

Minutes



Standards Committee

Date: 7 November 2019

Time: 5.30 pm

Present: Councillors Westwood (Chair), Davies, V Dudley, P Hourahine, H Britton and Watkins

Pamela Tasker (Governance Officers) and Gareth Price (Head of Law & Regulation)

Apologies: Councillors H Thomas, A Mitchell and Worthington

1 Apologies for Absence

Mitchell, Dr Worthington

2 Declarations of Interest

None

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Agreed: That the Minutes were a true record.

4 Chair's Announcements

No announcements

5 Matters Arising

None.

6 Standards Committee Annual Report 2018/19

The Chair commented that the Standards Committee Annual Report was a well-written report by the Head of Law and Regulation and that they were satisfied with the report.

The process was that the report would go to Council on the 26th November 2019 and Members could give their comments before then. The report was a similar format of previous years. The previous practice had been for one of the Councillor members of the Committee to present and move the report in Council, unless the Chair wanted to attend in person. Councillor Hourahine agreed to present the report to Council on the 26th November 2019 if Councillor Thomas was unable to do so. It was agreed that either Councillor Thomas or Councillor Hourahine would present the report to Council

The Head of Law & Regulation reported that three complaints had been made to the Ombudsman last year, but none of them had been accepted for investigation. Two complaints had been resolved amicably under the local resolution protocol, rather than an escalation to the Ombudsman, so this was working well.

The Chair commented on the Welsh Local Government Association Social Media Guidelines for Councillors and the lessons picked up in England.

Point 2.6 and 2.7 the Ombudsman Annual Report was discussed and it was noted by the Committee that the number of complaints about the Code of Conduct had gone up by 4% in the last year.

Complaints regarding lack of respect were highlighted and it was acknowledged that complaints had gone up nationally but not locally.

The Committee discussed how raising the profile of the Standards Committee was important. In England it had come full circle because the self-regulation of Councillors was not working, following the abolition of the legislative framework and the adoption of voluntary local codes of conduct. Therefore, the review of the Committee on Public Life was now recommending the re-introduction of controls in England similar to those that continued to operate in Wales. Standards of ethical conduct in England and public confidence had slipped due to the abolition of the statutory controls.

Resolved:

That any further comments on the draft Annual Report be submitted within the next 10 days, before the final report is published with the Council agenda. Subject to this, the Committee agreed the draft report for presentation to Council.

7 Ethical Standards Questionnaire

The Chair commented that the results of the questionnaire were disappointing as only 13 responses were received and questioned whether this was a representational response.

It was noted that the answers to the questions were fairly positive and comments from individuals who had filled in the questionnaire had also been included for information.

Main points

- 8 responses were received from Members
- The best response received was Q1 where 100% of respondents replied in a positive manner (strongly agree or agree) that the work of the Standards Committee had a positive effect.
- Q2 responses showed that 92% of respondents replied in a positive manner and thought that the Council operates in an ethical manner
- Q3 showed an equal mix of agree and strongly agree responses in relation to whether the Council had clear policies and guidance in place.
- 100% of respondents agreed that it was easy for them to declare an interest.
- 53% of respondents felt that they did not need further training.

It was commented that Community Councils did request further training but that elected Members did not show the same interest.

The Chair commented on the respondent comments at the end particularly the comment regarding the profile of the Standards Committee being low and that maybe they needed to be referred to the annual report in terms of reporting back. It was also suggested that the information on the web pages should be updated to raise the profile of the committee and the members.

A Member stated that they thought that it was positive how a respondent thought that the Standards Committee was low profile and not very busy as if it was busy then there would be a cause for concern.

Another Member commented that they found it difficult to speak to certain officers and that they understood that it was not always possible to do this but that they found it invaluable but that everything had to be done by email.

The Head of Law and Regulation confirmed that there were no restrictions on Members speaking to officers, provided that this was agreed with senior management. The issue was where Members in the past saw officers face to face and some junior officers felt under pressure to carry out actions.

It was also commented by the Head of Law and Regulation that there was nothing to stop Members speaking to officers face to face prearranged by appointment but going to staff to get advice needed to be channelled through senior management.

The Chair suggested whether an on-line survey would produce better results than a manual questionnaire. The Head of Law & Regulation advised that this could be considered, but responses were limited even with electronic surveys.

All 50 members were canvassed as well as 10 senior managers, who were also asked to cascade the survey among their managers and other officers who advised elected members on a regular basis, such as those officers attending Planning and Licensing committees.

It was noted that the staff survey response was also low and it could be assumed that those individuals who didn't fill it in were satisfied and there were no issues.

It was discussed that if there was a good relationship built up with an officer and Members then it shouldn't be a problem.

It was noted that getting hold of officers was an issue and the Head of Law and Regulation reiterated that the current system was there for a reason. It was not there to frustrate Councillors but to ensure that Members are not perceived to be exercising improper influence over junior staff.

Elected members should raise issues with the Head of Service or senior managers.

The Chair questioned whether this agenda item should be rolled on to the next meeting in January 2020. One of the points made was that a 10% return was a good response.

It was discussed how establishing a good relationship with officers was very beneficial and by doing it in a transparent way was the most important to avoid a Councillor getting in trouble for trying to influence.

Resolved:

- That the Standards Questionnaire be considered at the next meeting and for the questionnaire to be sent to third and fourth tier staff.
- That Standards Committees of other authorities be contacted to see how well their surveys were received.

8 Complaints

The Head of Law and Regulation confirmed that there were no complaints to report.

There was one local resolution complaint from IT regarding a Member and the complaint from the service manager was actioned under Stage 2 and a meeting was arranged between the manager and the Elected Member. The complaint regarded lack of respect for IT support staff trying to resolve problems with the Councillor's computer. The Councillor had apologised for any offence but had been frustrated by delays in resolving issues with the laptop because this was affecting her work. The manager agreed a process for escalating any complaints of this nature. It was resolved amicably and did not need to be taken any further, which showed that the resolution protocol was working at a local level.

9 Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting will take place on 16 January 2020 at 5.50pm in Committee Room 4.