

NOTICE OF MEETING



Snowdonia National Park Authority

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- Meeting:** Standards Committee
- Date:** Friday 20 September 2024
- Time:** 2.00 p.m.
- Location:** Snowdonia National Park Authority Office,
Penrhyndeudraeth and via Zoom

Joining instructions will be sent to Members separately

Members are asked to join the meeting 15 minutes before the designated start time

Councillors :

Dilwyn Roberts, Elfed Roberts;

Independent Members

Mr. Martin James Hughes, Mr. Mark Jones, Mrs. Sharon Warnes.

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE
DRAFT AGENDA
20.09.2024**

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Numbers

1. **Apologies for absence and Chairman's Announcements**
2. **Declarations of Interest**
To receive any disclosure of interest by members or officers in respect of any item of business.
3. **Minutes**
The Chairman shall propose that the minutes of the Standards Committee held on the 26th April 2024 be signed as a true record (copy herewith) and receive matters arising, for information. 3 - 5
4. **Nomination of Members for the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel**
To submit a report by the Director of Corporate Services. (Copy herewith) 6 - 7
5. **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**
To submit a report by the Director of Corporate Services. (Copy herewith) 8
6. **Grant of Dispensations**
To submit a report by the Director of Corporate Services. (Copy herewith) 9 - 13
7. **Complaints Monitoring Report**
To submit a report by the Head of Administration and Customer Care, for information. (Copy herewith) 14 - 18

**STANDARDS COMMITTEE
FRIDAY 26th APRIL 2024**

PRESENT:

Member appointed by Gwynedd Council

Councillor Elfed Roberts;

Member appointed by Conwy County Borough Council

Councillor Dilwyn Roberts;

Member appointed by the Welsh Government

Sarah Hattle;

Independent Members

Martin J. Hughes, Mark Jones, Sharon Warnes (Chair);

In Attendance (ex. officio)

Tim Jones;

Officers

Mr. G. Iwan Jones, Mrs Anwen Gaffey.

Apologies for Absence

Councillor Edgar Owen (ex. officio);

The Director of Corporate Services advised that the meeting was being recorded to assist in verifying the minutes.

1 Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Members and officers to the meeting.

2. Declaration of Interest

No declarations of Personal Interests were made in respect of any item.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the Standards Committee meeting held on 1st September 2023 were accepted and the Chair signed them as a true record. The Chair thanked Sarah Hattle for not attending the meeting in September in order to balance the membership and ensure a quorum.

4. Annual Report to the Authority's Annual General Meeting

Submitted – A report by the Director of Corporate Services for Members to agree the contents of the Annual Report.

Reported – The Director of Corporate Services presented the report and background and advised upon the additional statutory duty to prepare an annual report on how the committee's functions have been discharged and provide an overview of conduct matters within their Authority.

Members considered the report and made the following observations on Section 4:-

- para 4.2 – Members noted that the new hybrid system was being trialled at the meeting today and officers invited further feedback from the Members who were attending remotely. The Director of Corporate Services stated that past acoustic problems had been addressed by installing a new ceiling, and new screens and

microphones had been purchased to allow the Authority to convene its meetings at the National Park Headquarters in Penrhyndeudraeth in future. Members agreed that the updated facilities were an improvement on the facilities at Plas Tan y Bwlch, although some problems did arise at the meeting which were reported to the IT department.

- the Director of Corporate Services to ascertain whether the Chair's input to the Wales Audit report on Governance of National Park Authorities and the Standards Committee's input to the Penn Review had previously been reported in the Annual Report 2023.
- the Chair confirmed that she was available to present the Standards Committee Annual Report to the Authority's AGM on the 12th June 2024.

RESOLVED subject to the above, to agree the contents of the Annual Report to be presented to the Authority's Annual General Meeting, as set out in Section 4 of the report.

5. Report by Internal Audit on Support Provided to the Authority's Members

Submitted – An information report by the Director of Corporate Services for Members to note and discuss.

Reported – The Director of Corporate Services presented the Internal Audit Service's report in detail.

Members considered the report and made the following observations:-

- Members welcomed the report conclusion that there was a high level of certainty that the internal mechanisms in place provided sufficient support to Members.
- the Standards Committee raised concerns on the low level of participation by Members to the Internal Audit Service's questionnaire. A total of three responses had not provided the Internal Audit with enough information to make an informed analysis and on this occasion the Authority had benefited from the additional evidence and information provided.
- the Standards Committee agreed that such lack of engagement should be referred to in the annual report and to encourage Members to respond fully to such matters when the opportunity presents itself in future.

RESOLVED

1. to note the report

2. to include in the Annual Report the Standard Committee's concern at the lack of engagement by Members.

6. Declaration of Members' Interests

Submitted – A report by the Director of Corporate Services for the Standards Committee to monitor the operation of the code of conduct.

Reported – The Director of Corporate Services presented the report and background and Members noted they had had reviewed the process which seemed to be working very well.

RESOLVED to note the report, for information.

7. Standards Committees Chairs' Forum Wales – Monday 29th January 2024

Submitted - The minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committees Chairs' Forum Wales, for information.

Reported – Members noted that the Chair would present the minutes and not the Vice-Chair as stated in the Agenda.

The Chair presented the minutes and advised that many of the matters under discussion at the Chairs' Forum were not relevant to National Park Authorities.

Arising thereon, Members and officers discussed:-

- use of the Local Resolution process
- the support provided for the Standards Committees
- an online session on the use of social media, prepared by the WLGA, which could be accessed by using the link in the report.
- Members noted that the recently published report by the Auditor General for Wales on Governance of National Park Authorities was available on the Audit Wales website, for information.

RESOLVED to note the oral report, for information, and to thank the Chair for representing the Snowdonia National Park Authority Standards Committee at the Standards Committees Chairs' Forum Wales.

The meeting ended at 14.55

MEETING	Standards Committee
DATE	20 September 2024
TITLE	NOMINATION OF MEMBERS FOR THE SINGLE STATUS GRADING APPEALS PANEL
REPORT BY	Director of Corporate Services
PURPOSE	To appoint three members and two substitute members to the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel

BACKGROUND

On 15th June 2011 the Authority adopted a revised Scheme of delegation that included changes to the terms of reference of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel. The revised arrangements provide that membership should comprise of three members plus two substitute members, all to be drawn from and chosen by the members of the Standards Committee. The terms of reference also provide that in appointing members to the Panel the Standards Committee shall have regard to the need for appropriate gender representation.

The role of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel is to consider appeals from the decision of the job evaluation panel which is usually conducted internally at officer level. The calling of a meeting of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel is a very infrequent occurrence. Historically, whilst the Authority was undertaking the job evaluation process, it is true to say that this Panel was at that time active. However, there is still a need for such a panel as an appeal could be lodged at any time by a member of staff who disagrees with the decision of the job evaluation panel.

When the Standards Committee last considered this matter on 1st September 2023 it resolved to appoint Mr Mark Jones, Mrs Sarah Hattle and Mr. Martin J. Hughes as Members of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel with Councillor Dilwyn Roberts and Councillor Elfed Roberts appointed as substitute members. The Standards Committee needs to consider the membership of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel annually following the AGM of the Authority.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

None

RECOMMENDATION

To appoint three members and two substitute members from the membership of the Standards Committee to sit as members of the Single Status Grading Appeals Panel.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

ITEM NUMBER 5

MEETING	Standards Committee
DATE	20 September 2024
TITLE	Public Services Ombudsman for Wales
REPORT BY	Director of Corporate Services
PURPOSE	To advise the Committee on developments applicable to this Authority

BACKGROUND

The Public Services Ombudsman for Wales publishes an Annual Report and Accounts.

The full report can be found on the Ombudsman's website (www.ombudsman.wales) under Publications and then Annual Report and Accounts.

Normally, only a very small minority of the total complaints received by the Ombudsman relates to the National Parks and I am pleased to report that the situation remains unchanged for 2023/24.

During this time, the number of complaints referred to the Ombudsman in relation to National Parks was down from a total of 3 in the preceding year to 1 for 2023-24 despite the number of complaints having increased overall. Unfortunately, in this instance the complaint was applicable to Snowdonia National Park Authority with the Ombudsman declining to investigate the matter further as confirmed in the Complaints Monitoring Report, also to be considered today by the Standards Committee.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

None

RECOMMENDATION

1. To note the contents of the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

ITEM NUMBER 6

MEETING	Standards Committee
DATE	20 September 2024
TITLE	Grant of Dispensations
REPORT BY	Director of Corporate Services
PURPOSE	To grant dispensations to the Members of Gwynedd Council and Conwy County Borough Council

BACKGROUND

The Standards Committee has previously granted dispensations on a number of occasions. On 1st September 2023, the Standards Committee resolved to grant a dispensation for Members appointed by Gwynedd Council to enable them to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Gwynedd Council for a period up to 31st December 2024 unless further extended by resolution of this Committee prior to 31st December 2024. The Standards Committee also resolved to grant a dispensation for Members appointed by Conwy County Borough Council to enable them to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Conwy County Borough Council for a period up to 31st December 2024 unless further extended by resolution of this Committee prior to 31st December 2024. As this period is due to expire before the Standards Committee is next scheduled to meet it is time to consider the matter further.

Prior to the grant of the dispensations referred to above and preceding grants of dispensation the adoption of the new Code of Conduct caused difficulties both in relation to quorum on the Authority and Planning and Access Committee and also from a loss of local knowledge as members had to withdraw from the meeting. Under the previous Code of Conduct members had been allowed to take part in the discussion and had often been a valuable source of information on various aspects of such applications.

When the Standards committee last considered this matter it had regard to the Standards Committees (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) Regulations 2001 as amended by the Local Government (Standards Committees, Investigations, Dispensations and Referral) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2016 which allowed the Standards Committee of this Authority to grant a dispensation where:

“2 (a) no fewer than half of the members of the relevant authority or of a committee of the authority (as the case may be) by which the business is to be considered has an interest which relates to that business;

- (b) no fewer than half of the members of a leader and cabinet executive of the relevant authority by which the business is to be considered has an interest which relates to that business and either paragraph (d) or (e) also applies;*
- (c) in the case of a county or county borough council, the inability of the member to participate would upset the political balance of the relevant authority or of the committee of the authority by which the business is to be considered to such an extent that the outcome would be likely to be affected;*
- (d) the nature of the member's interest is such that the member's participation in the business to which the interest relates would not damage public confidence in the conduct of the relevant authority's business;*
- (e) the interest is common to the member and a significant proportion of the general public;*
- (f) the participation of the member in the business to which the interest relates is justified by the member's particular role or expertise;*
- (g) the business to which the interest relates is to be considered by an overview and scrutiny committee of the relevant authority and the member's interest is not a pecuniary interest;*
- (h) the business which is to be considered relates to the finances or property of a voluntary organisation of whose management committee or board the member is a member otherwise than as a representative of the relevant authority and the member has no other interest in that business provided that any dispensation shall not extend to participation in any vote with respect to that business; or*
- (i) it appears to the committee to be in the interests of the inhabitants of the area of the relevant authority that the disability should be removed provided that written notification of the grant of the dispensation is given to the National Assembly for Wales within seven days in such manner as it may specify.*
- (j) it appears to the committee to be otherwise appropriate to grant a dispensation.*

3 (1) A dispensation granted by the standards committee of a relevant authority under section 81(4) of the Act on the grounds set out in regulation 2(j) and which remains in effect, must be reviewed by the standards committee once in every 12 month period from the date on which the dispensation is first granted.

(2) When conducting a review under paragraph (1) the standards committee must determine whether the dispensation should continue to have effect."

It was satisfied that that both paragraph (a) and (d) above provide sufficient justification for the granting of a dispensation to members appointed by Gwynedd Council to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Gwynedd Council.

In relation to those members appointed by Conwy County Borough Council, it found that they are in a slightly different position as there are generally no issues relating to quorum. It found however that paragraph (d) above was equally applicable to both members appointed by Gwynedd Council and Conwy County Borough Council appointed members and on that basis granted a dispensation to members appointed by Conwy County Borough Council to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Conwy County Borough Council.

It can be confirmed that the dispensations previously granted by the Standards Committee have worked well in practise with the Authority and Planning and Access Committee in particular benefitting from the same both in relation to ensuring a quorum and no loss of local knowledge in the determining of applications. During the operation of a previous dispensation between 2010 and 2012 there have been planning applications that were particularly contentious. One example involved an application for sheltered housing in the Llan Ffestiniog area on land in the ownership of Gwynedd Council. Members of Gwynedd

Council took a full part in proceedings. Officer recommendation was for approval. There were strong local objections to the proposed scheme and I received correspondence from members of the public voicing concern that members of Gwynedd Council were allowed to take part in the matter. However, on that occasion, following a site visit, the Planning and Access committee's decision was to refuse the application. This decision was the subject of an appeal which did not succeed and so members' views were exonerated.

Another contentious planning application involved an application by Gwynedd Council for a new area school. Once again officer recommendation was for approval and once again there was strong local opposition to the scheme. Part of that opposition centred on the fact that members of Gwynedd Council would be allowed to take part in the decision making process. Concerns were raised that some of those members had voted on the issue as part of Gwynedd Council's approval of its strategy. I took the view that no decision had been taken by Gwynedd Council on the actual planning application as this Authority is the Planning Authority for the area. The application was to decide on the planning merits of the application and the discussion at committee broadly followed the planning merits or otherwise of the application with the exception of a public speaker on behalf of the Applicant who referred to non-planning matters. On this occasion members decided to follow officer recommendation and planning permission was granted. The majority of members of Gwynedd Council voted in favour of the application but there were also abstentions and some also voted against the application. Even if all members of Gwynedd Council had declared and withdrawn from the meeting, on the assumption that the voting members remaining would not have voted differently, the application would still have been successful albeit on a reduced majority down from a majority of 9 in favour with 4 against to 5 in favour with 2 against.

Whilst there was undoubted concern in connection with this application I saw no evidence of irregularity by members of Gwynedd Council. Such applications are by their very nature generally contentious applications with a wide range of views but the final decision was one of approval in accordance with officer recommendation.

In September 2018 the Planning and Access Committee dealt with another contentious issue namely the application for planning permission for the Llanbedr relief road. In this matter members of Gwynedd Council declared an interest but relied on the dispensation granted by the Standards Committee and took a full part in deciding the application.

A complaint was subsequently received alleging a breach of the Members Code of Conduct by members appointed by Gwynedd Council in their consideration of the planning application.

The complainant raised concerns that members appointed by Gwynedd Council who were present at the meeting, despite having signed declarations of interest, were allowed to fully participate in the decision making process which culminated in the application being granted planning permission.

The complaint was not upheld as the Standards Committee, in their meeting of the 7th of July 2017 had granted a general dispensation to Members appointed by Gwynedd Council and Conwy County Borough Council in such circumstances, to enable the Authority to continue to conduct its business effectively. A full explanation was given to the complainant.

The complainant referred the matter to the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales, and also referred to the fact that only 10 members out of the possible 18 were present in the Planning and Access Committee on the day.

The Ombudsman explained to the complainant how the law regarding the granting of dispensations worked, as well as the quorate numbers required by law for a planning committee to proceed. Both had complied with legal requirements in this instance. The ombudsman therefore declined to investigate the matter further on the grounds that it was a properly made decision that a public body is entitled to make.

The Planning and Access Committee once more considered the Llanbedr Relief Road but on this occasion there were no complaints regarding the use of the grant of dispensation by members of Gwynedd Council.

There was one further planning application during 2021 when the dispensation was used. The application was a contentious one for the demolition of a former school building and for the erection of five supported living units at Dolgellau. On this occasion the committee resolved contrary to officer recommendation to refuse permission on the grounds that the development would result in the loss of a traditional building and negatively impact on the wider historic environment of Dolgellau. A second reason was also given namely that insufficient information had been submitted in relation for the need for the proposal in order for the local planning authority to make an informed decision on the impact of the development.

If the Standards committee is minded to grant a further dispensation it must be stressed that, as before, the granting of dispensations in such terms would not preclude the operation of any other part of the Code of Conduct so, for example, if a member appointed by Gwynedd Council was also the owner of land adjacent to the application land owned by Gwynedd Council then notwithstanding the fact that he/she had the benefit of a dispensation on his/her membership with Gwynedd he/she would of course still have to declare a prejudicial interest. The reason for this is that the decision would affect land in the Authority's area in which he/she has a beneficial interest and a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts would reasonably regard the personal interest as so significant that it is likely to prejudice his/her judgement of the public interest.

Having considered the issues, I consider that it would be in the interests of the Authority to grant dispensations to both members appointed by Gwynedd Council (Grounds 2 (a) and (d)) and Conwy County Borough Council (Ground 2 (d)) for a set period so that the Standards Committee can then revisit the matter and assess the situation once more.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

None

RECOMMENDATION

1. To grant a dispensation for Members appointed by Gwynedd Council to enable them to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Gwynedd Council for a period up to 31st December 2025 unless further extended by resolution of this Committee prior to 31st December 2025.

2. To grant a dispensation for Members appointed by Conwy County Borough Council to enable them to take a full part in the determination of issues relating to Conwy County Borough Council for a period up to 31st December 2025 unless further extended by resolution of this Committee prior to 31st December 2025.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Standards Committees (Grant of Dispensations) (Wales) Regulations 2001
The Local Government (Standards Committees, Investigations, Dispensations and Referral) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2016

ITEM NUMBER 7

MEETING	Standards Committee
DATE	20 September 2024
TITLE	Complaints Monitoring Report
REPORT BY	Head of Administration and Customer Care
PURPOSE	To report on the written complaints received by the Authority

1.0. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. All formal complaints are registered and monitored centrally, as part of our ongoing commitment to ensuring excellent customer care in our service provision. The Authority received 12 formal complaints directly relating to the Authority during the 2023/24 financial year.
- 1.2. Of the 12 complaints received, 6 related to the planning service, 3 complaints were received about staff at Pen y Pass (2 of which involved private security staff), 2 complaints were received about Plas Tan y Bwlch, and 1 complaint regarding a member of staff making an unannounced call at a property.
- 1.3. All complaints were thoroughly investigated, and all but 1 received a response within the target of 15 working days.
- 1.4. Of the complaints investigated, 7 were upheld or partially upheld. One complaint that was upheld was later referred to the Public Service Ombudsman who declined to investigate further as the statutory appeals process had been instigated with Welsh Government.
- 1.5. Where the Authority's standard of service has fallen short, we have duly apologised and taken steps to address the problems immediately.
- 1.6. Of the formal complaints concerning the planning service, communication issues and delays seem to be the root cause of most of these. Whilst it is important to remember that the ratio of complaints compared to the total number of planning applications decided within the year remains very low (515 planning Decision Notices issued in 2023/24); there is however no room to be complacent.

1.7 During the process of investigating these complaints some training issues have been identified and addressed, changes made to some processes, and the Duty Officer Rota is now monitored regularly. Recruitment issues have also now eased which has meant that staffing resources have stabilised within the service. This in turn should see improvements in response times in the coming year, once backlogs have been reduced.

2.0. RECOMMENDATION

2.1. That the Committee note the content of the report

Summary of Complaints Upheld or Partially Upheld

PLAS TAN Y BWLCH

2 x Complaints regarding stay at Plas Tan y Bwlch (July and August 2023)

Two separate complaints were received regarding bed a breakfast stays at Plas Tan y Bwlch. The complainants sent photographs of a broken window blind, stained carpets, marks on the wall, exposed expanding foam around pipework and poor cleaning standards.

Both complainants received full apologies and a refund of their stays. The Cleaning Standards were addressed with the Cleaning Supervisor.

PLANNING

Lack of response and updates from the Planning Compliance Service (September 2023)

The complaint related to a reported concern regarding a possible breach of planning control at a campsite and the lack of response received by the compliance service to the initial concern. A further complaint related to the subsequent lack of action taken on the site in question, which led the complainant to believe that such matters were not taken seriously by the Authority.

A review of the case was undertaken, and steps put in place to progress matters. An apology was also given to the complainant as the service received including response times fell well below expected standards.

Complaint regarding not being kept updated regarding an Enforcement Notice issued (November 2023)

The individual had previously contacted the Authority with information about a possible breach of planning control on a site, and had informed Officers of their personal safety concerns should the land occupier under investigation find out their identity, and accordingly asked for their contact details to be removed and destroyed from our files.

The individual was informed that the Authority's intention was to serve an Enforcement Notice on the site in question. Following this, a complaint was received regarding not receiving any further updates from the Authority once the Notice was served and that they were not included on the interested party list on the Authority's response to PEDW on the appeal.

Upon investigation it was found that although there is no doubt that the complainant was an interested party, due to the location and remoteness of the property, had their details been included and subsequently published on the PEDW website (as is their usual practice), it would not have been hard for the appellant to identify the complainant; and

so to ensure the protection of the complainants' identity, the Officer did not include them on the interested party list.

Contact should have been made with the individual to both inform them of the appeal taking place and to ascertain whether they wanted to be logged as an interested party. This was not done, and an apology was given to the complainant, and the learning points of this case were discussed with the Officer concerned.

Complaint regarding processing time of pre-application advice and subsequent Listed Building Consent Application (November 2023)

A complaint was received regarding the protracted pre-application advice process and subsequent Listed Building Consent Application which had commenced in July 2023, which the complainant stated had been very stressful.

It was unfortunate that during this time the Historic Environment Planning Officer left her post and recruitment difficulties meant that the case had to be transferred to an external consultant to be progressed. The application had to be amended due to new advice received which contradicted the initial advice, which led to further delays. An apology was given to the applicant regarding the time taken thus far on processing the application, and also for the late response to the complaint, which was not given within 15 working days as set out in the Authority's Complaint Procedure.

Complaint regarding processing time of pre-application advice and subsequent Listed Building Consent Application (February 2024)

The individual submitted a pre-application advice request in November 2021 followed by a Listed Building Consent application in July 2022. A site inspection took place in April 2023, and since that time the complainant noted that despite sporadic communication from the Authority, the application remained undecided. The complainant stated that due to the delays the roof of her property was now leaking to such an extent it rendered the property uninhabitable.

A review of the case was undertaken and although recruitment issues and the subsequent staffing resources had contributed significantly to the delays, there were also unauthorised works that had taken place at the property which required addressing and which had complicated matters further.

An apology was given to the complainant and immediate steps put in place to address matters, including setting up a site meeting to agree a way forward. The complainant subsequently appealed to the Department of Planning and Environmental Decisions Wales (Welsh Government) on the grounds on non-determination.

A complaint was also submitted to the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales who declined to investigate further as the statutory right of appeal had been instigated.

Applicant incorrectly advised by Planning Officer (February 2024)

The individual submitted a pre-application advice request and paid the £250 fee. The pre-application advice request was incorrectly handled as a non-fee paying request (to confirm only if planning permission was required) by the Planning Officer and the individual was advised to submit a Certificate of Lawful Existing Use or Development (CLEUD) application. The CLEUD application fee was an additional £250.

Had the pre-application advice request been processed correctly and the matter looked into fully, it would have become evident that a CLEUD application was not needed. Due to the Planning Officer's error the individual had paid an additional £250 for the CLEUD application which he did not require.

An apology was given along with a refund of the fee.

A complaint regarding availability of Planning Officers to answer enquiries in the Planning Service (March 2023).

A complaint was received by a Planning Agent who had years of experience in submitting planning applications with the Authority, regarding the difficulties of getting hold of Planning Officers on the phone to discuss issues that arise with current planning applications. The Agent was unhappy that applicants and agents were expected to communicate with the Planning Officer via e-mail which led to delays in response times; whereas a quick phone call for straightforward enquiries would be more efficient and effective approach which would avoid unnecessary delays in processing applications.

A full response was given to the Agent and further discussions were entered into on improvement areas. As a result of which, some aspects of the service were reviewed and changes made, including to the Duty Officer rota.