

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee

Date: Thursday, 9 March 2023

Venue: The Liz Cantell Room, Ealing Town Hall, New Broadway,
Ealing, W5 2BY

Attendees (in person): Councillors

P Driscoll (Chair), J Blacker, G Busuttil, H Kaur Dheer, G Shaw and A Young

Independent Standards People:

O Sall and K Quayle

Apologies:

K Sahota, J Gallant

Attendees (virtual): Councillors

K K Nagpal

1 Apologies for absence

Apologies had been received from Councillors Sahota and Gallant. Councillor Young was substituting for Councillor Gallant.

2 Urgent Matters

There were none.

3 Matters to be considered in private

There were none.

4 Declarations of interest

There were none.

5 Minutes of the previous meeting

The Chair explained that the full notes of the last meeting were missing and this meant that the minutes of the private meeting were unavailable. The Committee were asked to consider the public minutes of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the public minutes of the meeting on Thursday, 9 June 2022 were agreed as a true and correct record.

6 Dispensations

There were none.

7 Overview of the council's Freedom of Information performance

Lorraine Cox, Corporate Information Governance Manager, introduced the report and noted that the Corporate Information Governance Team had performed well in relation to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in 2022 after a difficult period over 2020 and 2021. Ms Cox noted that the compliance rate for 2022 was just under 80%, with a compliance rate in January 2023 of 87%.

The Committee were invited to ask questions of Ms Cox in relation to her report. In response, Ms Cox made the following clarifications:

- Low compliance rates in 2020 were largely the result of the impact of the pandemic on Council services. Resources had been diverted from the FOI team to front line services.
- Ms Cox considered that FOI requests were becoming more detailed. The Council were obliged to answer a request unless a response was likely to take more than 18 hours of officers' time.
- Each FOI request was triaged before a response was given. Officers had the option to reject a request if it was deemed inappropriate.
- Ms Cox agreed to investigate recording statistics on rejected FOI requests so that they could be shared with the Committee at a future meeting.
- In 2022, no complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) were upheld.

RESOLVED:

That the Standards Committee noted the contents of the Freedom of Information Performance report.

8 Annual review of the Whistleblowing Policy operation

Helen Harris, Director of Legal and Democratic Services, introduced the report and noted that there had been no whistleblowing cases in the period 1 March 2022 to 27 February 2023. Whilst it was hoped that this fact was the result of potential whistle blowers reporting issues through established Council channels, Ms Harris noted that it was possible potential whistleblowers were not aware of the Council's whistleblowing procedures. It was suggested that the Committee consider authorising officers to investigate options to publicise the Council's whistleblowing scheme to potential whistle blowers.

The Committee were invited to comment on the report.

RESOLVED:

That the Standards Committee:

1. Noted the details of the whistleblowing cases set out in paragraph 3; and
2. Authorised the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, following consultation with the Assistant Director of Audit and Investigation, to investigate options to publicise the Council's whistle blowing scheme to potential whistle blowers.

9 Annual review of the operation of the council's standards regime

Ms Harris introduced the report and explained that there had been complaints against members which had been raised through the standards regime in period since the last annual meeting of the Standards Committee. Ms Harris noted some broad trends in the number of complaints per year since 2013/14. These included:

- Some members of the public raised complaints about policy through the standards process. The standards process was not the appropriate place to consider complaints about policy and these complaints were not referred to the Standards Committee.
- Some complaints related to delays in councillors replying to residents' emails. On further investigation, it was sometimes found that the delays in response were outside of councillors' control.
- Some complaints related to the private life or employment of councillors outside of their Council role. The standards regime was clear that the standards regime only applied in cases where the individual was acting in their capacity as a Councillor.

Ms Harris also noted the work of the Committee's independent people, Ms Oumou Sall and Ms Karen Quayle. Ms Harris thanked them both for their assistance on standards matters.

The Committee were invited to ask questions and comment on the report. The following points were noted:

- Complainants were informed if independent people were consulted on their case.
- In addition to the standards regime, political parties also had standards and complaints procedures.
- Resourcing for standards investigations was an issue which sometimes led to delays in the process.

It was noted that there was a typo in paragraph 4.4 of the report. "Law Traffic Neighbourhoods" was corrected to "Low Traffic Neighbourhoods".

RESOLVED:

That the Standards Committee:

1. Considered the report and agreed that it be presented to full council on 25 April 2023;
2. Noted the work and achievements of the committee and its independent people during the past year.
3. Thanked Ms Oumou Sall and Ms Karen Quayle for their hard work as independent standards people.

10 Date of the next meeting

The date of the next meeting was 18 April 2023, if required.

Before the meeting drew to a close, the matter of the minutes of the last minutes was revisited. It was noted that the meeting was only recorded as having lasted for 10 minutes. It was suggested that the public meeting went on for 10 minutes, whilst the private meeting went on for longer. No further action was taken by the Committee.

Meeting commenced: 7.01 pm

Meeting finished: 7.40 pm

Signed:

Dated:

P Driscoll (Chair)