

STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

THIRD ANNUAL REPORT – OCTOBER 2005

INTRODUCTION

I have great pleasure in presenting our third annual report to the Council on the work of the committee.

What have we been doing?

Ethical Standards Indicators

We are still the only Standards Committee in the country that looks at such information. The committee has now increased the range of ethical standards indicators they look at on a quarterly basis to now include any disciplinary action relating to breaches of the member/officer protocol; disciplinary action relating to fraud; numbers of requests made under the Freedom of Information Act, numbers of requests open and closed; the number of cases where information was withheld due to exemptions and those instances in which fees were applied.

These indicators have helped us gain an impression of the ethical health of the authority, which the committee considers continues to be in a good state.

Local Investigations

The long awaited second part of the Section 66 Regulations were finally published which allowed the Standards Board for England to refer complaints of member misconduct to the Monitoring Officer for local investigation. The Committee have agreed their procedure for dealing with such local investigations should any be referred to us.

Consultation Papers

The committee have responded in detail to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Consultation Paper on the Model Code of Conduct for Employees (which was similar in form to the Code for Members) and the Review of Political Restrictions. Although the consultation ended in November 2004 no further announcement has been made by the ODPM on these papers.

The committee also responded to the consultation on the review of the Member's Code of Conduct by the Standards Board for England. The views of local government have now been passed to the minister and changes to the Members Code are awaited which will hopefully improve and clarify the Code overall.

Indemnities for Members and Officers

Following a referral made by the Standards Committee two years ago, the Council agreed to take out insurance on behalf of members to cover legal costs they may incur in defending themselves against allegations of breaches of the Code of Conduct.

The government have now issued legislation that would enable local authorities to provide an indemnity to members and officers in certain circumstances.

It was noted that the legislation required the member to reimburse the authority, if they had used the insurance policy to defend themselves and were found to have breached the code or admitted that they failed to comply with it. The existing insurance policy has now been amended to reflect this requirement.

The Corporate Services Committee at their meeting on 25 January 2005, agreed that members' and officers' indemnities would be limited to the amount of the insurance cover effected by the Councillor by insurance held by an outside body they had been appointed to.

Work Programme

The committee have drawn up a work programme for the year which expands their remit to look at other issues such as the Procurement Code and Financial Regulations; the Council's Policy under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the Council's Anti-Fraud Policy.

Again this is an area where Islington is pioneering in terms of the work that it does.

Publicity and Profile

We have worked particularly hard this year to raise our profile and I am pleased with the production of an excellent website for the Committee giving clear advice and information on our work. We hope to build on this and produce leaflets and other publicity later in the year. Having attended the recent Annual Standards Committees Conference in Birmingham, it was clear that Islington's Standards Committee are proactive and carry out best practice compared with many other authorities in the country. We have written to the Board setting out our achievements so they can share this with other authorities.

The Board have asked Councillor Stacy if he would join the Steering Committee to help organise the Annual Assembly for 2006 and Father Jim if he would co-ordinate a London-wide meeting of independent members given the good work that has been undertaken in Islington.

Standards Board

Following on from the national publicity and criticism of the Standards Board of the time they took to deal with complaints, I am pleased to report that they have now cleared their backlog of cases and are reporting that they are now meeting their performance indicators on dealing with complaints.

Referrals to the Standards Board

During the last year the Standards Board have considered five cases in relation to Islington Councillors, only one of which was investigated. This related to a failure to declare an interest in relation to a Council meeting item on GP provision in Islington. The Board advised that although there was a failure to disclose a personal interest, this was not prejudicial and that no further action needed to be taken.

At the time of writing, a Case Tribunal is considering allegations against five administration members in connection with the appointment of the Chief Executive.

Conclusion

I would again like to thank all members of the Committee for the open and constructive discussions we have had at our meetings which have been carried out in a positive manner. My thanks also to the officers of the Council who have helped support the work of the Committee.

I feel we are ready to deal with any cases that may be referred to us at a local level and will continue to raise the profile of the Committee to ensure standards and conduct remain high in the authority. This will be especially important to reinforce next year with the borough elections and the possibility of many new councillors being elected.

Father Jim Kennedy
Chair of the Islington Standards Committee