

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

21st August 2013

Present: Mr R Barrett-Evans (Chair)
Mrs G Hayward, Councillor B Kilmister, Mr B Powdrill

(Newport Visitor Centre, Newport: 10.15am – 11.50am)

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Mr J Evans. The Monitoring Officer explained that the Standards Committee Regulations prevented there being more National Park Authority representatives than independent members present at a meeting of the Standards Committee and therefore as Mr Evans could not be present, it was not possible for Councillor Reg Owens to attend the meeting.

2. Disclosures

There were no disclosures of interest.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th December 2012 were presented for confirmation and signature.

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held 18th December 2012 be confirmed and signed.

4. Matters Arising

Standards Conference Wales (Minute 9)

The Monitoring Officer noted that he had circulated the proceedings of the 2013 Standards Conference to members of the Committee. Members agreed that the correct decision had been taken in not attending the Conference due to the distance and cost.

NOTED.

5. Ombudsman's Annual Report 2012/13

The Monitoring Officer was pleased to report that the Authority did not feature in the Ombudsman's Annual Report and there was therefore little more he wished to add. He had read the cases to see if there was anything the Authority could learn and any points would be included in future training sessions. The Chief Executive noted that whilst it was not possible or even desirable to prevent people complaining, the key measure was that no complaints against the Authority had been upheld in recent years.

NOTED.



7. Complaints Procedure

The Monitoring Officer explained that the Authority's current Service Standards procedure contained no time limit with regard to the making of complaints against the Authority. In contrast, the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales had a 12 month time limit, and the Monitoring Officer recommended that the Authority should adopt a similar limit, with the exception of any complaint or allegation of breach of its financial policies.

Members questioned when the 12 month time period would begin, particularly as members of the public often expressed concern about issues before they made a formal complaint and these could therefore be quite long-running cases. The Monitoring Officer clarified that he was proposing that any complaint, which the Service Standards booklet identified as Stage 1 of the process, should be made within 12 months of the cause of the action. The Chief Executive added that it was important that this was clearly set out in the booklet as well as what constituted exceptional circumstances. The Monitoring Officer went on to suggest that it would be an opportune time to revise the booklet as a whole and members of the Committee were invited to provide him with any comments.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Standards Committee recommend to the National Park Authority that the Service Standards booklet should be revised and that a 12 month time period for making complaints be adopted in line with that undertaken by the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.

8. Member Dispensations

It was reported that two new Members had recently been appointed to the Authority by Pembrokeshire County Council – Councillor Stanley Hudson and Councillor Owen James. Members were reminded that at its previous meeting in December 2012, dispensations had been granted to members of Pembrokeshire County Council to speak and vote on applications made by Pembrokeshire County Council, provided they had no reasons to declare any personal and prejudicial interest other than their membership of the Council. The basis of the need for a dispensation to be granted by the Committee had been set out in the report presented to the previous meeting.

It was **RESOLVED** that Councillor Stanley Hudson and Councillor Owen James be granted dispensation to speak and vote on matters relating to Pembrokeshire County Council provided that they had no other reason to declare any personal or prejudicial interest other than their membership of Pembrokeshire County Council.



9. Voluntary Cap on Indemnities

The report of the Monitoring Officer explained that under the Local Authorities (Indemnities for Members and Officers) (Wales) Order 2006, local authorities might, but did not have to, provide an indemnity for Members in respect of legal costs incurred in relation to misconduct proceedings brought against them under the Local Government Act 2000. This Authority provided such an indemnity and paid for an insurance policy with DAS Insurance.

The Public Service Ombudsman for Wales had raised concern in respect of the level of indemnities that some Members had received and had expressed the view that he would be prepared to agree to a voluntary cap on legal costs in such matters. Following consultation with the Welsh Local Government Association, it had been suggested that a voluntary cap of £20,000 on the level of indemnity offered by the Authority to Members subject to proceedings be introduced.

It was **RESOLVED** that the National Park Authority is recommended to approve the adoption of a voluntary cap of £20,000 on the level of indemnity offered for Member code of conduct proceedings.

10. Social Media and its use by Members

It was reported at the meeting that final guidance on the use of social media had now been published by the Welsh Local Government Association, and a copy had been circulated electronically to members of the Committee. This included the use of sites such as Twitter and Facebook as well as guidance on other electronic means of communication.

At the meeting, the Chief Executive circulated a copy of the Authority's own Social Media Protocol which had been developed for use by staff and went on to explain the Authority's use of social media and how it had benefitted. He added that guidance for Members of the Authority could be incorporated within the document.

While welcoming the guidance, individual members of the Committee were cautious of using social media, commenting that it was time consuming and very easy to say something ill advised that was then in the public domain. They also considered that it would be poor practice for Members to send messages via facebook or twitter during meetings as it would give the impression that they were not paying attention, however they did not feel it would be appropriate to prevent Members from doing so.

There was also a discussion regarding the use of webcasting, with attention being drawn to Brecon Beacons NPA's use of this facility, and plans for its introduction by Pembrokeshire County Council. The Chief



Executive noted that the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority did not have suitable facilities and the cost of its introduction would be prohibitive at the present time, although other options could be considered in the future. The Monitoring Officer concluded saying that he felt webcasting had been beneficial in Brecon Beacons, where he had acted as Monitoring Officer for a time, and suggested that a visit to their offices together with discussions with members of that Authority, might prove useful.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Welsh Local Government Association's document "Social Media: a Guide for Councillors" be circulated to Members of the Authority together with the Authority's revised Social Media Protocol prior to the subject being covered at a future training event.

