

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 6.04 P.M. ON WEDNESDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2024**

**COMMITTEE ROOM - TOWER HAMLETS TOWN HALL, 160 WHITECHAPEL  
ROAD, LONDON E1 1BJ**

**Co-optees Present in Person:**

John Pulford MBE (Chair)  
Fiona Browne  
Elizabeth Marshall MBE  
Faham Sinan-Katamba

**Members Present in Person:**

Councillor Abu Chowdhury  
Councillor Iqbal Hossain  
Councillor Asma Islam  
Councillor Sirajul Islam

**Co-optees In Attendance Virtually:**

Mike Houston

**Officers Present in Person:**

Jill Bayley (Head of Legal Safeguarding)  
Patricia Attawia (Democratic Services Team Leader, Civic &  
Members, Governance)  
Matthew Mannion (Head of Democratic Services)

**Officers In Attendance Virtually:**

Linda Walker (Interim Director of Legal and Monitoring Officer)

**1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING(S)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2024 be approved as a correct record of proceedings, subject to:

- Noting apologies of absence from Mike Houston
- Item 5.9 - Recording that the Advisory Committee had indicated it takes lack of attendance very seriously.
- Minor typographical errors.

### **3. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

#### **3.1 Register of Interests and Gifts and Hospitality Quarterly Update**

Patricia Attawia, Democratic Services Team Leader - Civic & Members, introduced the report that updated the Committee on the Members' Register of Interests and declarations of gifts and hospitality submitted by Members since the previous report to the Committee on 26 June 2024.

The Advisory Committee discussed the practicalities of checking or scrutinising submissions of gifts and hospitality. Some members reported that political groups had their own processes to encourage and proactively source submissions.

**RESOLVED** that the Advisory Committee:

1. Review and note the report

#### **3.2 LGA Standards Committee Guidance**

Matthew Manion, Head of Democratic Services, introduced the report that provided an update on the responses provided to Hoey Ainscough Associates in relation to the work to prepare new LGA Guidance for Standards Committees.

The Chair welcomed the opportunity to think strategically about the role of standards committees. He was reassured that Hoey Ainscough Associates had indicated Tower Hamlets was an exemplar in the operation of its standards committee.

The Advisory Committee noted the report and the summaries of the responses provided to Hoey Ainscough Associates so far. Members then discussed some of the key themes and questions as raised in the report. Some of the themes identified in the Advisory Committee's discussion were:

##### Complaints investigations and hearings:

- Any process should have a defined purpose, against which its effectiveness can be measured. Does the process best serve the complainant and the Council as a whole?
- Encourage benchmarking and exploration of processes at other authorities to identify best practice. Members shared their experiences of complaints processes at other organisations.
- How can more complaints be resolved at an earlier stage?
- Could any useful learning be drawn from exploring restorative justice models?
- More and clearer public information on different types of complaints and complaint routes would be beneficial.
- Should standards bodies have powers to raise matters or launch an investigation even if a complaint had not been received?

More detailed discussion of these consideration in the form of a working party or similar would ensure these ideas could be explored in more detail. However, care would be needed to ensure establishment of such a working party did not become onerous.

#### Terms of reference

Clarifying key terms such as 'stakeholders' and 'wider community' would be an essential first step.

The very limited powers and impact of local authority standards regimes as set nationally should be a factor in determining the extent of work undertaken and if and how to reach out to the wider public.

Could initiatives to engage the wider public elsewhere in the Council already underway be used to source interest and engagement on standards matters?

#### Member-Officer protocol

Should oversight of this be in the SAC terms of reference? Some felt there may be a risk of receiving employment complaints of which the requisite expertise may be lacking on standards bodies.

#### Separation of audit and standards

The Advisory Committee was firmly of the view standards body should be separate. However, some form of liaison between chairs of standards and audit could be beneficial.

#### Relationships with political leadership.

Noted that the SAC has informal processes already. A more formalised arrangement with stakeholders such as political group leaders could be welcome.

#### A lead member for Standards?

Some members voiced concerns this could risk political interference in the process.

#### Regular MO/IP and Chair of Standards meeting proposal?

Should IPs be more strongly encouraged to attend standards committee meetings?

#### Voting rights for co-opted members.

Matthew explained that there were legal restrictions on voting rights of co-opted members of local authority committees. It was understood some councils operated standards procedures, including investigation of complaints, with only elected members.

**RESOLVED** that the Standards Advisory Committee:

1. Noted the report.
2. Asks officer to consider the comments above for how the Advisory Committee can promote best practice in standards matters.

### 3.3 Standards in Public Life webpage

Matthew Manion, Head of Democratic Services, introduced the report that sought input from the SAC on whether there should be a specific web page on the Council's website highlighting standards principles to make them more accessible and to underline how important the Council takes this subject.

The Advisory Committee offered the following comments:

- Members broadly supported the principle of a dedicated webpage. However, indicated that consideration of whether to resource such a page should be informed by its likely usefulness and impact. Consideration of feedback from or visitor numbers to similar pages hosted by other local authorities could inform this.
- A webpage would reinforce the importance the Council assigns to the upholding of ethical standards.
- Alternatives to a standalone webpage could be explored such as linking the information via an existing page, for example the 'Be a Councillor' webpage.

**RESOLVED** that the Standards Advisory Committee:

1. Notes the report and asks that the feedback above informs any decision on the proposal to create a new web page highlighting standards principles.

### 3.4 Annual Review of the Member Code of Conduct

Jill Bayley, Head of Safeguarding, introduced the report that aimed to fulfil the requirement to undertake an annual review of the Code of Conduct for Members. Jill and Matthew provided a summary of recent work to refine and simplify the code and associated documents, including the Standards Advisory Committee procedure rules. Jill invited the Committee to review and identify any changes they consider should be made to the Code or associate documents.

Further to questions from members of the Advisory Committee, Jill and Matthew:

- Confirmed training had been provided for members regarding serving on outside bodies. Presentation slides from that training would be circulated to members of the Advisory Committee.

Members of the Advisory Committee made the following comments and observations

- The investigations procedure as set out in Appendix 3 was unclear and would benefit from a different style of presentation, such as a flowchart.

- Clearer and objective criteria to explain which investigation route would be appropriate in which circumstances, would improve clarity and understanding of this process.

**RESOLVED** that the Standards Advisory Committee:

1. Noted the Code of Conduct for Members as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
2. Requested the following changes to the Code (Appendix 3):
  - Review the format of the investigations procedure as set out in Appendix 3
  - Implement criteria for the assessment of complaints as referred to in paragraph 8.9.
3. Delegated authority to the Monitoring Officer, following consultation with the Chair of the Advisory Committee, to make any such changes to the Code prior to submission to Council.

### **3.5 Standards Advisory Committee - report on Code of Conduct matters for the year 2024-2025 (to date)**

Jill Bayley, Head of Safeguarding, introduced the report that updated the Standards Advisory Committee on the monitoring information for complaints and investigations relating to alleged breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct for Members from 1 May 2024 to 16 August 2024. Jill confirmed that all complaints from the previous year had now been resolved. Linda Walker, Director Legal and Monitoring Officer provided further detail.

Further to questions from members of the Advisory Committee, Jill and Linda:

- Indicated they felt that Councillors may lack understanding of the role of the Monitoring Officer and/or their role in the investigations process; this may be delaying investigations procedures unnecessarily. Training has been provided on the obligations to comply with investigations.
- Indicated that the total number of complaints under the Code of Conduct at Tower Hamlets was lower than many other local authorities.
- Further to questions on complaint 002/2023, Jill advised she was unaware of any update on complaint since it was allegedly referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. Explained the reason for the unusually long delay in closing this complaint.

Members of the Advisory Committee made the following comments and observations:

- LGA Guidance should cover members obligations to comply with investigations. Sanctions with non-compliance should be stronger. The Chair indicated he would raise this issue in his report to full Council later in the year.
- Letters sent to Councillors home addresses could help encourage compliance/responses.

- Regarding complaint 002/2023, the process of investigation and decision not to progress to hearing was opaque.
- Political groups should have a greater role to hold their members accountable for and promote higher standards of compliance with investigation requests.

**RESOLVED** that the Standards Advisory Committee

1. Notes the contents of the report and the information contained in Appendix 1 to the report.

**4. WORK PLAN**

The Advisory Committee noted the current iteration of its Work Plan 2024/25.

**5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT**

Further to the report to the June 2024 meeting 'Improving the Effectiveness of the Advisory Committee' the Chair asked that the regular meetings between himself and the Chief Executive be scheduled as soon as possible. He also noted he had yet to receive the media-mentions information that had previously been promised. Following comments from members, Matthew agreed to investigate if the Member communications bulletin is still active.

**6. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

A resolution to exclude the press and public was not required.

**7. ANY OTHER EXEMPT/CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR CONSIDERS URGENT**

None.

The meeting ended at 7.40 p.m.

Chair,  
Standards Advisory Committee