

DRAFT

STANDARDS COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF ISLINGTON

NINTH ANNUAL REPORT – OCTOBER 2011

INTRODUCTION

I have am pleased to present the ninth annual report to the Council on the work of the Standards Committee.

THE COMMITTEE

During 2010/11 the Committee comprised 7 Members as follows:

Five Independent Members

Arvinda Gohill
Diana Gibbs
Jane McNeill
Godfrey Stadlen, Chair
Alison Vydulinska

Two Councillors

Councillor George Allan
Councillor Kate Groucutt

Substitutes

Councillor Paula Belford
Councillor Rhiannon Davis

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

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The role 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;
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 2010/11

Revisions to the Publicity Protocol

The Committee considered and commented on draft revisions to the Council's Publicity Protocol, aimed at clearing up some uncertainties of interpretation.

Both political groups were consulted on the proposed changes which were due to go to full Council to agree as part of an amendment to the Constitution.

Local Assessment and Investigation of Complaints

During the last year the Initial Assessment Sub-Committee received five complaints covering nine different Councillors. Four cases were referred for investigation. In relation to two of the four Councillors concerned the conclusion was that there had been no breach of the Code. The remaining two were referred to a full hearing and were found to have involved a breach. In one of these cases a Councillor was censured; in the other, no sanction was considered necessary.

Of the five complaints, two were made by a fellow Councillor, two by members of the public and one by a member of staff. The complaints have related primarily to the behaviour of Members in making comments to which others have taken exception and to the use of Council resources.

Annual Members Survey

The Committee was provided with the feedback from the 2010 Members survey. The survey asked Members a number of questions about the services and support they receive from key sections across the Council and about the induction and training provided to Members following the May local elections.

25 Members, including nearly the entire intake of new Councillors, returned the survey. This represented just over half of the Council's membership. The responses have been used to inform future training events and to identify needs that were not being met. Overall responses were very positive, with 96% of responses rating the level of service provided by Democratic Services to Members as being good or excellent.

As a result of the information gathered, the Information Technology team has contacted all the Members who expressed problems or issues with their equipment. The Members casework system has been up and running and training has been offered to those Councillors who expressed an interest in it. Equalities briefings have been given to both Groups and a public speaking course has been arranged for 10 Councillors. The Committee asked that Group Offices and Whips be encouraged to identify any further training and remind them of the support that is available from officers.

Standards Awareness Raising Programme

The Committee is responsible for publicising and explaining what requirements the Code of Conduct places on Councillors to the public, partners and external stakeholders. The Committee agreed at its July meeting a series of briefing bulletins for both Members and officers on various aspects of the code to aid their understanding. The bulletins are drafted by the Director of Legal and Human Resource Services and circulated to all Members including the independent members

Past ethical governance surveys have indicated a reasonable degree of awareness amongst officers of the Code of Conduct and a reminder in the IC News for all staff has helped to ensure that awareness is maintained.

The Standards Committee presented its last annual report to the Council and interviews with the Chair of the Standards Committee and the new independent member will shortly be published in the Council's magazine, Islington Life.

New Members

I am pleased to report that full Council at their annual general meeting on the 10 May 2011 approved the recommendation to appoint Councillors Kate Groucutt and George Allan as main Members of the Committee and Councillor Rhiannon Davis as our newest substitute Member. Councillor Kate Groucutt replaces Councillor Phil Kelly who has been elected as Mayor for 2011/12. We wish him every success in his new role and would like to put on record our thanks to Councillor Kelly for his much valued contribution over the years to the Committee's work. Councillor George Allan has replaced Councillor Paula Belford, whose contribution was also much valued; we are not losing her entirely, because she will now be a substitute Member.

Localism Bill – Proposed Changes to the Standards Regime

The Committee considered a report which detailed how the provisions of the Localism Bill concerning standards in local authorities are likely to affect arrangements in Islington. The proposals will generally allow local authorities to make their own decisions on how to regulate the conduct of their Members. However, new criminal offences will be introduced, relating to failure of Members to register or disclose interests and their participation in local authority business contrary to restrictions.

The Localism Bill was published in December 2010 and the implementation of the proposed changes appears likely to be with effect from early 2012. The Council will need to take certain decisions about its future approach to Members' conduct, including the following:

- i) Whether to have a code of conduct at all
- ii) If it has a code, what form that will take and whether its provisions should be identical or similar to those being adopted elsewhere
- iii) What procedure to have in place for the investigation of complaints about the conduct of Members
- iv) What future role it sees, if any, for a Standards Committee in promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct.

The Committee noted the report and awaits further developments. In the meantime, we will continue to carry out our functions as before.

Freedom of Information

The Committee received a report on the Council's handling of freedom of information requests and the data protection obligations on Councillors.

The Committee asked that we be provided with compliance statistics monthly over the year and comparative information from the Information Commissioner's Office on the performance of other boroughs.

The Committee resolved that Councillors should be reminded of the rules and guidance on data protection and registration. This has now been provided.

Standards and Ethics Indicators

We continue to monitor the ethical health of the Council through quarterly reports to the Committee of standards and ethics indicators across a number of areas, and by monitoring the register of gifts and hospitality.

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

- London Member Development Charter
- Annual Audit Letter
- Review of the Whistleblowing Policy
- Online Code of Conduct Training.

CONCLUSION

I am grateful as ever to my fellow members of the Committee for giving up their time for our work.

We have as usual been very well served by the efficient administration and expert advice of the officers who service the Committee. We are grateful to them, and also to other officers of the Council who have from time to time during the year responded to our need for reports on various matters.

Pending decisions by the Council about future arrangements, I look forward to continuing our work in support of high standards of conduct and ethics within the authority.

Godfrey Stadlen
Chair of the Islington Standards Committee