

STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

SEVENTH ANNUAL REPORT – OCTOBER 2009

INTRODUCTION

I have great pleasure in presenting our seventh annual report to the Council on the work of the Committee. It sets out the key issues we have dealt with during the past year.

THE COMMITTEE

The Standards Committee for 2008/09 comprised 5 members as follows:

Five Independent Members

Father Jim Kennedy, Chair
Diana Gibbs
Jane McNeill
Godfrey Stadlen
Alison Vydulinska

Two Councillors

Councillor Phil Kelly
Councillor George Allan replaced Councillor Terry Stacy in May 2009

Substitutes

Councillor Richard Watts
Councillor Paula Belford

The Committee was supported by Louise Round, Director of Corporate Resources and Monitoring Officer, Debra Norman, Director of Legal Services and John Lynch, Head of Democratic Services.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The role and purpose of the Committee is as follows:

1. To advise the Council on a local Code of Conduct for members and to promote, develop and maintain high standards of conduct by members and co-opted members of the Council;
2. To monitor and update the Code of Conduct as necessary;
3. To be responsible for the implementation of the Code of Conduct and for providing or organising training for members on ethical conduct;
4. To undertake an initial assessment of any written allegation made to it under section 57A or referred to it under section 58, of the Local Government Act 2000

and upon request under section 57B of that Act to carry out a review of that initial assessment;

5. To appoint from its own membership Sub-Committees to carry out such of its functions under 4 above as it deems necessary;
6. To consider any report from the Monitoring Officer on any matter which is referred to him/her by an Ethical Standards Officer of the Standards Board for England under sections 60 or 64 of the Local Government Act 2000 or which has been investigated following an initial assessment or review under 4;
7. To consider and respond to national reviews and consultations on standards related issues;
8. To grant dispensations to councillors and co-opted members allowing them to vote in circumstances when they would not otherwise be entitled to; and
9. To grant exemptions under section 3 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 from political restriction to holders of posts under the Council and to give directions as to inclusion of specified posts in the list maintained by the Council under section 2(2) of that Act.
10. To publicise and explain the requirements the Code of Conduct places on members to the public, partners and external stakeholders.

REVIEW OF THE MAIN ISSUES ADDRESSED IN 2008/09

Review of Whistleblowing Policy

Whistleblowing within the Council is one of the Standards and Ethics Indicators that the Committee look at each quarter. There were nine reports under the policy in 2006, one in 2007 and two in 2008. Investigations following these reports did not reveal any substantive malpractice but did lead to the identification of procedures which could be improved.

As the policy had been in place since April 2003 the Committee considered and commented on a report which updated the policy to make it clearer and easier to use.

The new policy was launched in January 2009 and was publicised to staff through the internal newsletters, corporate induction procedures and on the intranet and internet sites.

The Committee will continue to monitor the number of whistleblowing issues as part of their work.

REGISTER OF GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY

The Committee now receive a report, twice a year, which sets out all declarations made by members over the previous six month period.

The largest number of declarations were made by the Executive and the Mayor. No declarations have been made over the past year from any Labour or Green Party members. Most of these declarations related to dinners/lunches and invitations to events.

It is hoped that both these declarations and the financial declarations made by Members will be available on the Council's website by the end of the year.

CODE OF CONDUCT

The Committee responded to the latest consultation paper 'Communities in Control : Real People, Real Power – Codes of Conduct for Local Authority Members and Employees'.

ISLINGTON STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The Committee met with the Islington Strategic Partnership (ISP) in April 2009 to highlight the work of the Committee and to suggest that the ISP adopt a Code of Conduct for their organisation. I am pleased to say that we received a positive response as the ISP consulted us on their revised governance arrangements which they were updating which included provisions similar to the Members Code of Conduct.

TERM OF OFFICE OF THE CHAIR

My current term of office was due to expire in November 2009. However, Council at their meeting in June 2009 agreed to extend to my term of office until November 2010. This was to try and give some stability to the Council given that the borough elections take place in May 2010 and to help ensure that the new Council can make a fresh start with appointments to the Committee at that time.

LOCAL ASSESSMENT AND INVESTIGATION OF COMPLAINTS

The Initial Assessment Sub-Committee have received four complaints since they were established in May 2008. Of these four complaints, two were not investigated further but the Monitoring Officer was asked to take other action on one of these which resulted in her writing to both Chief Whips asking them to check and monitor the accuracy and acceptability of the information published on their Party Group's websites.

In relation to the other two complaints both were referred for investigation. No further action was taken on one case as an apology had been given by the Councillor concerned and in the second case the Investigating Officer's finding that the Councillor concerned had not failed to comply with the Code of Conduct was accepted by the Committee.

REPORTS

We continue to monitor the ethical health of the Council via our quarterly reports on Standards and Ethics Indicators across a number of areas.

We have also received a number of interesting and useful reports over the year on the following:

- Annual Audit and Inspection letter
- Councillor Call for Action
- Internal Audit Plan

LOCAL DEMOCRACY WEEK

The Committee fully supported the various activities organised as part of Local Democracy Week as well as other work in the Council on civic engagement. These included the Council taking part in the British Youth Council's Councillor Shadowing Initiative and the very successful work undertaken with school children and a local Arts Organisation entitled Photography Democracy. Children got the chance to talk to decision makers in the community, including members of this Committee and take their photographs.

CONCLUSION

I am grateful as ever to both Members and Officers for the help and support and constructive discussions we have had over the last year.

I visited all Area Committees earlier this year to introduce our annual report and my colleagues attended a range of Council and Committee meetings to see how these were run and members conducted themselves which I am pleased to say were, on the whole, constructive meetings. The Committee is always open to dialogue with Councillors and we would welcome feedback from Members on our attendance at these meetings.

We will be closely involved in the preparations for Member induction and training for the borough elections next May as well as continuing to raise the profile of the Committee and the role of Members generally.

Father Jim Kennedy
Chair of the Islington Standards Committee