

LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS

MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

HELD AT 7.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2010

**C1, 1ST FLOOR, TOWN HALL, MULBERRY PLACE, 5 CLOVE CRESCENT,
LONDON, E14 2BG**

Members Present:

Mr Patrick (Barry) O'Connor (Chair)

Mr Muhammad Habibur Rahman (Vice-Chair)

Ms Suzette Barry (Independent Member)

Mr Barry Lowe (Independent Member)

Mr Eric Pemberton (Independent Member)

Mr Matthew William Rowe (Independent Member)

Councillor David Snowdon

Other Councillors Present:

None Present.

Officers Present:

Isabella Freeman	– (Assistant Chief Executive [Legal Services] Chief Executive's)
John Williams	– (Service Head, Democratic Services)
Richard Parsons	– (Service Head Procurement and Corporate Programme, Resources)
Claire Symonds	– (Service Head, Customer Access, Communities Localities Culture)
Tony Qayum	– (Head of Audit Services, Internal Audit, Resources)
Zoe Folley	– (Committee Officer, Democratic Services Chief Executive's)
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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Waiseul Islam, Azizur Rahman Khan, Salim Ullah and Dr Emma Jones for whom Councillor David Snowdon was deputising.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None reported.

3. UNRESTRICTED MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on 20th October 2009 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendments:

- Inclusion of Mr Barry Lowe in the Members present list
- Item 5.2 – Anti Fraud Corruption Strategy – Red Book 2 – Progress Report. Substitution of December 2009 with March 2010.

Matters Arising

5.1 Ethical Standards Questionnaire – Outcomes Report

In relation to the request for training on the Whistleblowing Policy, Ms Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services) reported that the training and clarification sought had been provided. In relation to the training on hearings held on 11th November 2009, it was noted that there was a good Independent Member turnout but a low elected Member turnout due to good reasons.

4. DEPUTATIONS & PETITIONS

None received.

5. UNRESTRICTED REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION

5.1 Corporate Governance Review - Assessment against CIPFA/ SOLACE Framework

Ms Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services) presented the Corporate Governance Review report and highlighted the key points. Ms Freeman reported that page 4 of the report comprised a list of the actions agreed in October 2008 at the previous review. As detailed the majority of tasks had been completed. A checklist had been formulated to identify any necessary compliance action as set out in the final column of Appendix A. There were only a few outstanding actions.

The Chair asked the Committee whether they saw merit in undertaking a self evaluation exercise to assess their performance and identify any areas of improvement. It was suggested that this idea could be examined in more detail at a later stage and that it would fit in with the Council's Corporate Governance Assessment. The Committee were supportive of this idea.

In reply to a question from the Chair, Ms Freeman confirmed that the results of the Annual Residents Survey were published on the Council's website. The results were positive overall.

RESOLVED:

That the progress on compliance/ action arising from the 2008 review as detailed in section 4 of the report be noted and the outcome of the 2009 review as detailed in Appendix A be agreed.

5.2 National Fraud Initiative 2008/09 and Anti Fraud Update Report

Mr Tony Qayum, Head of Audit Services, presented the progress report which provided an overview of anti fraud work undertaken during the past nine months by Audit Services.

Mr Qayum advised that since the last report to the Committee in February 2009, the Authority had received 18,000 matches from the Audit Commission for investigation. Mr Qayum reported on the value to the Authority of measuring the targets over a one year period rather than a longer duration. Appendix A summarised progress against the NFI milestones as at end December 2009.

Mr Qayum summarised current activities including the work undertaken in relation to Housing Fraud, Blue Badge irregularities and the CIPFRA Red Book 2 requirements.

In reply to questions regarding the Audit Commission's assessment process, Mr Qayum reported that the Audit Commission examined the best quality matches to identify areas for investigation. The Authority then took the recommended filters and applied local knowledge to assess what should be looked at. This allowed for a broader view to be taken and enabled the Authority to obtain a better understanding of the issues.

Mr Qayum reported on progress with recovering the sums lost as a result of overpayment and Council Tax Fraud as detailed in the report. He also summarised the recovery process.

In reply to a question about benchmarking assessments, Mr Qayum confirmed that Audit Services already carried out such exercises. He referred to the difficulties in trying to carry out such comparisons as different Authorities tended to have different approaches to managing fraud. He suggested that Audit Services could look into the variances between Authorities to establish where the Authority stands in terms of managing NFI. It was also reported that the Audit Commission monitored activity via their web portal, and any incidences of non compliance could be included in the future Comprehensive Area Assessment.

The Committee welcomed the progress report and the positive work carried out.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of this report be noted.

5.3 Local Assessment of Complaints Update - New Adult Social Care procedure

Ms Clair Symonds, Service Head for Customer Access presented the report as requested by the Committee at a previous meeting.

Ms Symonds reported that in general the emphasis was on finding effective solutions to services user's complaints through flexible investigations. Ms Symonds reported on the process for hearing complaints. No standard response time was stipulated. However the service were measuring the response times at 10,20 and 30 working days.

Attention was drawn to a new leaflet designed to promote the new complaints procedure developed in conjunction with the Primary Care Trust and partners. (The leaflet was subsequently circulated to Members of the Committee following the meeting). Ms Symonds also drew attention to the figures for the number of Adults Social Care Complaints resolved in the 3rd Quarter 2009/10. The figures indicated there appeared to be a small reduction in complaints.

The Resources Service were working closely with Adults Health and Wellbeing to ensure the new procedures were fully followed and would also monitor them on a regular basis.

It was also reported that monitoring reports would be brought to both the Standards Committee and also the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the regular cycle of monitoring.

In response to questions from Members, Ms Symonds reported on the timeframe for answering complaints. During the most recent quarter, all complaints were resolved within 10 working days. It was clarified that the term 'Answered' in Table 1 meant that the Authority had done all that it could to resolve the complaint.

The Committee also heard about the value of receiving feedback as this helped improve services. It was also reported that where a complaint was not upheld, the service would report back to the complainant and provide them with an explanation.

The Council's staff had received training on the new complaints procedure and met with the partners to discuss the procedures.

Ms Symonds emphasised that the new regulations represented a procedural change rather than a change in how the system worked. Ms Symonds emphasised that the new procedures would be reviewed and that all partners involved were committed to the process.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of this report be noted.

5.4 Monitoring Report on Ethical Standards Training

Ms Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services) presented the report and highlighted the main points.

Members noted the need for further training and that this would be provided.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of this report be noted.

5.5 Monitoring Implementation of the Ethical Governance Protocol for Council Contracts Progress Report

Mr Richard Parsons Service Head Procurement and Corporate Programmes presented the progress report regarding adherence to the Council's Ethical Governance Protocol by suppliers and use of the Requisition to Pay (R2P) e-procurement system.

Mr Parsons reported on progress made in implementing the Protocol since agenda publication. A further 31 suppliers had signed up representing a total value of £10million. He briefly explained the purpose of the R2P system, how it would assist the Protocol and the size and number of the suppliers who had committed to it. Action was being taking to ensure all suppliers to the Council signed up to the Protocol. The goal was to have 100% of suppliers committed by Summer 2010.

Mr Parsons answered questions from members about the rollout of the R2P system and use of the traditional 'paper chase system'. The number of traditional invoices would be scaled down. 100% of business would be processed through the new system. The use of the paper based system was now only really about registering suppliers on the new system.

Mr Parsons also reported on the systems of review and the mechanisms for monitoring adherence to the protocol. The Procurement Service were requiring compliance with the protocol in all tenders.

It was also reported that Audit Services would be examining the checks and balances being applied to the R2P system.

RESOLVED:

That the contents of this report be noted.

5.6 Members Attendance and Interests - Monitoring Report

Mr John Williams, Service Head for Democratic Services presented the monitoring report. The report updated the Committee on a range of matters related to Councillors attendance at meetings, events, completion of timesheets and registration of interests.

Mr Williams also tabled an updated version of Appendix 1. (Summary of Members Monthly Timesheet Returns) incorporating timesheets completed since report publication.

Mr Williams drew attention to the key changes identified in the report. Members timesheets now showed the total number of hours recorded by the Member at the end of the month. The average total was broadly in line with the guidance set by the Independent Remuneration Panel.

Members considered the responses to the consultation on changes to the timesheet proforma (as attached at Appendix 4). Members expressed disappointed at the low number of responses and considered how the existing timesheet proforma could be improved.

In considering the responses, concern was expressed at the inclusion of the category 'time spent on reading and telephone calls' and the difficulty of recording these activities.

In relation to Appendix 1 regarding Councillors' timesheet submissions, concern was also expressed at the number of Members without any submissions since the start of the current municipal year. There were more Members without submissions and in arrears compared to previous years. It was reported that the Chair of the Committee and the Service Head of Democratic Services had spoken to Party Leaders regarding the need to submit timely timesheets. It was **Agreed** that the Chair of the Committee should write to the Members who had not completed any timesheets during the current municipal year to ask that this be rectified and that they clarify their reasons for non submission of timesheets.

It was also **Agreed** that the problem of Members not submitting timely timesheets should be incorporated into the Standards Committee's Annual Report to full Council to be published after full Council. Consideration was also given to alternative ways of publicising the findings.

Councillor Snowdon considered that the incidences of non completion of timesheets could be due to time constraints. He considered that Members often don't have time to keep an absolute record of everything they do and they don't usually record everything like informal events in their diaries. This illustrated the difficulty of the task.

RESOLVED:

1. That the information set out in Appendices 1, 2 and 3 of the report in relation to Councillors' submission of timesheets, attendance at formal

meetings and training events, and completion of the register of interests during the current municipal year be noted;

(ii) That the Chair be asked to write to those Councillor(s) who have not completed any timesheets during the current municipal year to ask that this be rectified and to clarify reasons for non submission of timesheets.

(iii) That the responses submitted by Councillors to the consultation on possible changes to the Members' timesheet proforma as set out at Appendix 5 be noted and it also be noted that the Committee expressed disappointment at the lack of responses;

(iv) That the revised format and content of the monitoring report be welcomed. The Committee considered that the new format was a lot clearer and better focused than previously

(iv) That further monitoring reports be submitted to the Committee at six monthly intervals and

(v) That the problems around Members not submitting timely timesheets be highlighted in the Standards Committee Annual Report to Full Council in addition to the action agreed under resolution 1 (ii) above.

6. ANY OTHER UNRESTRICTED BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT

Mr John Williams, Service Head for Democratic Services, reported that the next scheduled meeting of the Committee was due to take place in April 2010. The Committee was asked to consider the need for this meeting or whether a June/July meeting would be more appropriate. It was **Agreed** that the next meeting in April be cancelled and that the next meeting of the Committee be held in June/July 2010.

The Committee were also informed that three Independent Members of the Committee would be retiring at the end of the Municipal year. The Members were invited to indicate to the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services) / Service Head for Democratic Services Mr Williams whether they wished to seek reappointment. There would be a recruitment exercise to seek new applicants.

The meeting ended at 8.40 p.m.

Chair, Mr Patrick (Barry) O'Connor
Standards Committee