

Appendix 1

STANDARDS COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

2024 – 2025



RHONDDA CYNON TAF



STANDARDS COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025

Chair's Foreword – Mr Dave Bowen

During the 2024 – 2025 Municipal Year, the Committee has continued with its intended purpose of promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct across the Council. As a Committee, we continue to be kept up to date with legislative changes and have also benefited from attendance at the National Standards' Committee Forum where the Public Service Ombudsman is a regular contributor.

The Council's Monitoring Officer has continued to support us in our role and our thanks are provided to him and his team for the support and advice actively provided to us as a Committee and to the Elected Members of the Council.

Pleasingly, the conduct of Members remains high and again my thanks are passed onto the Group Leaders of the Council, whom I look forward to working with further as we support the legal duty placed upon them to promote good standards of behaviour amongst their Members.

During the 2024 – 2025 Municipal Year, the number of complaints made to the Ombudsman concerning the code of conduct of County Borough Councillors was 3. The number of complaints relating to Community or Town Councillors during the same period was 5.

As part of the Committee's work programme, we considered a report published following the Senedd's review of the 'Role, Governance, Accountability of The Community and Town Council Sector'. The report made a number of recommendations concerning improving standards in Community and Town Councils, including introducing mandatory code of conduct training for Town and Community Councillors. We understand this recommendation will be subject to a formal consultation in the near future but it is one, in principle, the Committee supports.

Throughout the year, we have been provided with opportunities to receive quarterly updates from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales in relation to summaries of complaints, recent investigations and their findings. Such examples of investigations continue to provide us with further learning opportunities and help ensure that such behaviours are not replicated within the Council.

The Committee was pleased to hear that the training session provided by the Monitoring Officer in January with a specific focus on the declarations of interests was well attended by Members. It is vitally important that Members continue to refresh themselves of the provisions of the code of conduct to which they are all signed up to.

Following our previous work in relation to the Council's Member-Officer Protocol, it was pleasing to see this review of the protocol endorsed by Council at its meeting on the 27th November 2024. We see this protocol as an essential framework for good working relationships between Members and Officers, a framework which continues to provide the

best means of supporting the work of this Council. It is important that such protocols are reviewed in a timely manner to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

As mentioned previously, my attendance at the National Standards Committee Chairs Forum has again assisted me in undertaking my role. The purpose of the forum is to share best practice and problem solving across the relevant authorities in relation to the work of Standards Committees. The forum has received presentations from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and discussed many issues affecting the standards and ethical framework in Wales.

Can I thank all Members for their time, dedication and continued support and enthusiasm to the work of the Committee. During the year, we resumed our hybrid approach to meetings which has allowed us to conduct our meetings in meeting room environments that are convenient to all. It has been a pleasure to utilise the arrangements in the new Headquarters of Llys Cadwyn, which we will, as a Committee continue to utilise

The Ten General Principles of Public Life

Selflessness – members should serve only the public interest and should never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person.

Honesty and integrity – members should not place themselves in situations where their honesty and integrity may be questioned, should not behave improperly, and should on all occasions avoid the appearance of such behaviour.

Objectivity – members should make decisions on merit, including when making appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards or benefits.

Accountability – members should be accountable to the public for their actions and the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities, and should co-operate fully and honestly with any scrutiny appropriate to their particular office.

Openness – members should be as open as possible about their actions and those of their authority, and should be prepared to give reasons for those actions.

Personal judgement – members may take account of the views of others, including their political groups, but should reach their own conclusions on the issues before them and act in accordance with those conclusions.

Respect for others – members should promote equality by not discriminating unlawfully against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability. They should respect the impartiality and integrity of the authority's statutory officers and its other employees.

Duty to uphold the law – members should uphold the law and, on all occasions, act in accordance with the trust that the public is entitled to place in them.

Stewardship – members should do whatever they are able to do to ensure that their authorities use their resources prudently, and in accordance with the law.

Leadership – members should promote and support these principles by leadership, and by example, and should act in a way that secures or preserves public confidence.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP 2024-2025

Chair (and Independent Member): Mr. Dave Bowen
Independent Member: Ms. H. John
Independent Member: Mr. J. Thomas
County Borough Councillor: A. Ellis
County Borough Councillor: G. Hopkins
Community Councillor Member: Mr. C. A Thomas

STANDARDS COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Standards Committee has the following roles and functions:

- (a) promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by Councillors, co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor representatives;
- (b) assisting the Councillors, co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor representatives to observe the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (c) advising the Council on the adoption or revision of the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (d) monitoring the operation of the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (e) advising, training or arranging to train Councillors, co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor representatives on matters relating to the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (f) granting dispensations to Councillors , co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor representatives from requirements relating to interests set out in the Members' Code of Conduct;
- (g) dealing with any reports from a case tribunal or interim case tribunal, and any report from the Monitoring Officer on any matter referred to that Officer by the Public Services Ombudsman For Wales;
- (h) overview of complaints handling and Ombudsman investigations relating to Councillors, co-opted Members and Church and Parent Governor representatives;
- (i) oversight of the Members' protocols adopted by the Council;
- (j) oversight of the register of personal interests maintained under Section 81 of the Local Government Act 2000;
- (k) oversight of the gifts and hospitality register;
- (l) monitor adherence to the Council's Management of Unreasonably Persistent Customers Policy by Group and Service Directors; and

- (m) the Committee will exercise the functions set out in (a) - (g) above in relation to Community Councils and Members of Community Councils.

STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING DATES 2024-2025

The Standards Committee is required to meet at least once annually in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000. In practice, the Committee meets on a scheduled quarterly basis (dependant on business needs) and additional special meetings are arranged, as necessary, to deal with specific matters such as misconduct hearings.

Details of the meeting and the relevant recordings for each of the meetings can be found [here](#).

The Committee's Work Programme for the current Municipal Year can be found [here](#).

ITEMS CONSIDERED DURING THE 2024-2025 MUNICIPAL YEAR

- Standards Committee Work Programme 2024 - 2025
- Draft Standards Committee – Annual Report 2023-2024
- Public Services Ombudsman for Wales - Annual Report and Letter 2023-2024
- Public Services Ombudsman for Wales – Summary of Complaints 2024-2025
- Public Service Ombudsman for Wales – Recent Investigation Outcomes – ‘Our Findings’
- Adjudication Panel Decisions and Annual Report
- National Standards Committee Chair’s Forum – Feedback from meetings
- Dispensation Application
- Review of the Council’s Member-Officer Protocol
- Independent Review of investigations by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales into Code of Conduct complaints.
- Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Consultation on the Notification of Complaints
- Group Leaders' Duties in Respect of Standards of Conduct
- Role, Governance, Accountability of The Community and Town Council Sector
- National Association of Local Councils - Civility & Respect Pledge for Town and Community Councils
- Declaration of Interest Training
- Review of the Council's Local Resolution Protocol And Procedures
- Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee Report - Role, Governance and Accountability of The Town & Community Council Sector

- **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales - Summary of Complaints 2024 - 2025**

This is a regular report for the Standards Committee over the municipal year and provides the opportunity for Members to receive a summary of complaints made against Members and submitted to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales over certain periods across the year and the results of any investigations for those complaints that had been received.

Members were pleased to see the low number of complaints made against Members of the Council during the year in relation to alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct.

- **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales - Annual Report and Letter 2023-2024**

The Annual Report sets out the workload that has been dealt with by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) during 2023-2024.

The Monitoring Officer advised that the Ombudsman had received 328 new complaints about the Code of Conduct – 16% more than in 2022/23 (283). 54% (176) of those complaints concerned Town and Community Councils. 45% (151) of the total complaints received related to County and County Borough Councillors. There was 1 complaint about a Member of a National Park Authority and zero complaints related to Members on Fire & Rescue Authorities & Police and Crime Panels.

- **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales - Recent Investigation Outcomes - 'Our Findings'**

A regular report provided to Members by the Monitoring Officer with the summary of investigation outcomes concerning alleged breaches of the Members' Code of Conduct as published by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) on the 'our findings' section of their website for the Municipal Year.

Members learned that the PSOW considers complaints that members of local authorities in Wales have breached the Code. There are four findings the PSOW can arrive at:

- (a) that there is no evidence of breach;*
- (b) that no action needs to be taken in respect of the complaint;*
- (c) that the matter be referred to the authority's Monitoring Officer for consideration by the Standards Committee;*
- (d) that the matter be referred to the President of the Adjudication Panel for Wales (the APW) for adjudication by a tribunal.*

The 'Our Findings' section on the PSOW website includes a search tool to allow summaries of cases to be accessed by reference to the relevant organisation, matter type, dates, case reference numbers, or outcome.

In terms of matter types, cases are broken down into the following categories:

- a. Integrity;*
- b. Promotion of Equality and Respect;*

- c. Disclosure or Registration of Interests;*
- d. Duty to Uphold the Law; and*
- e. Selflessness and Stewardship.*

An appendix to each report contained a summary of those published cases.

- **Adjudication Panel for Wales Annual Report 2023-2024**

The Monitoring Officer provided Members with an overview of the information contained in the Adjudication Panel for Wales' (APW) Annual Report 2023-2024.

Members were informed the APW Annual Report summarises the activity of the Panel during the relevant reporting period. The report provides details of the membership of the Panel, an analysis of its performance and a useful section summarising cases and decisions made by the Panel during the reporting period.

- **Adjudication Panel for Wales - Recent Tribunal Decisions**

The Monitoring Officer provided the Standards Committee with reports which provide updates on the recent decisions made by the Adjudication Panel for Wales (APW).

Members were referred to the appendices of the report, which detailed a number of APW decision notices, that had been issued following the conclusion of the cases.

Such consideration of the decisions taken by the Panel and the approaches adopted by the APW in formulating its decision and sanctions (where relevant) are helpful to us as a Standards Committee, in light of our own role when conducting Code of Conduct hearings. As a Committee we also find such reports useful to help us consider whether there are any possible messages or lessons to be learnt arising out of APW Panel decisions that could be communicated as part of future training for Members on the Code of Conduct.

- **Dispensation Applications.**

As part of the Committee's Terms of Reference, the Committee considered and granted an application for a dispensation during the Municipal Year. Such dispensations allow Members to undertake their role whilst also adhering to the Code of Conduct.

- **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Consultation on the Notification of Complaints**

As a Committee, we were pleased to be consulted by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) in relation to a review of its current practice of not informing an accused Member of a complaint until after it has been assessed as to whether an investigation should or should not be commenced.

As a Committee, we considered the two approaches. Noting that early notification of a complaint could provide a Councillor with undue upset and worry, although we also considered the early notification and the general 'openness' of a complaint as an opportunity for a Councillor to compile relevant evidence to assist in the matter. Following detailed discussions, we considered that the general view would be to inform the Member in the first instance, as was previous practice and our response to this nature was put forward by the Monitoring Officer on our behalf.

- **Review of the Council's Member – Officer Relations Protocol**

The Committee finalised its ongoing work with the review of the Council's Member – Officer relations protocol which sets out a framework for good working relationships between Members and Officers as the best means of supporting the work of this Council. It explains how the nature of the relationship between elected Councillors and employed officials should work and describes their different but complementary roles within the Council. It also sets out the behaviours and treatment that each can expect from the other and thereby expands upon the Councillors Code of Conduct.

The timely review of the protocol undertaken by the Committee looks to ensure the protocol remains fit for purpose. The renewed protocol was endorsed by Council on the 24th November 2024.

- **National Forum for Standards Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs**

The Monitoring Officer and the Chair of the Committee provided Members with updates in respect of the National Forum for Standards Committee Chairs meetings that had taken place across the year. By sharing best practice, it is anticipated the Forum will help to raise standards across all authorities in Wales.

- **National Association of Local Councils - Civility & Respect Pledge for Town and Community Councils**

In August 2022, the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and One Voice Wales (OVW) launched "The Civility and Respect Pledge" as part of their "Civility and Respect Project" aimed at tackling poor behaviour in local government. The Pledge is directed specifically towards Community and Town Councils rather than Principal Councils. Following consideration of the Pledge the Committee resolved to refer the Respect & Civility Pledge to the Town & Community Councils within the area of Rhondda Cynon Taf for their consideration and adoption.

- **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Independent Review**

The Monitoring Officer took the opportunity to address Members on the allegation of political bias, made against the former Head of Investigations at the Ombudsman office. Members were reassured that the Ombudsman had announced that an independent review would be conducted to provide assurance that its code of conduct

processes are sound, free from political bias and that lessons are learned from what has happened.

It was reported that the Ombudsman, Michelle Morris, had fully accepted that her office now needs to rebuild trust in the work of the organisation on complaints against Councillors. The review remit will include reviewing discretionary decisions previously made, by the former officer and her team, not to investigate complaints when applying the Ombudsman's processes.

- **Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee Report - Role, Governance and Accountability of the Town & Community Council Sector**

On the 5th March, the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee published its report in relation to the role, governance and accountability of the Community and Town Council sector to which the Standards Committee reviewed and provided feedback in relation to. The report identified poor behaviour was one of the key factors in deterring people from standing or continuing in an elected role. The Committee were therefore very interested in the Code of Conduct for Members and the Council's Standards Committee supported the Committees recommendations relating to training, which the Committee believes could lead to fewer equality and respect complaints.

- **Group Leaders' Duties in Respect of Standards of Conduct**

'Leaders of a political group should build good relations, and work constructively with the Monitoring Officer, seeking advice from them and the Standards Committee on matters of behaviour and conduct when required, both promoting positive behaviours and addressing inappropriate ones. Group Leaders should also report compliance with their duty to the standards committee.' As a Committee, we considered a revised *Performa* to assist Group Leaders with their duty and look forward to receiving the Group Leaders reports at the start of the next Municipal Year.

- **Declaration of Interest Training**

Members were advised that RCT Councillors were provided with a bitesize session in respect of personal and prejudicial interests during the Municipal Year. It was advised that the session had a good attendance and was positively received. The session had been delivered in advance of the annual update of Members' declaration of interest forms and the session was a reminder to Members to regularly review and update their declarations.

- **Review of the Council's Local Resolution Protocol and Procedures**

Members considered the report of the Monitoring Officer in relation to the review of the Council's Local Resolution Protocol and Procedures, which contained exempt information.

- **Independent Review of Investigations by the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales Into Code Of Conduct Complaints Information**

Members were reminded that the aim of the independent review was to provide assurance as to whether the Ombudsman's Code of Conduct Team processes, delegations and decisions in relation to the assessment and investigation of complaints by the Code Team and FCTM have been sound, free from political bias and that lessons are learned from what has happened.

During our consideration of this item, the Monitoring Officer advised that several recommendations had been provided following the review and provided the Committee with details of such. The Monitoring officer concluded that the review had found that the Ombudsman office investigations had been sound and non bias in their processing and complaint assessment and Members could rest assured and could continue to have trust and confidence in the work of the PSOW and its Code Team.

Future Priorities

The Committee regularly reviews its work programme and the following areas have been scheduled for consideration in 2025/26:

- Monitoring compliance with Group Leaders' statutory duties in relation to Member conduct - to receive and consider reports from political group leaders about steps taken to discharge their new statutory duties in accordance with the agreed reporting arrangements.
- Code of Conduct Complaints - To continue to receive quarterly reports on complaints made against Elected Members alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct.
- Review of the Council's Gifts & Hospitality Policy