

MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Thursday, 11 December 2014 at 6.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Peter Bernards, Brenda Dacres, Colin Elliott, Alan Hall, Liz Johnston-Franklin, Helen Klier and Hilary Moore.

ALSO PRESENT: Cathy Sullivan.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Obajimi Adefiranye, Councillor Simon Hooks and Councillor Pauline Morrison and Gill Butler, Hannah Le Vay, David Roper-Newman and Leslie Thomas QC.

1. Declaration of interests

None were made.

2. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on the 23 July 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. Annual Complaints Report

Ralph Wilkinson, Head of Public Services, presented the report which provided performance information for 2013/14 on complaints dealt with by the Council and its partners at Stages 1 and 2 of the corporate complaints procedure, as well as complaints and enquiries to the Mayor and councillors and complaints and enquiries from Members of Parliament.

The report and presentation did not include complaints or enquiries in relation to adult and children's social care both of which are reported individually and publicised according to statutory guidance.

The Independent Adjudicators report and the Local Government Ombudsman Annual Review Letter were also considered.

It was explained that there had been an increase in some complaints when compared with previous years. The most noticeable increase related to Council Tax and was attributable to legislative changes in Council Tax Benefit being replaced by the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. Another reason for the increase in complaints was a consequence of changes that removed or severely reduced the period of exemption awarded to empty properties.

It was explained that there had been some difficulties due to the increased volume of telephone and billing enquiries and a number of improvements were made to address those difficulties including the introduction of a number of automated messages directing customers to self service via the Council's web site.

In response to an enquiry from members it was further explained that no

formal benchmarking was undertaken however officers do discuss the issue of complaints with colleagues in other boroughs. It was possible for some benchmarking of overall numbers to be carried out however processes are different so the reliability of any benchmarking is uncertain.

Members of the Committee noted that the report was very helpful, useful and detailed.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

4. Compliance with the Member Code of Conduct

Kath Nicholson, Head of Law and Monitoring Officer, presented the report and explained that the report provides information about the extent of compliance with the Member Code of Conduct.

The committee's attention was drawn to the written observations of Independent Member, David Roper-Newman, that the absence of complaints against councillors is very encouraging and must be due in large part to compliance with high standards of ethical conduct on the part of councillors themselves, coupled with the high degree of support from the Council's Monitoring Officer.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. Standards Committee Work Programme

Kath Nicholson, Head of Law and Monitoring Officer presented the item and invited the Committee to comment.

The Chair identified the need for some specific training on the use of social media.

Kath Nicholson agreed to seek the assistance of the Member's Training and Development Team and the Council's Head of Communications in securing appropriate training and guidance.

RESOLVED that the work programme shown in paragraph 3.3 of the report be agreed.

The meeting ended at 7.45pm.