

Report of Monitoring Officer
(Standards Committee)

Subject: Annual Report 2025/26

Decision Required: Yes

Recommendations:

- a) That this report is noted.
- b) That, subject to any additions agreed at the meeting, this report forms the basis for the Standards Committee's Annual Report to be submitted to the National Park Authority in accordance with the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

1. Terms of reference of the Standards Committee

- (a) to keep under review the Authority's Code of Conduct and to make recommendations to the Authority as to any changes it considers desirable;
- (b) to monitor the operation of the Authority's Code of Conduct;
- (c) to provide advice and training for Members of the Authority on matters relating to its Code of Conduct;
- (d) to consider any reports relating to Members of the Authority issued by the Monitoring Officer under Section 70 (4) or by the Public Services Ombudsman (Wales) under Section 71(2)(c) of the Local Government Act 2000 and any recommendations of the Adjudication Panel for Wales and to take such action thereon as it considered appropriate;
- (e) to receive and take action on any reports issued to it by a Case Tribunal under Section 79 of the Act;
- (f) to consider and make recommendations to the Authority as to the actions which should be taken on any report from a Case Tribunal under Section 80 of the Act;
- (g) to consider requests from Members of the Authority for dispensations under the Standards Committee's (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) Regulations 2001,
- (h) the monitoring of the Authority's complaints procedure in relation to allegations of maladministration and the making of recommendations thereto and
- (i) to make recommendations to the Authority from time to time with regard to any proposed additions to or revisions of these Terms of Reference.

- 1.1 Membership of the Standards Committee has changed notably since the last meeting. DR Rosie Plummer is no longer a member of the Authority, her tenure as a Welsh Government appointee having come to an end and therefore her position as the Welsh Government appointee to the Standards Committee having also ended. The Monitoring Officer asks members to join him in thanking Dr Plummer for her work with the Standards Committee and with the Authority generally.
- 1.2 Mr John Hogg was appointed as an independent member, but has now been appointed as a Welsh Government appointee to the Authority so he remains as a member of the Standards Committee but in the role as the Welsh Government appointee rather than as an independent member. The Monitoring Officer welcomes two additional independent members who were appointed last year; Mr Lyndon Freeman and Mr Rhodri Pryce-Lewis.
- 1.3 The current membership is therefore as follows:
- 1.4 Dr Simon Hancock and Cllr Mike James who are the Pembrokeshire County Council Appointees, Mr John Hogg who is the Welsh government appointee and Mr Phillip Davies, Mr John Daniels, Mr Lyndon Freeman and Mr Rhodri Pryce -Lewis who are the independent members.
- 1.5 The chair and vice chair are, in accordance with the regulations, required to be independent members.

2. Training

- 2.1 Specific training for members of the Standards Committee took place on 12th February 2025 and was provided by Mrs Bethan Evans who had delivered training to members of the Authority and Pembrokeshire County Council previously. The training focussed primarily on the procedure to be followed should the Ombudsman refer a complaint back to the Standards committee for resolution and was an informative and well received session.
- 2.2 On 25th June 2025 the Monitoring Officer provided training for all members of the Authority at Oriel y Parc whilst the construction of the Preseli suite was continuing at Llanion Park. The session consisted of an overview of the Code of Conduct followed by members working through various scenarios and considering how the Code of Conduct would be engaged. Feedback was positive and it is planned to follow a similar pattern when the next training session takes place which is scheduled for the autumn of 2026.
- 2.3 In February 2025 the Welsh Government issued a document entitled [National Park Authority Governance in Wales - a Guide to members roles and responsibilities](#). It was produced in collaboration with the three National Parks, Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Local Government Association. It covers much of the ground covered by the Authority in the training it provides for its members and is useful adjunct to that training.

3. Complaints

- 3.1 In the last report the Monitoring officer reported a complaint which the Ombudsman had decided to investigate and at the time of that report had issued a draft report which upheld the complaint. Following extensive representations made by the Authority to the Ombudsman concerning the draft findings and recommendations the Ombudsman issued a final report in which the complaint was rejected. This was a very welcome outcome and showed the importance of scrutinising thoroughly any adverse findings that the Ombudsman may issue.
- 3.2 Of the other two complaints referred to in the last report, one did not result in escalation to the Ombudsman and the other was held in abeyance pending the issue of judicial review (JR) proceedings which covered points similar to those that were raised in the complaint.
- 3.3 Members will be aware that the JR was heard on the 18th and 19th June 2025 in Haverfordwest and judgement in favour of the Claimants was handed down on the 11th of September 2025. In essence whilst the majority of the grounds for JR were rejected by the Judge, he did find that the Authority had failed to publish several documents which he found could have caused material prejudice to the claimants. In the light of these findings then officers have reviewed the procedure for disclosure of documents in planning applications.
- 3.4 Since April 2025 there have been eight complaints two of which were dealt with informally. Of the remainder two were escalated to the Ombudsman and concerned allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct regarding non disclosure of interests. Both complaints were rejected by the Ombudsman.
- 3.5 However, the complainant in the most recent case has requested a review of the Ombudsman's decision not to investigate.
- 3.6 The same complainant also lodged a further complaint which did not concern allegations of a breach of the Code of Conduct. A stage 2 response was prepared and sent which was rejected by the complainant who says that that complaint will be escalated to the Ombudsman. The Monitoring officer will provide an update at Committee.

4. Trends.

- 4.1 It is pleasing that only two allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct have been made and both have been rejected by the Ombudsman subject to the outstanding review referred to earlier. What is concerning however is the increase in complaints including FOI, EIR and Subject Access Requests under Data Protection legislation having clearly been prepared using artificial intelligence (AI). This can result in wide ranging and often uncorroborated allegations being made and far-reaching requests for information which are very time consuming for officers to deal with. Interestingly the Ombudsman's own website includes a statement concerning the use of AI and the Authority is liaising with the designated Data Protection Officer to see if it would be appropriate for the Authority to issue a similar statement.

5. Local Resolution Protocol. (LRP).

- 5.1 It has not been necessary for the LRP to be invoked since the last report. Should that change then the Monitoring officer will provide an update.

6. Dispensations

- 6.1 No applications for dispensations have been received by Members in the current year. However, there have been a number of changes to both PCC appointed Members and those appointed by the Welsh Government and insofar as newly appointed PCC members are concerned The Monitoring Officer has written to them granting a general dispensation concerning PCC matters subject to consideration of the impact of the Code of Conduct in each case.

7. Unacceptable actions by complainants Policy.

- 7.1 It has not been necessary to implement this policy in the current year

8. Annual report of the Ombudsman.

- 8.1 In the most recent [report covering the years 2024/2025](#) the Ombudsman received 315 complaints relating to the Code of Conduct which was 4% less than the previous year but 36% more than 2019/2020. As previously reported complaints about Town and Community Councils were the largest group to receive complaints and showed an increase of 7% on the previous year. 56% of those complaints related to the need to display equality and respect. 49 investigations were undertaken which amounted to about 15% of the total and of those 15 were referred either to Standards Committees or the Adjudication Panel for Wales (APW). 85% of the Ombudsman's findings were upheld.

9. Consultations.

- 9.1 Last year Members were invited to contribute to a consultation launched by the Ombudsman into the operation of the Code of Conduct, specifically whether it should adopt the previous procedure where an accused member would be notified straightaway that an allegation of a breach of the Code of Conduct had been made. The procedure was that members were only notified if an investigation was being launched or if the Ombudsman had declined to investigate.
- 9.2 The outcome of that consultation resulted in support for the disclosure of a complaint being made to the member concerned at the outset of the complaint and that [revised procedure](#) has been adopted by the Ombudsman and is in operation.

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