

## Standards Committees Chairs Forum - Wales

Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2026 @ 2pm, via Teams

Notes

### 1. Welcome

The new Chair, Julia Hughes (JH), welcomed attendees, deputies, and the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. She recorded apologies from outgoing Chair Clive Wolfendale (CW) along with thanks for his leadership as the first Chair of the Forum during its initial three years. JH noted a positive handover meeting with CW and reaffirmed the value of the Forum as an all-Wales, voluntary space for sharing best practice from across the sector.

JH reminded members that notes may be shared with Standards Committees. She encouraged active participation during the meetings and also invited volunteers for the Vice Chair role, expressing her intention to support the Forum's aim of a sharing and learning network.

### 2. Notes of previous meeting – 23rd June 2025.

Note 3 - it was noted that the D&BCC was not in attendance because the decision on the remuneration rate for co-opted members rests with the Welsh Government, not the D&BCC. The Forum can invite the D&BCC to attend a future meeting if further discussion is needed.

Note (5b) All attachments had been circulated apart from the process for dispensations referred to by JH which had since been updated and will be forwarded with these notes.

### 3. Feedback from Welsh Government (WG) Local Resolution Protocol Function online workshops November/December 2025 – JH and all who attended.

JH provided a summary of the Welsh Government's recent online workshops on the Local Resolution Protocol (LRP).

The session purpose was to consider and test LRP, explore ideas around solutions and the practical application of solutions.

The workshops included an overview of the Local Resolution Protocol from One Voice Wales, alongside discussion of proposed improvements such as a clearer process flowchart and greater clarity on when apologies should be verbal or written. Participants raised concerns about the lack of defined consequences for Code of Conduct breaches and noted the varied use of Local Resolution Protocols across Wales.

Issues highlighted included shortages of experienced clerks, the need to better address neurodiversity, and strong support for mandatory Code of Conduct training. Suggestions included incorporating the Code into the Declaration of Acceptance of Office, strengthening mediation and bullying-and-harassment guidance, and continuing to prioritise training. WG will now consider how best to draw together the feedback and identify actions to strengthen current arrangements.

#### **4. Items highlighted by the Monitoring Officers and Governance Group**

##### **4.1 Local Resolution Protocols – To what extent do Town & Community Councils typically implement Local Resolution Protocols and how robust are they.**

The Forum noted that Local Resolution Protocols remain a voluntary process and are not widely or consistently used across Councils. Clerks often feel they lack the confidence and support needed to mediate effectively between councillors, highlighting a need for clearer guidance and training. The importance of training for councillors was emphasised, and reference was made to a Flintshire survey in which only 10 of 34 councils responded, though nine reported having a protocol in place.

##### **4.2 Duty to promote and maintain standards**

Chairs reported a range of approaches used to support and assess Group Leaders in meeting their duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct.

In some authorities, councillors meet with Standards Committee members after receiving reports, with summaries incorporated into annual reporting. Others require quarterly or annual reports from Group Leaders, sometimes discussed collectively rather than through one-to-one meetings. Several Chairs described meeting Group Leaders individually at key points in the year and presenting updates or annual reports at full Council or AGMs.

Across authorities, there is an emphasis on fostering dialogue: some councils use structured questions for Group Leaders, while others invite backbench councillors to meet Standards Committees to share perspectives and triangulate evidence. Many councils also highlighted the growing importance of addressing public abuse of councillors, social media behaviour, and maintaining fairness, with some developing toolkits or introductory ethics statements for all meetings.

Approaches to involving elected members in the process vary. In some Authorities, councillor members of the Standards Committee take part in assessing compliance with the duty, leaving political affiliations aside to ensure impartiality. Others exclude Group Leaders from Standards Committee membership or arrange for Independent Members only to undertake one-to-one meetings, with the full Committee signing off annual reports. The Standards Committee is a public meeting and once a year some local authorities ask Group Leaders to attend and present their annual reports.

Despite these differing models, Chairs emphasised that the processes in place were generally positive, collaborative, and supportive for both Group Leaders and Standards Committees.

### **4.3 Linked to 4.2 the Forum discussed if elected Councillor Standards Committee members take part in the Group Leader's Duty process of assessment of compliance with the duty?**

Standards Committee Chairs described a variety of approaches of how elected councillor members participate in assessing Group Leaders' compliance with their duty to promote and maintain high standards of conduct. Several authorities reported that councillor members take part fully in the process, bringing objectivity and leaving political allegiances aside. Others noted that no Group Leaders sit on their Standards Committee, which helps maintain impartiality.

In some Councils, councillor members declare an interest and withdraw from any one-to-one meetings involving their own Group Leaders, ensuring fairness in the process. A number of authorities rely solely on Independent Members to undertake individual meetings with Group Leaders, with the full Standards Committee later signing off annual reports. One authority holds annual meetings with all Group Leaders in public at the same time. Despite these differences, the overall focus remains on ensuring transparency, impartiality, and constructive engagement.

## **5. Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) update – Michelle Morris (MM)**

The Ombudsman provided an update for the quarter ending December 2025, reporting just over **250 complaints**, consistent with the previous year except for a difference of one case. Internal changes, including early triage and an additional staff member, have helped reduce open cases from **94 to 63**, with more recent cases being resolved more quickly. Aged cases over 12 months fell from **32 in December 2024 to 18 in December 2025**, and there are currently **53 open investigations**. As of **23 January 2026**, **17 cases** were classed as aged—**13** relating to Town and Community Councils and **4** to County Councils. The service closed **205 cases**, compared with **180** the previous year, and recorded **6 referrals** to December 2025, with a further **6 expected** by year-end. Some APW hearings relate only to older, year-plus cases. The earlier notification of complaints to members has prompted some reciprocal complaints, though it has also encouraged earlier communication. Key trends continue to involve behaviour towards the public and officers (around **50%** of cases), followed by interests and social media issues, with the Ombudsman emphasising the importance of ongoing training work.

## **6. Forum discussion on**

### **6.1 Recent cases of interest**

Recent cases of interest were discussed, with attention drawn to a complex Wrexham matter involving officers and the Local Development Plan, three Adjudication Panel for Wales decisions—including councillor disqualifications and an appeal relating to the Vale of Glamorgan—and two Pembrokeshire APW cases that may be useful for training, particularly around principal council responsibilities and social media use.

## **6.2 Hearings**

### **Discussion around Hearings procedure, protocols and processes documents**

Members discussed recent hearings activity, noting that while some councils have more experience due to a higher number of hearings, others have yet to hold one. Where hearings have taken place, procedures and protocols were reviewed and refined to address areas that were unclear or required strengthening.

The Forum considered whether an all-Wales protocol might be helpful, but this was not supported due to differing local arrangements. Instead, Monitoring Officers will continue to develop their own procedures collaboratively, and it was agreed that existing hearing protocols will be shared among Chairs as a useful learning resource.

## **7. Any other Business**

The Forum discussed issues relating to the quorum requirements of Standards Committees, noting that the Town and Community Council representative does not count as an independent member for quorum purposes. This can make it difficult to ask councillors to withdraw when necessary to maintain the correct balance of independent members.

Members also shared differing practices across Wales regarding involvement in the appointment of new independent Standards Committee members, with some Chairs participating directly, some observing, and others not involved at all

## **8. Date of next meeting.**

Monday 29 June 2026, 2pm – 4pm online.