

MINUTES OF THE STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Thursday, 8 January 2020 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Obajimi Adefiranye, Bill Brown, Jim Mallory, Hilary Moore and Sue Hordijkeno.

Councillor Alan Hall under Standing Orders

ALSO PRESENT: Fasil Bhatti, Gill Butler, Cathy Sullivan and Joy Walton

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Pauline Morrison, Eva Stamirowski, David Roper-Newman and Leslie Thomas QC

Declaration of interests

None were made.

Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2019 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Annual Complaints Report 2017-18

The Director of Public Services presented the report which provided performance information for 2018/19 on complaints dealt with by the Council and its housing partners at Stages 1 and 2 of the Corporate Complaints procedure and complaints and enquiries to the Mayor, Councillors and MPs logged on the Council's complaints management system during 2018 -19.

It was explained that there were a total of 7828 complaints and enquiries received in 2018/19 which represented a 12% increase when compared to the previous year. Attention was drawn to the breakdown of complaints and enquiries by directorate and the percentages of those responded to within the standard response times appearing as Tables 1, 2 and 3. It demonstrated that the Council had improved in resolving complaints at the first point of contact.

The Committees attention was drawn to the breakdown of complaints received by ward as set put at paragraph 5.4 and recent trends in relation to the reasons for complaints. It was noted that the top three issues identified as the reasons for complaints in 2018/19 were in relation to environment, housing strategy and Council Tax.

It was explained that the Independent Adjudicator, who deals with Stage 3 complaints on behalf of the Council, had received 9 less complaints this year. There was an increase this year in complaints upheld by the Independent Adjudicator where she had investigated.

The Committee was referred to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Letter which provides a summary and commentary on complaints made against the Council. In 2018/19 127 complaints were received a decrease of 19 on 2017/18. The LGSCO was critical of the time taken to implement agreed remedies in a couple of the complaints.

The Director of Public Services confirmed that whilst there has been a significant increase in complaints over the last two financial years the Council was dealing with them faster and resolving them earlier.

In response to the significant increase in complaints and enquiries in Resources and Regeneration the Director of Public Services could not at this stage provide an explanation as to why they have gone up and other areas have gone down. It could possibly be due to incorrect categorisation.

In response to further inquiry the Director of Public Services confirmed that Stage 2 complaints are handled by the Corporate Complaints Team and an independent review will be conducted.

It was confirmed that whilst the Council is improving the provision of services online all conventional methods remain in place. In response to the specific concerns relating to homelessness it was explained by the Director of Public Services that officers remain committed to face to face contact with the right people.

In response to an enquiry in relation to attempts to capture equalities information the Director of Public Services confirmed that there remained difficulties in obtaining such details, which would be very informative. The Council however remains keen to develop methods to capture such information.

In response to an enquiry about any available benchmarking to inform how well the Council is doing compared to other similar local authorities. The Director of Public Services confirmed that whilst he could locate statistics for statutory complaints he could not find any statistical information for corporate complaints by other local authorities. However any information would have to be treated with caution as no local authority complaints processes are the same. By way of illustration, in Lewisham we have an Independent Adjudicator which not many local authorities do not.

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RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Annual Review of Complaints Made under the Council's Whistleblowing Policy

The Director of Law /Monitoring Officer introduced the report and explained this is an annual report considered by the Committee and provides an opportunity for members to note referrals and to consider and suggest any changes.

The Director of Law/Monitoring Officer provided the Committee with an update on 5 whistleblowing referrals previously referred to the Committee in November 2018 and on the 10 referrals received since the last review.

It was suggested that in light of recent staff changes the Whistleblowing Policy required amendment to reflect such changes.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life

The Director of Law gave a presentation on the Committee for Standards in Public Life Review of Local Government Ethical Standards. It was explained that this presentation was for information only at this stage. The Director of Law suggested that a further report be brought to the Committee allowing sufficient time to discuss those areas where the Council may wish to consider amendments to the Council's ethical governance arrangements.

It was suggested that as most decisions are made by the Mayor and Cabinet the focus of any training should be focused and given to such members. The Director of Law confirmed that a lot of Council decisions remain the responsibility of members generally, for example, planning. It was accepted that all members will require training whether Cabinet members or not.

The Director of Law confirmed that she is happy to meet with any member to discuss their responsibilities under the Member Code of Conduct and specifically to advise any member with questions in relation to their role on outside bodies.

Members expressed the assistance in bringing this presentation to them and looked forward to a further report as soon as possible.

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted and that a further report be brought to the Committee as soon as possible.

Compliance with Member Code of Conduct

The Director of Law/Monitoring Officer presented the report and explained that the report provides information about the extent of compliance with the Member Code of Conduct.

The Director of Law/Monitoring Officer confirmed there have been nine complaints raised against members since consideration of the previous report on compliance with the Member Code of Conduct in November 2018.

It was commented that the report demonstrates a high level of compliance.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 8:45pm