

Minutes



Standards Committee

Date: 18 January 2024

Time: 5.30 pm

Present: A Mitchell (Chair), Watkins (Vice Chair), P Worthington, J. Davies and G. Nurton. Councillors P Cockeram, F Hussain and W Routley.

In Attendance: Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Katharine Majer (Deputy Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Anne Jenkins (Governance Team Leader) and Emily Mayger (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies for Absence

Richard Morgan

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting:

Accepted.

Resolved:

The Minutes of the Previous Meeting on the 19th October 2023 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

4 Matters Arising

None.

5 Chair's Announcements

None.

6 Complaints

The Monitoring Officer provided the Committee with an oral update on complaints.

The Monitoring Officer noted that the Ombudsman had provided the Decision Notice for one complaint made by a member of the public alleging a Councillor had failed to show respect, had used bullying and harassing behaviour and had conducted themselves in a manner that could have brought the Authority into disrepute. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the complaint had been fully investigated and it was found that the Member had been acting in a personal capacity and that there was not sufficient evidence that they

had brought the Authority into disrepute. The Monitoring Officer stated that therefore the complaint had not been upheld and so there had been no further action.

Resolved:

The Standards Committee noted the complaints Report.

7 Ombudsman Annual Report 2022/23

The Monitoring Officer presented the Ombudsman Annual Report to the Committee.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the report consisted of 2 parts. The Monitoring Officer stated that the first was for overall complaints against the Authority which although not under the remit of the Standards Committee had been included for interest.

The Monitoring Officer stated that although there had been a small increase in the number of reports the percentage that had been upheld had been relatively low. The Monitoring Officer wished to draw the Committee's attention to the Newport City Council (NCC) report and noted that there had been an increase in complaints mainly pertaining to Housing and Communities. The Monitoring Officer stated that 4% of complaints against NCC were made to the Ombudsman directly by the complainant.

The Monitoring Officer noted that complaints regarding the Code of Conduct were low for NCC. The Monitoring Officer stated that there had been 7 complaints made and explained to the Committee that 6 of them had been discontinued and the other had previously been referred to the Standards Committee.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that 7 complaints had been made against Newport Community Councils all of which had no further action taken.

The Monitoring Officer noted the actions that NCC had been advised to take and highlighted the engagement between NCC and the Complaints Standards Authority. The Monitoring Officer also noted that they wished to arrange a representative from the Ombudsman to come to a Standards Committee meeting to promote further engagement as well as providing support for the Group Leaders in fulfilling their duties.

A question was raised whether a league table had been supplied that showed the comparisons between the Local Authorities. The Monitoring Officer drew the Committee's attention to the report and noted that Newport came out near the middle which would be considered low when in comparison with its size as a Local Authority.

It was noted that although higher complaints are often seen as a negative, it could be an indication of an easy and effective complaint system which is a positive. The Committee Member noted that it is important that Authorities are happy to hear and listen to complaints.

Resolved:

The Standards Committee noted the Ombudsman Annual Report 2022/23.

8 Gifts and Hospitality Report

The Monitoring Officer presented the Gifts and Hospitality Report to the Committee. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee of the current Gifts and Hospitality threshold and noted that there had been discussions within the National Monitoring Officer Forum about a standardised threshold across Wales.

The Chair noted that comparison of the values across the Welsh Authorities had been of interest and noted that some gifts may have been received as well as additional remuneration.

It was noted that it was positive to know that Gifts and Hospitality had continued to have been monitored and noted their agreement with the current threshold of £25. The point was raised that the report had lacked in detail which should be included for transparency. It was suggested that Gifts and Hospitality that had been declined should be monitored as well.

The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that the report had provided an extract and the full details could be found as a list on the website. The Monitoring Officer informed the Committee that Members are not required to declare any Gifts and Hospitality that had not been accepted but noted that it could be a recommendation given to Members for the sake of transparency.

It was noted that the information was not readily available on the website and recommended that the way to access information on Gifts and Hospitality be made clearer.

The view was expressed that declined Gifts and Hospitality would be less important to declare and another the point was made that if declaring Gifts and Hospitality that had been declined was not enforceable then it should not be included.

The Chair suggested that it may be of use to discuss Gifts and Hospitality with the Group Leaders.

The Committee noted their surprise that a uniform approach to the Gifts and Hospitality threshold had not already been put in place but stated their agreement that £25 felt both adequate and in line with other authorities.

Resolved:

The Standards Committee noted the Gifts and Hospitality Report and it was decided that although it was agreed that the threshold seemed reasonable, Gifts and Hospitality should be discussed further with the Group Leaders.

9 Welsh Government Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales - the role of Standards Committee.

The Monitoring Officer noted that an update had been provided on the Welsh Government Statutory and Non-Statutory Guidance for Principal Councils in Wales at the last Standards Committee meeting which had led to matters arising on the work that was required to be undertaken to comply with the updated guidance.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted the section relating to the frequency and method of updates from Group Leaders and noted that the Committee would agree on Group Leader attendance going forward at the start of the yearly meeting cycle. The Monitoring Officer highlighted to the Committee that they were also able to determine whether the content of the reports had been sufficient.

The Monitoring Officer noted the desire to achieve a 100% attendance record for the Code of Conduct training in 2024 and raised the possibility of delivering an e-learning module for those who had already undertaken the training previously that could be used as a refresher.

The Monitoring Officer reported on the need to provide advice and training to new Group Leaders on their roles and responsibilities. The Monitoring Officer suggested that research could be completed to benchmark against other local authorities. The Monitoring Officer recommended that the Committee should invite the Ombudsman representative to attend the

next meeting with the Group Leaders to offer them support and feedback on their duties as well as handling complaints.

The Chair noted his surprise that the Code of Conduct training was not already offered as an e-learning module. The Chair stated his recognition of the benefits of face-to-face training but stated the importance of progression. The Chair stated his agreement that the attendance of the Ombudsman representative should correspond with the Group Leaders attendance to ensure a consistent message.

It was highlighted that the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) had an online platform that may be adaptable to use by Newport City Council (NCC). The Monitoring Officer agreed to look into this.

The view was expressed that the summary provided had been helpful and that it was positive that many issues had already been covered. It was noted that the enthusiasm of the Group Leaders had been obvious and that the Committee should capitalise on their willingness to engage as well as welcome any opportunity to support them in their role.

A concern was raised that members may not pay undivided attention to training when it is delivered online. The Chair noted that although he was in agreement, there were methods to try and ensure attention was being paid to the training. The Committee considered that a blended approach could be taken. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that any e-learning module would only be used for refresher training and that it would not be considered standard for all Members.

Resolved:

The Standards Committee noted the report.

All Other Business

The Chair updated the Committee on his attendance at Full Council where he presented the Standards Committee Annual Report. It was noted that it had been preferable to have the Chair of Standards Committee present the report rather than a Member.

The Chair informed the Committee that he would be in attendances at the upcoming National Standards Committee Forum meeting and that he would provide feedback at the next meeting.

The Chair informed the Committee that the Monitoring Officer was leaving her role and the Standards Committee wished her luck in all future endeavours

10 **Click here to view the Webcast**

[Standards Committee - Thursday 18 January 2024, 5:30pm - Newport City Council Webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)