
STANDARDS COMMITTEE, 30.09.13

Present:-

Elected Members:- Councillors Charles Wyn Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams and Michael Sol Owen.

Independent Members:- Mr Gwilym Ellis Evans (Chairman), Miss Linda Byrne, Miss Margaret E. Jones, Mr Sam W. Soysa and Dr Einir Young.

Community Committee Member:- Mr David Clay.

Also Present: Dilys Phillips (Monitoring Officer), Siôn Huws (Compliance and Language Manager), Iwan Evans (Legal and Cabinet Services Manager) and Eirian Roberts (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Others invited to the meeting: Leaders / representatives of the political groups.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

2. MINUTES

The Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 1 July, 2013, as a true record.

3. LEADERS OF THE COUNCIL'S POLITICAL GROUPS

The Chairman extended a warm welcome to the leaders / representatives of the political groups who were present to discuss the work which could be undertaken in relation to maintaining standards of conduct.

Present to discuss the matter with members of the Committee were Councillors Gareth Roberts (representing the Leader), Roy Owen, Owain Williams and Stephen Churchman.

The Chairman explained the role and purpose of the committee and sought the opinion of the leaders / representatives on the five following questions:-

- 1) What else could the committee do to promote the high standards of the Council?
- 2) What is the role of political groups in maintaining standards?
- 3) What are the main conduct matters the committee should discuss?
- 4) How could members be encouraged to attend training on the Code of Conduct?
- 5) What is your opinion on resolving complaints informally? (i.e. within the groups, with the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Executive or at the Standards Committee, without going to the Ombudsman).

During the discussion on the matter, the following observations were submitted:-

- It was a matter for the individual to respect the Code of Conduct and that Leaders could do no more than provide guidance to members of their group by trying to raise their awareness of the code.
- It would be beneficial to enclose a straightforward summary of the Code of Conduct with the Council's meeting agendas. It would also be possible to install an 'App' on the I-pad that reminded members regularly of the main requirements of the Code of Conduct.
- Undertaking training was part of a councillor's role, but that training had to be presented in an interesting and coherent manner.
- Training on the Code of Conduct was more important than anything else and it should be mandatory. It should also be more than just a box-ticking exercise and perhaps there was a need for more than one course a year.
- It would be beneficial to provide training for councillors on what was expected of them as members of the various committees. On the contrary, it was noted that it would not be practical to provide training on everything and that an element of common sense came into this.
- It would be beneficial to receive much more prior notice regarding training courses. Perhaps an icon could be included on the 'Desktop' of the I-pad that linked to the training programme.
- There was a need to raise the profile of the Standards Committee in general, as well as among county councillors and town and community councillors.
- It was too easy for people to submit an official complaint to the Ombudsman and there was a need to tighten arrangements in some way.
- The procedure of resolving complaints on an informal / local basis was to be approved. It would be an idea to give a presentation to members at the meeting of the full Council to remind them of the procedure to be followed in terms of resolving a complaint locally and the fact that the Monitoring Officer's door was always open. It was also suggested that the Standards Committee could do more to spread the message among the public, such as holding roadshows. In addition, if the informal in-house arrangements appeared to be working, perhaps they should be extended so that complaints from the public could also be resolved on a more informal level.
- Providing services for the public across the whole county was the important element. There was a need to be transparent and there was a responsibility on councillors to behave in a fair, democratic, open and rightful manner.

The Monitoring Officer noted that it would be beneficial to hear the observations of the leaders and he asked for the committee's opinion on the matters raised by the groups.

The following was noted:-

- That they supported the leaders' observations in relation to (i) including a summary of the main requirements of the Code of Conduct with Council agendas / on the I-pads, (ii) seeking to educate the public that it was possible to resolve complaints informally without approaching the Ombudsman, (iii) raising the committee's profile amongst the public and amongst councillors and (iv) introducing training on the Code more often and the idea of making it mandatory.
- That 'Newyddion Gwynedd' could be used to raise awareness of the Standards Committee and the protocols and codes that were relevant to its work.
- That it would be a good idea to spread the message at the full Council that all members should undertake training on the Code of Conduct.
- That training on the Code of Conduct could be provided to the members in the Area Forums with the inclusion of examples in order to bring the matter alive to members.

It was asked whether the resources to achieve all of this were available. The Monitoring Officer responded that the work would have to be tailored according to the available resources. She intended to hold a discussion with the Information Technology Unit following this meeting, but she supposed that some of the recommended steps would not take up much time or resources.

It was noted that it would be beneficial to know the costs that would be saved by resolving more complaints locally rather than going directly to the Ombudsman.

RESOLVED to adopt the suggestions of the leaders and proceed to implement them.

4. ALLEGATIONS AGAINST MEMBERS

Submitted for information – the report of the Monitoring Officer notifying the committee members of the developments, since her last report, in terms of allegations against members.

During the ensuing discussion on the matter, the following main matters were noted:-

- Referring to section 3 of the report, it was asked whether this matter had been resolved by now given that a year had passed since the Standards Committee held a hearing in relation to the complaint against Councillor A.M. Jones. The Monitoring Officer responded that she had been given to understand by the officer responsible for administering the appeal that a discussion had been held with the councillor; however, no date had been set for the hearing. She added that the office of the Adjudication Panel for Wales had acknowledged that 12 months was too lengthy a period to arrange a panel, whatever the circumstances, and they would seek to get a decision on the date. She was increasing the pressure on the office in order to bring the matter to a close, however, to date, she had not received a date or any information regarding what would take place.
- It was enquired whether or not the Ombudsman now took less time to investigate complaints. The Monitoring Officer responded that there was no evidence of this, but that he did make quicker decisions on whether or not an investigation should be held.

RESOLVED

- (a) That this committee sends a letter to the Adjudication Panel for Wales to press on them to proceed with Councillor A.M. Jones's appeal case, as failure to resolve the matter undermines the entire procedure.**
- (b) The letter should also note that this committee wishes for it to be mandatory for people to attend appeal hearings in future, and that this committee should also bear this in mind, if and when another hearing is held for a complaint against a member in future.**
- (c) To ask the North Wales Standards Committee Forum to discuss, and send observations as appropriate, the time it takes for the Ombudsman to investigate complaints.**

5. SOCIAL MEDIA

Submitted – the report of the Monitoring Officer presenting the Welsh Local Government Association's guidelines on social media to councillors, requesting that the committee

considered amending them specifically for Gwynedd's use and / or producing a specific protocol on the use of social media by councillors.

The Monitoring Officer referred to the decision of the Democratic Services Committee at its meeting on 10 September to recommend that Gwynedd should adopt their own guidelines on the use of social media and establish a sub-group jointly with the Standards Committee to collaborate on drawing up guidelines on social media for councillors in Gwynedd (with the exact process for achieving this to be agreed between the Chairs of both committees).

It was suggested that the town and community councils could be asked to consider adopting the same guidelines in due course. The Monitoring Officer noted that she would submit this idea to the Sub-group and asked the members to send any other observations they wished for the Sub-group to consider to her attention.

RESOLVED

- (a) To recommend that Gwynedd should adopt its own guidelines on the use of social media.**
- (b) To recommend establishing a sub-group jointly with the Democratic Services Committee to collaborate on drawing up guidelines on social media for councillors in Gwynedd (with the exact process for achieving this to be agreed between the Chairs of both committees).**
- (c) To nominate the Chairman and Vice-chair of this committee and Linda Byrne (along with David Clay as a substitute for them) to serve on the sub-group.**

6. TRAINING

Submitted – the report of the Monitoring Officer on the training given on the Code of Conduct and on the training arrangements for the coming year.

Referring to section 3(c) of the report, the Monitoring Officer noted that she had arranged two sessions for the town and community council clerks jointly with the Society of Local Council Clerks – one in Caernarfon on 3 October and the other in Dolgellau on 7 October. To date, of the 55 clerks in Gwynedd, nine had put their names down for Caernarfon and six for Dolgellau.

Concern was expressed that so few clerks would attend the training sessions. It was asked whether the town and community council members were aware of these sessions as the invitations had been sent to the clerks, rather than the councils themselves.

RESOLVED

- (a) To accept the report on the training provided and on the training plans for the coming year.**
- (b) When training is arranged for town and community council clerks in future, that the invitations are sent to the councils themselves, rather than the clerks.**
- (c) To ask the clerks attending the training in October to note on their feedback forms whether or not they received their council's seal of approval to attend.**
- (ch) To hold an hour's session of specific training for members of the Standards Committee at the beginning of the next meeting in January, to include revising dispensations and arranging and holding hearings.**

The meeting commenced at 11.00am and concluded at 12.45pm.