

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
NORTH WALES STANDARDS COMMITTEE FORUM
HELD AT COUNTY HALL, MOLD
ON TUESDAY, 29 APRIL 2014**

PRESENT:

Isle of Anglesey	Michael Wilson - Chair Robyn Jones - Deputy Monitoring Officer Awena Parry - Solicitor to the Monitoring Officer
Conwy	Howie Roberts - Chair (Chair) Samuel Adams - Vice-Chair Ceri Williams - Deputy Monitoring Officer
Denbighshire	Ian Trigger - Chair Rev. Steven Wayne Roberts - Vice-Chair
Flintshire	Patricia Jones - Chair Edward Michael Hughes - Vice-Chair Gareth Owens - Monitoring Officer
Gwynedd	Gwilym Ellis Evans - Chair
Wrexham	Ceri Nash - Vice-Chair
Snowdonia National Park	David Vaughan - Chair

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Islwyn Jones (Anglesey), Delyth Jones (Conwy) and Sam Soysa (Gwynedd).

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the North Wales Standards Committee Forum held on 21 October 2013 were submitted for approval.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the North Wales Standards Committee Forum held on 21 October 2013 be received and confirmed as a correct record.

3. TRAINING SESSION

A presentation was received from Mr Gareth Owens, Monitoring Officer of Flintshire County Council on ethical training and development not only to help councillors to understand their obligations under the Code of Conduct but also to assist independent members in their role on Standards Committees. He explained the approach taken in Flintshire in relation to:

- Member training - this had not been made compulsory due to a limited enforcement mechanism, apart from those on Planning and Audit Committees which Group Leaders were responsible for enforcing. Low attendance at Member training sessions had prompted a change in procedure to ensure a minimum of six attendees before a training session could proceed. It had also caused the Council to adopt a different approach. Training was given in small doses on specific topics at meetings which councillors were already attending. He gave examples of delivering training on declaring interests at group meetings and on recording declarations of interest immediately prior to committee meetings.
- Standards Committee - in addition to task-based training (eg granting dispensations and the holding of a hearing), broader development on the role and workings of the Council had been given. An informal half-hour training session was held prior to each Standards Committee meeting, with suggestions for future topics for training and discussion sought under the Forward Work Programme standard item.
- Town and Community Councils - periodic meetings of the Standards Committee were held at Town and Community Councils with others invited to attend and submit agenda items. At these meetings, the half-hour training session was adapted accordingly. In addition, meetings of the County Forum provided an opportunity for issues to be raised between representatives of the County Council and Town and Community Councils.

Following the presentation, members of the Forum discussed the varying number of Town and Community Councils within their areas and the difficulties that some had experienced in providing training to Clerks. It was noted that useful guidance could be found within a governance toolkit for parish/town councils in England produced by the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors, which had previously been made available to Monitoring Officers.

Comments were raised on the different approaches taken by Councils to engage with Town and Community Councils. These involved holding 'roadshow' events across the locality and encouraging Council Members to visit Town and Community Councils and report back on any issues. A potential increase in such issues was likely due to the need for Town and Community Councils to develop their websites in line with Welsh Government requirements.

4. OPEN SESSION FOR ITEMS OF CURRENT INTEREST

(i) High Court matter

In Flintshire County Council, a decision was awaited from the High Court in response to a challenge made by a councillor who had been disqualified. In view of the nature of the challenge, it was felt that the outcome would be of

significance to all Standards Committees. The case had been included in The Ombudsman Code of Conduct Casebook.

(ii) Appraisals

Gwynedd County Council Standards Committee had undertaken a self appraisal at its last meeting. A similar exercise was being developed by Anglesey County Council Standards Committee to identify any improvements and to be proactive as opposed to reactive, however this would involve members being individually appraised by the Chair who was in turn appraised by the Monitoring Officer. Reference was made to a set of standards in England to assess whether ethical practices were in place within Councils. The Chair suggested that this topic could be a future agenda item.

(iii) Dispensation forms

It was reported that Gwynedd County Council Standards Committee had been involved in the formulation of a draft policy which had subsequently been endorsed and was also undertaking a review of dispensation forms.

5. APPROVAL OF LETTERS FROM ISLE OF ANGLESEY COUNTY COUNCIL IN RELATION TO STANDARDS MATTERS

In response to previous discussions, Ms Awena Parry, Solicitor to the Monitoring Officer of Anglesey County Council presented the letters which had been drafted to One Voice Wales and the Ombudsman for Wales, for approval by the Forum.

(i) One Voice Wales

Following concerns around Town and Community Councils complying with statutory publication requirements, the letter suggested ways in which help could be offered by One Voice Wales. During discussion, some members of the Forum spoke of their surprise that many Town and Community Councils had refused the offer of funding to help with this. The second letter requested that consideration be given to publishing a governance toolkit, similar to that referred to earlier in the meeting, to assist Town and Community Councils in Wales.

(ii) Ombudsman for Wales

The letter requested that the Ombudsman for Wales consider (a) the potential for developing sanctions guidance for specific use by Standards Committees and (b) publishing case summaries on the Ombudsman's website, once they had reached a conclusion, in addition to the continuation of The Ombudsman Code of Conduct Casebook which had proved useful.

It was not yet known when the new Ombudsman for Wales, Nicholas Bennett, would take up his post.

RESOLVED: That the three letters be sent by Anglesey County Council on behalf of the Forum, with no changes.

6. ANY OTHER ITEM

(i) Chairing meetings

Whilst the Chair was satisfied to continue in this role, he suggested that the Chairs of each Standards Committee may wish to preside at meetings held at their Council offices. The Forum felt that this might lead to inconsistency and would complicate arrangements.

RESOLVED: That that the Chair (or Vice Chair) of the Forum would preside at meetings wherever they were held.

(ii) All Wales Standards Conference

It was clarified that the next All Wales Standards Conference would be held next year in South Wales.

(iii) Ombudsman

At the previous meeting, it had been resolved that concerns raised by Gwynedd County Council about an outstanding case should be raised with the newly appointed Ombudsman for Wales. It was agreed that a letter would be sent on behalf of the Forum to relay these concerns with the expectation that a response should be made in reasonable time. It was felt that the new Ombudsman should be allowed time to settle into his role before being invited to a future meeting of the Forum.

RESOLVED: That a letter be sent on behalf of the Forum by Gwynedd County Council to the Ombudsman for Wales to relay the concerns and seek a response within reasonable time.

(iv) Training

A suggestion was made by Anglesey County Council for the Forum to receive training from Peter Keith Lucas, who had provided valuable training to a number of Councils. The total cost of £3K plus VAT for a full day (10am-4pm) would amount to £500 per Council. Those who had been involved in training by this provider spoke in support of the suggestion and felt that the content of the training would be beneficial to the Forum.

Mr Owens agreed to email the Monitoring Officers who were not present to convey the support for this training. Once approval had been granted from all Councils, arrangements would be made to proceed.

RESOLVED: That Mr Owens contact Monitoring Officers on the Forum to seek agreement to the training from Peter Keith Lucas.

7. **FEEDBACK**

It was clarified that this standard agenda item provided an opportunity for self-analysis of the Forum's meetings and to identify any improvements which could be made. Comments were raised on the need to keep the meetings informal whilst some felt that the minutes should have been made available earlier and had only been provided in English.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of meetings of the North Wales Standards Committee Forum be provided bilingually and forwarded to Conwy County Borough Council for prompt circulation to the Forum.

8. **DATE AND VENUE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

In line with earlier discussion, it was agreed that Ms Parry would contact Peter Keith Lucas to pursue training dates for end June/early July 2014 at Anglesey County Council.

A suitable date for the next meeting of the Forum would be arranged by Sian Harland for September 2014 at Anglesey County Council.

RESOLVED: That a date for the next meeting of the Forum be arranged by Sian Harland for September 2014 at Anglesey County Council. That Ms Parry seek suitable dates for end June/early July from Peter Keith Lucas for the training session at Anglesey County Council.

(The meeting ended at 3.30pm)