

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
NORTH WALES STANDARDS COMMITTEES FORUM
HELD AT THE GUILDHALL, WREXHAM
ON MONDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2013**

PRESENT:

Isle of Anglesey	Michael Wilson - Chair Islwyn Jones – Vice Chair Lynn Ball – Monitoring Officer
Flintshire	Patricia Jones - Chair
Gwynedd	Gwilym Ellis Evans - Chair Sam Soysa – Vice Chair
Wrexham	Rob Dawson - Chair Councillor Paul Pemberton Community Councillor Geoff Edwards Trevor Coxon – Monitoring Officer Sioned Wyn Davies – Deputy Monitoring Officer Jane Johnson – Senior Committee Officer

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Howie Roberts and Samuel Adams (Conwy), Ian Trigger and Rev. Wayne Roberts (Denbighshire), Gareth Owens (Flintshire), Ceri Nash (Wrexham) and Jane Eyton-Jones (Fire and Rescue Authority)

2 WELCOME

Mr Rob Dawson, Chair of Wrexham County Borough Council Standards Committee, welcomed those present to the first of the new style North Wales Standards Committees Forum.

3 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum held on 20 May 2013 were submitted for approval.

Corrections

Page 1 – Appointment of Vice-Chair

That the references to 'Councillor Gwilym Ellis Evans' be amended to read 'Mr Gwilym Ellis Evans'

Page 6 – Indemnities for Members and Local Resolution

It was proposed that the words 'Members were advised' be deleted from the beginning of the second sentence of the first paragraph at the top of page six and that they be replaced with 'There was a view expressed'

RESOLVED – That, subject to the above corrections, the Minutes of the meeting of the North Wales Standards Committees Forum held on 20 May 2013 be received and confirmed as a correct record.

4 TRAINING SESSION

Mr Trevor Coxon, Monitoring Officer Wrexham gave a presentation on the Code of Conduct Training which he provided for Wrexham County Borough Councillors and Clerks and Town and Community Councillors in Wrexham, explaining why the training was provided, how the training was delivered with examples of materials used, the outcomes of the training which had resulted in the following benefits and drawbacks:

- Fewer complaints about Town and Community Councils
- Any complaints made fewer were upheld
- Clerks better informed and more confident
- Fewer issues for the Monitoring Officer
- Town and Community Councils more pro-active in seeking advice
- Less “fear” of the Code
- Town and Community Council Members and Clerks can view the Monitoring Officer as a cheap source of general legal advice
- Individual Town and Community Councils can make demands for personal training
- Potential conflict with advisory role to Standards Committee

During the discussion session reference was made to the following:

- Role of Standards Committee members. Committee members were invited to attend the training sessions, however, training still went ahead if none of the Committee members were able to attend as the principle of the training was to educate rather than police – prevention was better than cure.
- Problems being experienced regarding poor attendance at training events and whether the Minister should be encouraged to include a condition in the Code to make training enforceable. Mr Coxon said in Wrexham feedback received from the training events had been very positive indicating that attendees had found the events enjoyable and useful. Attendees had then informed others about how useful they had found the training. The County Borough Council had also identified Core Training which all County Borough Councillors were required to attend, one element was Code of Conduct Training, any Core Training attended by individual Members was recorded on their web page. Mr Coxon said that e-learning modules had been considered but interaction at training events was more beneficial. Training was also undertaken as soon as possible after elections as part of the induction process with refresher training being undertaken on an annual basis. The invitation letter to training could perhaps contain a reminder that the first questions asked by the Ombudsman was when the Councillor had signed up to the Code and when they had last attended training.
- Social media issues. Mr Coxon explained that Wrexham County Borough Council had adopted a protocol. This matter had not been discussed by the Standards Committee nor any work undertaken with Community Councils.

5 OPEN SESSION FOR ITEMS OF CURRENT INTEREST

(i) Promotion of Local Democracy and Public Engagement

Anglesey County Council's Standards Committee had requested that the Forum discuss the following paragraph, contained in a letter from Carl Sargeant AM, Minister for Housing and Regeneration, dated 28 January 2013.

'In a similar vein, principal councils are best placed to work with their community and town councils to enable the public to have access to information concerning the business of their local council and how to contact them. You will be aware that provisions to bring this in to place are included in the Local Government (Democracy) (Wales) Bill currently under consideration by the Assembly. I would like principal councils to work with their community councils to help take this forward.'

Although the issue of providing support to Town and Community Councils, with regard to their web presence was outside the remit of Standards Committees, Anglesey County Council's Standards Committee saw this development as an opportunity to enhance the awareness of Town and Community Council Members, as well as informing the public, by encouraging Town and Community Councils to include information about the Code of Conduct (which applied to their Members), how and with whom to lodge complaints and the role of local Standards Committees.

Gwynedd County Council agreed that Town and Community Councils websites should provide this additional information particularly in relation to the work of the Standards Committee and it was suggested that the public could be directed to approach Standards Committee Members if they had a complaint against a Community Councillor. Concern was raised that this may 'muddy the waters' if the complaint did go further and eventually ended up being referred to the Standards Committee by the Ombudsman.

It was also suggested that such complaints could in the first instance be referred to the Monitoring Officer to be settled under the Local Resolution Protocol/Procedure without any need for reference to the Ombudsman. The Monitoring Officer for Wrexham expressed concerns suggesting that it would be unwise for Monitoring Officers to become involved in all processes for Town and Community Councils as this could heavily dominate their time.

As many Town and Community Councils were being asked to take on additional services it was suggested that a toolkit similar to the one which had been developed for English authorities would be useful and whether One Voice Wales could develop a link to a similar toolkit on their website.

RESOLVED – That One Voice Wales and the WLGA be encouraged to develop a similar resource along the lines of the toolkit provided for English authorities.

(ii) Ombudsman Investigation Time

Gwynedd County Council had requested that this item be placed on the agenda to enable the Forum to discuss concerns they had in relation to the time it was taking the Ombudsman to complete an investigation and that, if felt appropriate, for the Forum to make representations to the Ombudsman.

Given that there would shortly be a new Ombudsman, Anglesey County Council felt it would be more appropriate to have early discussions with the new Ombudsman, when appointed, and possibly invite the new Ombudsman to a future meeting of the Forum.

Wrexham County Borough Council had not experienced any such delays.

RESOLVED - That these issues be raised with the new Ombudsman once appointed, rather than make representations at the current time.

(iii) Webcasting of Standards Committees

The Forum discussed whether it would be appropriate to webcast Standards Committee meetings and there was a general consensus against this.

(iv) Delegation of Dispensations

Wrexham County Borough Council queried the process for the granting of dispensations in other authorities and whether there was any scope for this to be delegated to an Officer or representatives of the Standards Committee.

It was noted that the Guidance specifically stated dispensations could only be given by the Standards Committee.

It was reported that in Anglesey the Standards Committee had a Sub-Committee which dealt with dispensations and in Gwynedd the Standards Committee had adopted a protocol/guidelines for the granting of dispensations, which they would be happy to share with other authorities.

6 FEEDBACK

There was general consensus that the new format for the Forum worked well but those present expressed their disappointment at the poor attendance.

7 DATE AND VENUE OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED – That the next meeting be held in January 2014, venue to be confirmed.

(The meeting ended at 3.56pm)