Appendix

Ethics & Standards Committee

Annual Report to Council 2014/15
The last report was presented to Council on 4 March 2014. This is the fifth Annual Report presented.

Meetings
In the last civic year (May 2014 to date) there were four ordinary meetings of the committee with one special meeting on 17 March 2015 to deal with dispensations for Members Small Schemes, thereby allowing payments to be made by the end of the financial year.

The next scheduled meeting is in April 2015 and then quarterly thereafter.

Report to Council on the outcome of a complaint under the Local Protocol.
Members will be aware of the report to Council on 24 June 2014 on the outcome of the only complaint made to date under the Local Protocol.

The Local Protocol is designed to allow local resolution of complaints between members, so that differences can be resolved at an early stage and matters do not escalate and lead to a breakdown in working relationships between councillors.

Though the basis of the complaint was upheld in that there was inaccuracy in a tweet sent, there was no malicious intent on behalf of the councillor concerned and so no further action was recommended.

It is worth reminding members of the care they must exercise when reporting council issues on social media.

We now have a new Ombudsman, Mr Nick Bennett, and it is clear that he is continuing the work of his predecessors, in that it is expected that member on member complaints will be dealt with under local arrangements unless they are of a very serious nature. At the moment, that does not involve community councillor complaints, but the Ombudsman is continuing to look at finding a similar solution for them.

Web Casting
Council meetings are now often web cast and the committee is pleased to note that the ability to have greater public scrutiny of councillor behaviour in the Chamber shows that behaviour by members to each other remains, by and large, courteous and respectful.
Annual All Wales Standards Conference

The next Annual All Wales Standards Committee is to be held in Cardiff on 20 October.

A draft programme is being prepared and at this stage is likely to be under the banner of *Managing Standards in a Changing World*, with particular emphasis on dealing with issues in social media, whistleblowing, and maintaining a pro active and effective standards committee. As usual, there will be special sessions aimed at the issues raised in undertaking community councillor roles.

The committee is aware that councillors are awaiting decisions from Welsh Government on local government re organisation, as well as responding to the proposals set out in the recent publication of the Welsh Government's white paper entitled ‘Power to Local People’.

All these possible changes are set against a stringent economic background which means councillors are being asked to make more and more difficult decisions, and it is the job of the Ethics and Standards committee to offer what help it can to members as they navigate their way through these changing conditions.

Annual Report from the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales 2013/14

Nationally, the then Acting Ombudsman reported that the number of code of conduct complaints continued to fall which is a pleasing situation to report.

Of the six cases for that period relevant to Torfaen, five were closed after initial investigation and the Ombudsman recommended no further action in the remaining case.

Training

The current Code of Conduct has been with us, without change, since 2008 but it is important that members continue to remind themselves of the principles under the Code as they apply it to the changing and challenging local government scene.

There are regular advice notes from the Monitoring Officer and recent training sessions for ‘dual hatted’ members i.e. those members who are both county borough councillors and community councillors. With 20 out of 44 councillors at Torfaen also serving as community councillors I hope this has been particularly helpful. Repeat sessions will be arranged for those councillors who were unable to attend.

The Ombudsman produces regular editions of a Code of Conduct casebook explaining his various decisions on code of conduct matters. These are helpful and are discussed at our committee meetings and will continue to be circulated to all
members by the Monitoring Officer. I would encourage members to find the time to read through these.

**Dispensations**

The Committee regularly considers applications for dispensations in respect of personal interests which would otherwise be prejudicial and prevent a member from participating in decision making. Most of these relate to Members’ Small Scheme Donations. This year we dealt with 38 of these.

In addition there were some from a community council to enable those councillors affected to discuss proposed school closures, always an important local issue where members of the public expect their local representatives to be involved.

**Attendance of Members at Meetings**

The Committee continues to receive reports on the level of attendance at meetings, seminars and training sessions as part of its role in promoting high standards and supporting members in their training and development regarding the Code, always with the intention of helping members to perform their duties effectively and to aid public understanding of the demands and competing priorities members balance every day.

**New and retiring members**

In the last report I welcomed two new members, Mr John Irvine and Mrs Kathryn Pegington. We now welcome Mr Andrew Walsh as the newest independent member.

I will come to the end of my second term in November and we will be looking for yet another independent member for the committee. I hope those members of the public who are watching will look out for the adverts during the summer when the interview process will take place and consider applying.

It is for all of us to be interested in, and give support to, maintaining the highest standards in public life.

**Lyn Oelmann,**

Chair of Ethics and Standards Committee

18 March 2015