

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY 2019/20

Background

This is the Standards Committee's fifteenth annual report to the Fire and Rescue Authority and spans the period from April 2019 to March 2020. Legislation requires that Standards Committees meet at least annually.

The Terms of Reference of the Standards 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 advertised a vacancy for an Independent Member and, following interview, there were 2 high quality applicants. Although the Committee only required one new member at the time, A P Young's second term of office ends in March 2020 and therefore he will not be eligible for re-appointment. It was felt prudent to add a temporary additional Independent Member position to the committee in order to secure the services of both applicants. Therefore two new independent members, Gill Murgatroyd and Gareth Pritchard, joined the Standards Committee in September 2019 for a period of four years.

The Standards Committee currently has the following membership:

Independent Members

Antony P Young 01/04/16 - 31/03/20

Sally Ellis 01/01/18 – 31/12/2021

Julia Hughes 01/01/18 – 31/12/2021

Gill Murgatroyd 01/09/19 – 31/08/23

Gareth Pritchard 01/09/19 – 31/08/23

Fire and Rescue Authority Members

Councillor Dylan Rees (19/06/18 onwards)

Councillor Owen Thomas (19/06/18 onwards)

The Committee will revert to its previous size on the retirement of Mr Young.

Attendance and Issues

The Standards Committee met twice during the year.

A meeting was held on 29 November 2019. Julia Hughes undertook the role of Chair and Sally Ellis, Gill Murgatroyd, Gareth Pritchard, Cllr Dylan Rees and Cllr Owen Thomas were in attendance.

At the meeting, members discussed the role of the Committee and requested training on certain topics to be provided at the following meeting.

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. In order to move forward with this issue, members asked that the Deputy Clerk send letters of appreciation to members with over 50% attendance rate and that letters outlining the importance of attending meetings be sent to those FRA members who have 50% and under attendance rate. These letters will be copied to the Group Leader and Chief Executive of each council.

At this meeting, members concluded the systematic review of policies in compliance with the remit of the Standards Committee.

A report was presented for members to consider the issues and options associated with adopting one or more joint standards committees across North Wales; currently there are eight Standards Committees across the authorities in North Wales. An increasing number of the independent members serve on more than one authority and this contributes towards reducing the cost of development/training (or maximise the benefit from it). However, it is legislatively possible to have a joint committee that serves two or more authorities. The report contained an analysis of the issues and options for one or more such joint committees. It was agreed to defer discussion on this matter until further information is known about Welsh Government's plans for the reform of governance within FRAs. In the meantime, the Deputy Clerk agreed to make enquiries about the possibility of combining the FRA Standards Committee with the National Park Authority's Standards Committee.

The Committee met again on 28 February 2020. Antony Young undertook the role of Chair and Sally Ellis, Julia Hughes, Gill Murgatroyd, Gareth Pritchard and Cllr Owen Thomas were in attendance.

At this meeting, Members considered revised terms of reference for the Committee which were now more comprehensive in terms of including standard matters such as composition, term of office and quorum. Following a discussion, it was agreed to remove the responsibility of overseeing the whistleblowing regime and that it would be more appropriate for it to be monitored by the Audit Committee. However, the whistleblowing policy was on the agenda in order for it to be reviewed; members agreed that it was a well written policy and suggested minor amendments.

Complaints against Members of the Fire and Rescue Authority

There were no complaints about FRA Members during this period.

Financial Implications

The budget for the Standards Committee is managed through a single budget heading for all Authority costs. Since 2012, independent members of the Standards Committee are entitled to claim remuneration based on meetings and events attended. For attending meetings in this financial year, a total of £1,287 has been claimed and travel costs of £179.55 have been paid.

Conclusion

The Standards Committee recommends that the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority notes its annual report for 2019/20.

Terms of reference for Standards Committee of North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

Remit

The North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) has a Standards Committee to oversee, maintain and strengthen high standards of conduct by its members.

The Standards Committee has a range of functions relating to the Members' Code of Conduct. Unless business dictates otherwise, the Committee will meet at least twice per year.

Composition

The Standards Committee will be composed of two Authority Members and four independent people who are not Members or Officers of the Authority, one of whom will chair the committee. Representation on this committee is not required to bear the same proportionality as the political composition of the whole Authority (Section 53(10) Local Government Act 2000).

Term of office

Independent Members' term of office is for a period of not less than four years nor more than six years. and they are eligible for re-appointment for a second period of up to four years.

For the Authority members of standards committees, their term of office is four years or the period until that member's appointment as a member of that authority ceases, whichever is the shorter. Such a member shall cease to be a member of that standards committee if that member ceases to be a member of the relevant authority concerned.

Chair and Deputy Chair

The roles of Chair and Deputy Chair must be undertaken by the Independent Members. Appointments will be made in the first meeting of every financial year. The period of election for the Chair and Vice Chair should be the shorter of either their remaining tenure or 4- 6 years.

Role and function

- 1 To promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the members of the authority.
- 2 To assist members of the authority to observe the authority's code of conduct.
- 3 To advise the authority on revision of the code of conduct.
- 4 To monitor the operation of the authority's adopted code of conduct.
- 5 To train authority members and advise on conduct matters generally.
- 6 Where statute so permits, to arrange dispensation to speak and/or vote where a member has an interest.
- 7 To receive and implement advice from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and or recommendations from any adjudication panel or case tribunal.
- 8 Where statute permits, to receive reports and complaints in relation to members, to conduct or oversee appropriate investigations and to make appropriate recommendations to the authority.
- 9 To receive reports from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales in relation to allegations of maladministration or allegations of breach of code of conduct and make appropriate recommendations.
- 10 To exercise such powers or duties as may be given or imposed on standards committees from time to time by legislation.

Powers delegated to the Committee

- 11 To determine Stage 3 Service complaints in accordance with the Authority's Complaints Procedure.
- 12 Delegated powers in relation to any matter within the terms of reference of the committee except where this involves expenditure for which there is no approved budget.

Quorum

The quorum shall be at least:

- (i) three members are present, including the chair; and
- (ii) half the members present (including the chair) are independent members.

Voting

Decisions of the Committee shall be decided by a majority of votes cast by the members present at the meeting. In the case of an equality of votes the person presiding at the meetings shall have a second casting vote.

Frequency of meetings

Unless business dictates otherwise, the Committee will meet at least twice per year. The meeting will be attended by the Monitoring Officer or nominated representative.

Minutes of meetings

Minutes of all meetings will be recorded and signed by the Chair. All decisions will be recorded, including the reason for such decisions and any declarations of interest made.

Reporting

The Committee will prepare an annual report to be presented to the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority.

Revision of these terms of reference

These terms of reference will be reviewed on an annual basis

(As provided by the Standards Committee (Wales) Regulations 2001; and The Standards Committees (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2006).