

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 7.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 21 APRIL 2009**

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

**Members Present:**

Mr Patrick (Barry) O'Connor (Chair)

Mr Ibrahim Ali (Independent Member)

Ms Suzette Barry (Independent Member)

Councillor Shirley Houghton

Councillor Ann Jackson

Mr Eric Pemberton (Independent Member)

Mr Muhammad Habibur Rahman (Independent Member)

**Officers Present:**

Isabella Freeman – (Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services))

John Williams – (Service Head, Democratic Services)

Louise Fleming – Senior Committee Officer

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Sister Christine Frost, Mr Satnam Bains, Councillor Stephanie Eaton and Councillor Alex Heslop.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made.

**3. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009 were agreed as a correct record.

Matters Arising

Members queried information given at the previous meeting relating to Members' timesheet returns, in light of information contained elsewhere on the agenda. The Committee was advised that officers would investigate the queries. A question was asked relating to whether the Chair had written to Members who had not submitted returns. The Chair advised that the letter had not been required at the time, as the Members had been reported as

being up to date with their timesheets. However, he would investigate and confirm.

#### **4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

##### **4.1 Draft Guidance On The Provision of References By Councillors**

John Williams, Service Head, Democratic Services, presented a report which proposed guidance for Members and Officers in the event that a Member is asked to provide a reference on behalf of a constituent or other acquaintance. It was acknowledged that the service provided by Councillors met a community need, and that it was important to codify existing arrangements to protect both the individual Councillor and the Council.

Some concern was expressed over the potential for bringing the Council into disrepute and it was suggested that there should be a requirement for the reference to be signed off by an officer; and/or that a provision should be included prohibiting references for direct family members. However, the view was taken that there were already procedures in place for any allegations of Member impropriety to be considered by the Standards Committee. It was proposed that minor changes to the wording of the guidelines be agreed (as attached at Appendix 1 to these minutes).

RESOLVED that

- (i) the guidance attached at Appendix 1 to these minutes in respect of Reference Letters from Councillors be agreed; and
- (ii) the guidance be reviewed by the Standards Committee 6 months after its implementation.

##### **4.2 Revised Code of Conduct for Members - Training Progress Report**

The Committee noted that all Members had received training on the revised Code of Conduct and that an Ethical Standards Self Assessment audit could now be progressed.

The Chair noted the success of the training programme and thanked the Monitoring Officer for her efforts.

##### **4.3 Members Ethical Standards Self Assessment Questionnaire**

Ms Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services) and Monitoring Officer, presented a report setting out proposals for a survey of Members using an Ethical Standards Self Assessment Questionnaire following completion of Member training on the revised Code of Conduct.

RESOLVED that the proposals for the survey of Members and the draft Ethical Standards Self Assessment Questionnaire attached as Appendix 1 to the Committee report be agreed.

#### **4.4 Members' Timesheets and Attendance at Meetings**

Mr John Williams, Service Head, Democratic Services, presented a report and a tabled appendix which gave an updated position on the completion of Members' timesheets and attendance at meetings. The Committee noted that there were still four Councillors who were more than three months behind with their timesheets and asked the Chair to write to those Members expressing the Committee's concern.

The Committee considered the value of the time sheets in relation to the time taken to complete the sheets. However it was considered that it was important for Members to be accountable and that a balance needed to be found between being transparent and not spending a disproportionate amount of time compiling the information, which could be spent better elsewhere. It was suggested that Members be consulted to assess the effectiveness of the system. The Committee was advised that a benchmarking exercise had been carried out, and that Tower Hamlets was one of a small number of comparable Councils which monitored such information.

In relation to the information about Members attendance at meetings, concern was expressed regarding the absence of Councillor Abjol Miah at meetings of the Standards Committee and the Audit Committee, and it was proposed that the Chair write to the Councillor to express those concerns.

RESOLVED that

- (i) the position on the submission of Members' timesheets and attendance at formal meetings during the current year be noted;
- (ii) the current frequency of monitoring reports to the Committee remain, but the quality of information be improved through consultation on different approaches and based on suggestions contained in Committee report, including information on the date that timesheets are completed; attendance at mandatory training events; completion of register of interests updates; and the development of Member role descriptions;
- (iii) a full breakdown of the Members' timesheet and attendance information (in particular at training sessions, in relation to the Member Job Descriptions) be reported as a one-off item alongside the next monitoring report to the Committee; and
- (iv) the Chair of the Standards Committee write to Councillor Stephanie Eaton, Carli Harper-Penman, Alex Heslop and Oliur Rahman regarding their non-completion of timesheets; and to Councillor Abjol Miah regarding his absence from meetings of the Standards and Audit Committees.

**5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT****Independent Members of the Committee**

The Chair welcomed the two new Independent Members who had been observing the meeting in the public gallery, Mr Barry Lowe and Mr Matthew Rowe. He also advised that interviews for the other two vacancies had taken place and that it was anticipated that the four new Independent Members would be in place for the beginning of the new municipal year.

The Committee noted that the terms of office of two of the existing Independent Members, Mr Satnam Bains and Sister Caroline Frost, would conclude at the end of the current municipal year and they would be standing down. The Committee wished to place on record its thanks and appreciation for the significant contribution that both members had made to the work of the Committee since they were initially appointed in 2002, and asked that this be conveyed to Mr Bains and Sister Christine along with the Committee's good wishes for the future.

**Calendar of meetings**

It was noted that the calendar of meetings for 2009/10 would be agreed by the full Council at its meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2009 and that dates for the Standards Committee would be circulated to all members of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 8.35 p.m.

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

## **Draft Guidance for Councillors and Members' Support staff (Mayor & Members' Services, Executive Support Office, Political Advisors and Scrutiny PAs) on Reference Letters from Councillors:-**

Councillors are on occasion asked to provide character or other references on behalf of a ward resident or other acquaintance.

In certain circumstances it may be appropriate for a reference to be supplied as a community service but it is important that procedures are in place to protect the interests of both the Councillor and the Council, particularly in relation to the provisions of the revised Code of Conduct on use of Council resources. The Standards Committee has agreed the following guidance to be followed in the event that a Member is requested to prepare a letter of reference for a constituent or other person:-

- The Councillor is not obliged to supply a reference, which will be provided only at his/her discretion and for someone who is known to the Councillor.
- The letter may be prepared on Council letterhead.
- Officers may type the letter on behalf of the Councillor but the officer details should not be on the letter head.
- The wording of the reference letter must come from the Councillor him/herself. The Member is giving a personal reference, based on their personal knowledge of the individual, not a reference from the Council. Therefore it is not appropriate for an officer to draft the text of the letter.
- As a matter of practice, all letters will include in the body of the text a clause which indicates that 'this is a personal reference and reflects the views of the Councillor. It is not a Council reference'.
- The Councillor must personally sign the reference letter. Officer may not sign or 'pp' the letter on the Councillor's behalf.

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