

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY 2023/24

Background

This is the Standards Committee (the Committee)'s nineteenth annual report to the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) and spans the period from April 2023 to March 2024. Legislation requires that Standards Committees meet at least once annually and that they prepare a report on their activity for consideration by the Authority.

The Terms of Reference of the Committee provide a remit to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by Members of the Authority. Also, where statute permits, to receive reports and complaints about Members and to conduct or oversee investigations and make recommendations to the Authority.

Membership

The Committee membership has not changed since new councillors were appointed after the elections in 2022. The Standards Committee membership is as follows:

Independent Members

Sally Ellis 01/01/22 – 31/12/26 (serving for a second term) (Deputy Chair)

Julia Hughes 01/01/22 – 31/12/26 (serving for a second term) (Chair)

Gill Murgatroyd 01/09/23 – 31/08/27 (serving for a second term)

Gareth Pritchard 01/09/23 – 31/08/27 (serving for a second term)

Fire and Rescue Authority Members

Councillor Marion Bateman (20/06/2022 until the next council elections)

Councillor John Brynmor Hughes (20/06/2022 until the next council elections)

Attendance

Meetings were held virtually on the following dates with the named members in attendance:

13 October 2023 – present: Julia Hughes (Chair), Sally Ellis (Deputy Chair), Gareth Pritchard, Gill Murgatroyd, Cllr John Brynmor Hughes

14 February 2024 – present: Julia Hughes (Chair), Sally Ellis (Deputy Chair), Gareth Pritchard, Gill Murgatroyd

Issues Discussed

At its meeting on 13 October 2023 the Committee reviewed:

- FRA Members' attendance at meetings. It was highlighted that failure to attend meetings represents a significant issue for the Authority as it reduces its capacity and creates gaps in Members' understanding that can take time to overcome. Those members with 50% attendance, or lower, are requested in writing if there is any reason why their attendance is so low and for a commitment to improve. Any mitigating circumstances are taken into account during this process.
- The Authority's gifts and hospitality policy was put into a new format and applied to all officers, including firefighters. It was recommended by the Committee that the document be reviewed once per year by a senior officer which was agreed.
- The Committee considered the annual reports of the Adjudication Panel for Wales and the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales plus findings published by the Ombudsman on her website to see whether there were useful lessons to be learned. A message was sent to all councillors about the dangers of attending meetings whilst driving.
- The Committee reviewed its series of observation visits to Authority meetings. Committee Members saw many examples of good chairing and compliance with the code. It made several recommendations to help improve adherence. It concluded that they had been of value, and similar visits will be conducted in two years.

The Committee met again on 14 February 2024. At this meeting, Members considered the following matters:

- Penn Review of the Ethical Framework – the report by Richard Penn included various recommendations on changes which required legislation to be implemented. Welsh Government has accepted some of those recommendations and legislation is not expected until the next term of the Senedd;
- Rolling review of the members Code of Conduct (the Code) – the Committee considered voluntary changes to the Code that might be considered in light of the Penn Review and asked for further details before reaching a conclusion
- Rolling review of member officer protocol – the Committee wanted further detail on the range of people (employees, contractors or agency workers) who should be considered to be within scope of the protocol.
- The Committee received an update to confirm that those Members contacted about their attendance after the October meeting had now increased their attendance levels above 50%

The Committee has also considered feedback from the National Forum for Standards Committee chairs. That forum is an opportunity to share good practice and build consensus around common areas of work. The views expressed there are taken into account when the Committee considers issues such as amendments to the code.

Training

The committee has agreed that it will undertake training at each of its meetings on matters pertinent to its terms of reference.

Forward Work Plan

The Committee has set itself an annual forward programme to ensure that it fulfils its terms of reference and considers all items that it needs to cover within a year. Regular standing items include Our Findings from the Ombudsman's website, feedback from the national forum, Members' attendance as well as training on its roles and responsibilities.

The Committee also sets itself a multi-year programme to review the codes and protocols within its terms of reference. Each is considered at least once per Authority term. That programme has commenced again following the elections in 2022.

Complaints against Members of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

There were no complaints about FRA Members during this period. Consequently, there were no referrals under the local resolution process or to the Adjudication Panel for Wales or the Standards Committee to hold a hearing in respect of an alleged breach of the code.

Group Leaders' Duty to Promote Ethical Behaviour

The Authority does not divide its membership by political grouping. However, the Committee Chair and Vice Chair will meet with the Chairs of the Authority and Audit Committee to ensure the Committee adds value.

Financial Implications

The budget for the Committee is managed through a single budget heading for all Authority costs. Independent members of the Committee are entitled to claim remuneration based on meetings and events attended. For attending meetings in this financial year, a total of £1,213 has been claimed.

Conclusion

The Standards Committee recommends that the Authority notes its Annual Report 2023/24.