

**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

**HELD AT 7.30 P.M. ON TUESDAY, 15 APRIL 2008**

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

**Members Present:**

Mr Patrick (Barry) O'Connor (Chair)

Ms Suzette Barry (Independent Member)

Councillor Lutfa Begum

Sister Christine Frost (Independent Member)

Councillor Shirley Houghton

Mr Muhammad Habibur Rahman (Independent Member)

Councillor Ann Jackson (Substitute)

**Officers Present:**

Isabella Freeman – (Assistant Chief Executive [Legal Services] and  
Monitoring Officer)

Tony Qayum – Head of Audit Services

Amanda Thompson – (Team Leader - Democratic Services)

John Williams – (Service Head, Democratic Services)

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Alexander Heslop and Abjol Miah.

Councillor Ann Jackson substituted for Councillor Heslop.

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Lutfa Begum informed the Committee that should any item or discussions refer to the National Health Service or Primary Care Trust, she would have a personal interest as she was an employee.

**3. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2008 be signed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

## **4. REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION**

### **4.1 Ethical Governance Arrangements – Progress and Update Report**

The Committee received a report from Ms Isabella Freeman, Assistant Chief Executive (Legal Services), detailing the current position and progress with the Council's Ethical Governance Arrangements.

Ms Freeman reported that local authorities were still awaiting guidance from the Standards Board on the implementation and function of the locally managed framework, however preparations for the handling of complaints were already in place. A joint training session for officers and Members had taken place on 11 March 2008 with the London Boroughs of Newham and Waltham Forest.

The Committee noted that further training would be arranged to take account of any changes to the membership of the Standards Committee in the new municipal year and the guidance awaited from the Standards Board. Advertisements had also been placed in the local press over the Christmas period for additional independent members to sit on the Committee in order to ensure that the Committee was able to operate with maximum flexibility under the proposed local framework.

Once the implementation date for the regulations and orders had been confirmed by the DCLG and guidance had been issued by the Standards Board, a further report would be submitted to the Committee detailing how the local standards framework would operate.

Ms Freeman advised that the Member/Officer Protocol had previously been identified as an area for possible future action in last year's annual corporate governance review for consideration of additional provisions (or a separate protocol) to cover working arrangements between the Chief Executive, Chief Financial Officer, Monitoring Officer and Leaders of the political groups for dealing with complaints about Member conduct.

This would be included in the detailed arrangements for operating the local standards framework once the guidance was received.

The Committee noted that training with implications for ethical standards had been provided in relation to Planning, Planning Probity, the Planning Code of Conduct, Licensing, the Members' Code of Conduct and Local Assessment of Complaints.

It was also expected that the Members' Ethical Standards Self Assessment would be carried out later in the year, following completion of the programme of training for all Members on the revised Code of Conduct.

Ms Freeman further advised that following the appointment of a new Service Head for Procurement, the Ethical Governance Protocol for all Council

contracts was now being implemented with a requirement for external providers (including the voluntary/third sector) to have in place a written policy for dealing with protected disclosures as defined by the Employment Rights Act 1996 (whistleblowing).

The Committee noted that all of these matters would be included in the Committee's work programme for the 2008/09 municipal year as appropriate.

### **RESOLVED**

That the report be noted and a suggested work programme for the next municipal year be submitted to the June meeting of the Committee.

## **4.2 Corporate Complaints Year End Report 2007/2008**

Ms Isabella Freeman introduced the report which was an annual summary of complaints received by the Council through the Corporate Complaints Procedure and the Local Government Ombudsman. The reporting period was only eleven months due to the timing of the committee.

The Committee noted that the volume of Stage 1 complaints had increased and this may be a good sign of service users' confidence to raise their views with the Council. Escalation rates of complaints to Stages 2 and 3 had fallen for the second successive year; this was very positive and indicated that many complaints were being resolved at Stage 1.

The proportion of Stage 1 complaints completed in time was the same as last year, but at 66% was still considered to be too low. A target of 80% had been set to try and improve performance and robust monitoring processes were in place. Those directorates with the lowest performance were required to implement individual service improvement plans.

The Committee noted that after a significant reduction in complaints investigated by the Ombudsman from 65 to 48 in 2006/2007, the 2007/08 total had stayed in this region. However for the second successive year, the Ombudsman had made no findings of Maladministration against the Council.

Following discussion Ms Freeman undertook to seek more information regarding (1) the types of complaints received in relation to Housing and Homelessness and in each case what action was taken to reduce the level of complaints and/or to check whether follow-up work was undertaken; and (2) with regard to complaints not answered within the ten day period, the reasons for this in respect of each category.

Regarding complaints about recycling, the Committee sought further information on whether these had reduced since the contractual issue had been resolved.

**RESOLVED**

That the report be noted and further information be reported to a future meeting as requested.

**4.3 National Fraud Initiative 2006/07 and Anti Fraud Update Report**

Mr Tony Qayum, Head of Audit Services, presented the report detailing the current progress of the National Fraud Initiative 2006/07 and associated initiatives developed in the area of Anti Fraud work during 2007/08.

Mr Qayum advised that the National Fraud Initiative data sets had now all been reviewed and work had been undertaken to investigate/ resolve the matches. Since the report was published the figures shown in paragraph 3.2 of the report had been updated as follows:

- Over 15,400 matches had been processed;
- 525 cases were under investigation; and
- £429,000 had been identified as overpayment/ loss. Of this 319 clients were being taken through the recovery process representing £385,000. The remaining balance represented cases at various stages of review.

The Committee noted that as a direct outcome of the National Fraud Initiative, Audit Services had started a review of all staff parking permits and were in the process of drafting protocols with the Director of HR for any subsequent outcomes.

In response to a question concerning disabled badge fraud, Ms Freeman advised that a number of cases involving staff had been identified and were being addressed.

**RESOLVED**

That the report be noted.

**4.4 Changes to the Membership of the Standards Committee and proposed amendments to the Constitution**

Mr John Williams, Service Head, Democratic Services, presented a report detailing the changes to the membership of the Standards Committee agreed by the Council, and seeking the Committee's comments on further proposed amendments to the Constitution to be reported to the Annual Council meeting in May.

With regard to the 'Local Filter' process the Committee felt that high level officer support would be needed, and also that Committee members would need to fully understand the separation of roles between the Committee and the three Sub-Committees.

The Committee noted that with effect from the Annual Council in May the membership would increase to fifteen, however the political proportionality split still required further discussion by the Constitution Working Party.

The recruitment process for additional Independent Members had commenced in January with a public advertisement in East End Life and a number of applications had been received.

In relation to the Standards Committee function the Constitution Working Party had identified a number of issues upon which the Committee were invited to comment.

Arising from the discussion the Committee endorsed the proposals for a three year 'term of office' for Independent Members; and for an Independent Vice-Chair of the Committee.

However the Committee felt that, notwithstanding the establishment of the Audit Committee, the Standards Committee should still receive reports on the ethical issues arising from audit investigations. The Committee also felt that it should agree the detailed arrangements for the sub-committees and that these should be established with flexible, rather than fixed, memberships to take account of Member availability and other relevant factors.

In relation to the proposed changes to the Planning Code of Conduct, the Committee felt that further work was required to the content, layout and drafting of the document in order to set out of the provisions of the Code in concise and plain English. Members asked that the officers undertake this work prior to submission of a revised draft to the Committee for consideration.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1) That the changes agreed by the Council to the membership of the Standards Committee and the progress in recruitment of additional Independent Members be noted; and
- 2) That the Committee's comments on the proposed changes to the Constitution in relation to the Standards Committee be reported back to the Constitution Working Party.
- 3) That the proposed Planning Code of Conduct be subject to further drafting work prior to consideration at a future meeting of the Committee.

#### **4.5 Members' Timesheets and Attendance at Committees**

Mr John Williams, Service Head Democratic Services, introduced the report and tabled an updated Appendix 2, which showed the latest summary information on returns made by Members of their monthly time sheets from May 2007 to March 2008. This showed that there were now four Councillors who were three months or more behind with the completion of their

timesheets and the Chair noted that this would be drawn to the attention of the Councillors concerned.

The Committee discussed the format and content of the regular monitoring report and possible improvements to this. Members supported the principle of Councillors completing and publishing timesheets as a mechanism to account publicly for their work. However, some Members questioned whether the format used provided the most useful information in this regard or a true reflection of that work. The regular reports to Standards Committee had been a valuable exercise in monitoring attendance and timesheets but it was felt that these could now be further enhanced. The point was made that the existing report, although recording whether timesheets had been submitted, did not provide details of the content of those timesheets or confirmation of their accuracy.

The Committee asked that the officers investigate whether and how other Boroughs' recorded and/or reported this information and report back following consultation with Members on possible improvements to the process at Tower Hamlets.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1) That the current position on the submission of Members' timesheets and attendance at formal meetings during the current municipal year be noted;
- 2) That further reports be submitted on this matter on a six monthly basis; and
- 3) That officers investigate practice elsewhere in relation to recording and reporting Members' meeting attendance and other duties and report back on possible improvements.

#### **5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Ms Freeman informed the Committee that Councillor Sardar had completed the training that he was required to undertake following the decision made at the last meeting.

The meeting ended at 8.45 p.m.

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