

STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

FIRST ANNUAL REPORT – JULY 2003

INTRODUCTION

I have great pleasure in presenting our first annual report to the Council on the work of the Committee. As this is our first report, I thought it would be easier both for members and the public if I set the report out in a question and answer style of format.

Who is on the Standards Committee?

Each local authority is required by law to establish a Standards Committee upon which at least 25% of its membership must be independent i.e. not councillors.

Islington's Committee has 5 members, 3 of whom are independent and one of whom chairs the Committee.

The membership for last year was:

Chair: Father Jim Kennedy
 Mr. Paul Najsarek
 Mrs. Jo Michie
 Councillor Derek Sawyer
 Councillor Terry Stacy

Substitute: Mr. Matthew Saunders

What does the Standards Committee do?

The Committee's role is :

- 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;
- To monitor and update the Code as necessary;
- To be responsible for the implementation of the Code and for providing or organising training for members on ethical conduct;

- To consider any report from the Monitoring Officer on any matter which is referred to her by an Ethical Standards Officer of the Standards Board for England;
- To respond to national reviews and consultations on standards related issues;
- To grant dispensations to members allowing them to vote in circumstances when they would not otherwise be entitled to.

The Council can if it wishes widen the Committee's remit to include other issues but in its first year has not chosen to do so.

What if there is a complaint of alleged misconduct against a councillor?

All complaints go initially to the National Standards Board who will determine whether they will investigate the matter. Where a complaint is upheld, the Standards Board may refer back to the Standards Committee for local sanction.

So far we are only aware of two complaints that have been submitted to the Standards Board relating to Islington Councillors. The Board have taken no further action on the first complaint and the other that is still under investigation and we have no clear idea when they will produce their final report on the matter.

Standards of Conduct in Islington Council

We would like this and future reports to concentrate on the ethical standards in the Council and less about the work of the Standards Committee. However, for this first report we are not in a position to do that yet because we do not deal with any complaints currently, as they all go to the National Standards Board and we have little ability to assess how people really behave in the authority.

What have we been doing?

We have ensured that all councillors and co-opted members have signed up to the Code of Conduct and were given briefings on the Code after they were elected last May.

We have also looked at and commented on a number of protocols drawn up by the authority including ones for Planning; Licensing; Whistleblowing and Member/Officer relations.

We are looking into the matter of Indemnity Insurance for members who are accused of misconduct.

With effect from June 2003, we also now receive quarterly reports on Standards and Ethics Indicators for the authority which cover areas such as employment tribunals, Ombudsman complaints, whistleblowing incidents, District Audit Public Interest Notices/formal investigations, industrial action and challenges to procurements. These reports will help us monitor the ethical health of the Council.

We have also attended various conferences organised by the Standards Board where we can share and learn from other authorities in terms of best practice and keep up-to-date with what is going on.

Authorities have been waiting since September last year for the Government to publish new Regulations which will allow the Monitoring Officer (as opposed to the Ethical Standards Officer appointed by the Standards Board) to investigate certain complaints and then report these to the local Standards Committee.

Proposals for Improving the Committee's Effectiveness next year

We are extremely grateful for the advice and support we have received from the Monitoring Officer, Louise Round, who is a key person in the work of the Committee. We are also ably supported by the Head of Scrutiny and Democratic Services, John Lynch, who has acted as Secretary to the Committee.

I am also grateful to the help and support from the other members of the Committee and for the open and constructive discussions we have had at our meetings which have been carried out in a truly independent and positive manner. Both councillors have also agreed to act totally impartially, leaving aside political differences and not to use any information they are presented with on the committee for party political purposes.

For next years report we hope to be in a position to report on

- the regular reporting of performance indicators relating to the Authority's ethical health
- our new role in investigating complaints
- learning from best practice from other Standards Committees
- any new roles the Council may decide to give us

Conclusion

I think we have made a good start with establishing the Committee and reinforcing the need for high standards of probity and ethics in public life.

However, I think we need to promote ourselves more widely once the regulations are published that will allow local determination of some cases, so that both members and the public have a clearer idea of what we do and how the procedures work.

If the Council wish to widen the Committee's remit we would be happy to consider any suggestions.

Father Jim Kennedy
Chair of the Islington Standards Committee

July 2003