

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 1ST JULY, 2013

- Councillors Present:** Cllr Geoff Taylor, Cllr Louisa Thomson, Cllr Patrick Vernon OBE and Cllr Jessica Webb (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)
- Co-optees Present:** Julia Bennett, George Gross, Adedoja Labinjo and Onagete Louison
- Apologies:** Elizabeth Coates-Thummel, Councillor Sophie Linden and Councillor Simche Steinberger
- Officers in Attendance:** Bruce Devile (Head of Business Analysis and Complaints), Gifty Edila (Corporate Director of Legal, HR and Regulatory Services) and Robert Walker (Governance Services Officer)

1 Appointment of Chair for the 2013/14 Municipal Year

- 1.1 **RESOLVED** that Councillor Linden be elected as chair of the Standards Committee for the 2013/14 municipal year.

2 Appointment of Vice-Chair for the 2013/14 Municipal Year

- 2.1 **RESOLVED** that Councillor Webb be elected as vice-chair of the Standards Committee for the 2013/14 municipal year.

3 Apologies for absence

- 3.1 Apologies for absence are listed above.

4 Declarations of interest

- 4.1 There were no declarations of interest.

5 Minutes of the previous meeting - 18 April 2013

- 5.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 18th April 2013 were approved as a true and accurate record.

6 Complaints Improvement Work and Complaints and Members' Enquiry Annual Report 2012/13

- 6.1 Bruce Devile introduced the report to the Committee, which provided information on the complaints improvement work, complaints received and Member enquiries for 2012/13. The report also gave an overview of future changes to the complaints process.

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- 6.2 Councillor Taylor welcomed the report and queried whether there was any benchmarking data available in order to gauge whether the satisfaction rates were comparable with other authorities. Bruce Devile stated that enquiries had previously been made of other local authorities however, they did not record data regarding complaints in the same way as the Council. In addition, local authorities and private sector organisations had not been willing to share any information on levels of complaint satisfaction.
- 6.3 Following a question from Onagete Louison, Bruce Devile explained that feedback from the Local Government Ombudsman had indicated that the number of complaints being referred to the Ombudsman was consistent with other similar local authorities. Bruce Devile also confirmed that the figures for the Children and Young People's Services in the table in paragraph 5.13 were correct and explained that very few complaints were received by this service.
- 6.4 In response to a question from Councillor Vernon, Bruce Devile assured the Committee that the Council was already gathering information on complaints received regarding public health services, which had recently come under the control of the Council.
- 6.5 Councillor Thomson welcomed the focus on quality checking responses to all complaints believing that it would help to resolve complaints at an earlier stage. Following questions from Councillor Thomson, Bruce Devile explained that the Council and Hackney Homes were pro-actively engaging with those officers often responsible for responding to complaints to advise that they should be seeking the approval of their senior manager. Bruce Devile also advised that the Council, as part of the ongoing complaints improvement work, would look at how the quality of officer responses to Member enquiries could be improved. He also encouraged Members to contact him if they had any concerns with the investigation/responses to any of their Member enquiries.
- 6.6 In response to questions from Julia Bennett, Bruce Devile stated that officers were instructed to follow-up in writing when responding to complaints by telephone. He also acknowledged that the Council needed to be more pro-active in encouraging officers to log compliments received.
- 6.7 In response to a further question from Julia Bennett, Bruce Devile explained that the rise in stage 1 complaints could be attributed in part to the changes to welfare benefits and the implementation of the new system. Bruce Devile highlighted however, that the rise in stage 1 complaints was small in proportion to the overall level of complaints received year on year.
- 6.8 Gifty Edila advised the Committee that the Chief Executive had instructed assistant directors to manage stage 1 complaint responses and assured the Committee that the Council was committed to seeking early resolution of all complaints. Gifty Edila also stated that it may be useful for Bruce Devile to provide a further seminar to tiers 1 to 4 managers on how best to respond to complaints and the sign off process.
- 6.9 In response to a question from Cllr Webb, Bruce Devile explained that a new computer system to record complaints would be introduced in October 2013. Training would be provided to officers on how to record complaints, although the computer software was already used by a number of officers for different

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functions. Bruce Devile outlined how the new software would improve the Council's ability to track complaints regarding the same issue across different service areas. Cabinet Members would also be able to track and monitor complaints through the new software.

- 6.10 The Committee thanked officers for the comprehensive report. Members suggested that in future annual reports the table showing satisfaction scores should differentiate Council and Hackney Homes scores, as well as showing aggregate scores. Members also stated that they would welcome case study examples setting out how the Council's complaint responses and services have been improved.
- 6.11 **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

7 Review of the New Ethical Governance Framework 2012-13

- 7.1 Gifty Edila introduced the report on the review of the new ethical governance framework, which came into effect on 1st July 2012 following the implementation of the Localism Act 2011.
- 7.2 Further to the report, Gifty Edila explained that revised guidance for Members and co-optees on completing their register of interests form would be circulated later in July 2013. When circulated, Members and co-optees would also be requested to check their register of interests form to ensure that it was up to date and complete. Gifty Edila also stated that she would be providing a seminar for Members of the new Health and Wellbeing Board on declaring and registering their interests.
- 7.3 In regard to paragraph 6.4, Adedoja Labinjo noted that only half of Members had attended training on the new Code of Conduct and queried whether the training was compulsory. Gifty Edila explained that Code of Conduct training was not compulsory although Members of the Licensing Committee and Planning Sub-Committee were required to undertake training before they could hear applications. Councillor Thomson explained that Members of the Labour group were encouraged to attend training sessions but stated that it could be difficult to ensure attendance given the number of other evening commitments that Members have.
- 7.4 Given the level of attendance at training sessions and concerns around Members understanding of pre-determination, George Gross welcomed the suggestion in paragraph 6.5 that a report on pre-determination be circulated to all Members (**Action: Gifty Edila**).
- 7.5 Following a question from Adedoja Labinjo, Gifty Edila confirmed that officers directly asked Members and co-optees, when receiving their register of interests form, whether they wished to have their address withheld from the form published on the internet.
- 7.6 Jonathan Stopes-Roe, the Independent Person, thanked Gifty Edila for the comments in the report. He also invited Committee Members to contact him directly if they had any further feedback.
- 7.7 **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

8 Standards Committee Draft Work Programme 2013-14

8.1 Gifty Edila introduced the report to the Committee. Gifty Edila drew the Committee’s attention to the proposal to cancel the November meeting if there were no items of business. Gifty Edila did, however, explain that Governance Services were seeking to arrange an additional Committee meeting to consider a Code of Conduct complaint which had been referred for a full hearing by an Assessment Sub-Committee. It was noted that the Member responding to the complaint was away at present and not contactable till September. Subsequently, the Committee was informed that it was unlikely that the hearing would be held prior to mid-September or October.

8.2 **RESOLVED** that the Committee’s work programme for 2013/14 be approved.

Duration of the meeting: 6.30 - 7.45 pm

Signed

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Chair of Committee

Contact:
Robert Walker, Governance Services