

STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

DRAFT

SIXTH ANNUAL REPORT – OCTOBER 2008

INTRODUCTION

I have great pleasure in presenting our sixth 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 2007/08 comprised 5 members as follows:

Five Independent Members

Father Jim Kennedy, Chair
Diana Gibbs
Godfrey Standlen
Jane McNeill

Eric Sorensen (resigned 16th June 2008) and was replaced by Alison Vydulinska on 9th October 2008

Two Councillors

Councillor Terry Stacy, JP
Councillor Richard Watts replaced by Councillor Phil Kelly in May 2008

Substitutes

Councillor Paula Belford
Councillor Richard Watts

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

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The role and purpose of the Committee is as follows:

- (a) 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;
- (b) To monitor and update the Code of Conduct as necessary;
- (c) To be responsible for the implementation of the Code of Conduct and for providing or organising training for members on ethical conduct;

- (d) 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;
- (e) To appoint from its own membership Sub-Committees to carry out such of its functions under (d) above as it deems necessary;
- (f) 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;
- (g) To consider and respond to national reviews and consultations on standards related issues;
- (h) To grant dispensations to councillors and co-opted members allowing them to vote in circumstances when they would not otherwise be entitled to; and
- (i) 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.

REVIEW OF THE MAIN ISSUES ADDRESSED IN 2007/08

Local Assessment and Investigation of Complaints

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 transferred responsibility for dealing with complaints against members from a national to a local level.

From May 2008 the Standards Committee had responsibility for carrying out the following:

- o an initial assessment about any complaint received and deciding whether the matter would be investigated
- o the review of any decision not to refer the matter for investigation; and
- o substantive hearings of complaints

We have established two sub-committees, an Initial Assessment Sub-Committee and a Review Sub-Committee to deal with the first two stages of the process. Any hearings would be dealt with by the main committee. To give us flexibility and allow us to have independent members on all sub-committees, the Council agreed to increase the number of independent members on the committee to five.

Details of these new arrangements have been publicised in the Council's Islington Now Resident's Magazine and the website has been updated with new forms and guidance which are available to download.

The committee adopted new procedures to cover this process and at the same time reviewed and updated its existing procedures in respect of investigations and hearings.

To date we have received two complaints to assess. The first complaint involving the Leader of the Opposition's comments about Councillor Stacy, is currently being investigated and at the time of writing this report, it is not known if a full hearing will be required. The second complaint involving Councillor Stacy related to an article and

comments posted by him on the Islington Liberal Democrat website about Councillor Lisa Spall.

The Initial Assessment Sub-Committee decided not to refer the matter for investigation but to ask the Monitoring Officer to ask both Chief Whips to check and monitor the accuracy and acceptability of the information published on their Party Groups websites and further to ask Councillor Stacy to consider whether it was still appropriate to have the complete article posted on the website and to consider its removal.

The Standards Board for England will collect monitoring information each quarter for every Standards Committee in England, relating to the number of complaints received, investigated and determined. They will also ensure committees adhere to the timetable for dealing with any complaints and hearings.

Ethical Governance Survey

At the beginning of 2008 the Council asked the Audit Commission to carry out their on-line ethical governance survey of members and officers. This was not in the context of any specific concerns in the Council or elsewhere but simply to see how the Council was doing in this important area and to follow-up from the first survey carried out in 2005.

I am pleased to report that the survey found that the Council had clearly made improvements to its ethical governance arrangements since the last audit. Members and officers generally behaved well and there had not been major problems with conduct in the Council.

However, the Council is very different to the one when the previous survey was done; not least because of the turnover of members and the new political balance, and the survey responses clearly reflected this.

The Committee were concerned about some of the responses from the survey which suggested that Councillors now had much less confidence in the ethical governance arrangements and conduct and behaviour in the Council than the previous survey.

Both Chief Whips stated that the responses probably reflected some Councillors' feelings at the time of the change in political balance. Neither felt that there was a problem within the authority or that the results reflected the current position or views of members.

The committee also held a very useful meeting with the Chief Executive to discuss the results. We agreed to meet formally with the Chief Executive twice a year and to continue to raise the profile of the committee and its work both inside and outside the Council.

New Members

We were delighted to welcome Jane McNeill onto the committee in April 2008 when the Council increased the number of independent members to five.

Jane is a barrister practising mainly in the fields of discrimination and personal injury law. She also sits as a part-time Judge/Recorder in The Employment Tribunal and County Court. She has lived in the borough for over 25 years.

We sadly had to say goodbye earlier this year to Eric Sorensen who resigned in June 2008. I would like to publicly thank Eric for all his hard work and support on the committee.

Eric has just been replaced by Alison Vydulinska.

Alison is a solicitor who acts as a consultant on law and governance issues and works with councils, companies and voluntary organisations. Previously she worked for a number of councils in London and for the Greater London Authority. She is also a trustee of the WAC Performing Arts and Media College and Interchange Trust, which provides training in the arts for young people in London. I welcome Alison to the committee and look forward to working with her.

Members Training And Development

We have agreed a training and development programme for 2008/09 for Members which has been based on feedback from last years programme, discussions with the Whips of both Groups and feedback from the Annual Members' Survey.

The programme is broken down into a number of areas: specific skills training, knowledge based events and 1:1 and Group Support via the IDeA and others.

We are keen to see that all Councillors have access to the right training and development to help them carry out their various roles and responsibilities.

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 last year on the following:

- Safe Recruitment and CRB checks
- Annual Audit and Inspection Letter
- Internal Audit Plan

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.

We do need to make sure all Members are up to speed with the changes to the Code of Conduct and continue to publicise and raise the profile of the work of the Committee, through articles in the local newspapers and Council publicity and by getting out to meet and visit as many people both inside and outside of the Council as we can.

I visited all Area Committees earlier this year to introduce our annual report and I and my colleagues will also be attending a selection of Council and Committee meetings in 2008/09 to see for ourselves how these are run and how members conduct themselves.

Father Jim Kennedy
Chair of the Islington Standards Committee