that the following could be improved on:
 - The on-line Gifts and Hospitality form;
 - Guidance on what should be declared on the Gifts & Hospitality form;
 - Further clarification on declarations of interests at meetings as Councillors were frequently declaring interests unnecessarily.
- He stated that the role of Councillors had changed dramatically over the years, with Councillors being more and more individually responsible for their ward. They were now responsible for their own Councillor Community Improvement Budget, which they could utilise for various improvements in their wards.
- Although he agreed that training was a necessity for any Councillor, he had experienced reluctance from certain members in the past in relation to undertaking training that they felt they did not require or had already received. This had been difficult to manage.
- He felt the Standards Committee should continue to monitor the standards of Councillors but also to attend meetings in order to understand how the Council works and what the tensions were within it.

The Chair thanked Councillor Holley for his attendance.

31 Code of Conduct Casebook.

The Monitoring Officer provided a 'for information' report to update the Standards Committee on the Ombudsman's Code of Conduct Casebook.

The Casebook covered the period October to December 2017 – Issue 15 January 2018.

One of the cases involved an alleged breach of the code of conduct using a Facebook messenger group chat. The Monitoring Officer stated that there was likely to be a workshop at the Standards Conference in relation to Social Media, details of

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which would be fed back to all Councillors and Co-Opted Members after the event. Training on Social Media had previously been provided for Councillors & Co-Opted Members, however consideration would be given to holding further sessions.

Resolved that:

- 1) The report be noted;
- 2) The Code of Conduct Casebook be circulated to all Councillors for information.

The meeting ended at 11.33 am

Chair