

MINUTES of the meeting of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at 10am on Monday 15 September 2008 at County Hall, Kingston upon Thames.

These minutes will be confirmed by the Standards Committee at its next meeting on 3 November 2008.

Members:

- *+ Mr SFI Rutter (Chairman)
Mrs Angela Fraser DL (Vice-Chairman)

- * Mr Victor Agarwal
- + Mr Nicolas Davies LVO JP DL
- *+ Mr Simon Edge
- *+ Ms Karen Heenan
- * Mr Geoff Marlow
Mr Chris Slyfield
- * Mrs Jean Smith
- * Mrs Christine Stevens

- + = Independent Representatives
- * = Present
- x = Present for part of the meeting

PART 1

IN PUBLIC

25/08 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS [Item 1]

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs Angela Fraser, Mr Nicolas Davies and Mr Chris Slyfield.

26/08 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING: 25 June 2008 [Item 2]

The minutes were agreed as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

27/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST [Item 3]

There were no declarations of interest.

28/08 QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS [Item 4]

There were no questions or petitions.

29/08 COMPLAINTS HANDLING PERFORMANCE: APRIL TO AUGUST 2008 [Item 5]

Declarations of Interest:

There were no declarations of interest.

Officers present:

Nigel Bartlett-Twivey (Customer Relations Manager, Services for Communities), Ann Charlton (Monitoring Officer/Head of Legal Services)

Key Points Raised During the Discussion:

- The report reflects the latest position rather than being a quarterly report.
- Performance during the period in question has been good. Although not reflected in the data before the Committee, Children's Service achieved a 100% response within target in August for the first time since the data has been collected. Adult Services is still under target but is working hard on solving the situation. The Customer Relations Officer for the service has assured the Customer Relations Manager that the problem is in focus.
- The Head of Legal Services had inquired as to the reasons behind Legal Services' performance in responding to complaints. Complaints to Legal Services tend to be about the handling of Freedom of Information requests. In one case, the Complaints Handling Officer was on leave and a complaint had remained in her inbox. Lessons have been learnt from this case.
- Following a query from Christine Stevens about the purpose of the Committee in receiving information about complaints handling performance, the Committee discussed the evolution of the report and possible improvements, including:
 - Looking more deeply into what lies behind the figures
 - Receiving examples of where relationships between the Customer Relations Team and the service could be better.
 - Clearly understanding the Committee's remit and how scrutiny of governance arrangements fits into this.
 - Potential value of scrutinising incoming complaints on a geographical basis to identify trends.
 - A further visit to the Contact Centre for anyone who had not been.

- The Customer Relations Manager suggested that the relationship between Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints was important. If complaints were dealt with well in Stage 1 they would probably not be escalated to Stage 2.
- Identifying if the Council is receiving complaints in the first place, whether the Council is dealing with complaints well and whether the Council learns from complaints.
- Identifying a trigger point for digging more deeply into poor performance.
- In response to an enquiry as to how the target of 85% of responses to be made within 20 working days was identified, the Customer Relations Manager explained that the target has gone up from 82% last year. Performance has continued to improve and it may be that 85% is no longer a stretching enough target. Members suggested that 95% would not be a stretch for some services. The Customer Relations Manager agreed but highlighted the need to keep working with some of the services such as Highways and the services in the Families directorate to ensure they keep focused on the performance in this area.
- In response to a query about what Services for Families was doing differently, the Customer Relations Manager highlighted the new Director's customer service background.
- Members enquired as to where the Procurement complaint came from. The Customer Relations Manager explained that a supplier had been concerned that the Council had not understood new rules on feedback.

Further Information to be Provided:

- Following the identification of an inconsistency in the papers regarding the compensation paid by Adult Services, the Customer Relations Manager to provide the Committee with the accurate figure.

Recommendations to officers:

- To pass compliments on to Children's Service for completing a review of SEN transport within three days of Jean Smith talking to officers about a case.

Select Committee Next Steps:

- To hold a further discussion on the Committee's approach to scrutinising the effectiveness of the Council's complaints procedures at the meeting on 3 November 2008.

30/08 THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN'S ANNUAL LETTER FOR THE YEAR ENDED MARCH 2008 [Item 6]

Declarations of Interest:

There were no declarations of interest.

Officers present:

Nigel Bartlett-Twivey (Customer Relations Manager, Services for Communities), Ann Charlton (Monitoring Officer/Head of Legal Services)

Key Points Raised During the Discussion:

- The Customer Relations Manager had asked Services for Families for an update on the revising of its charging policy but had not had a response.
- Members noted that response times by Adults Service to the Ombudsman tallied with that Service's response times to complainants. The Customer Relations Manager informed the Committee that Services for Families did have to deal with complaints about complex matters and files needed to be sought from various locations to answer a single complaint. This could be explained to the Ombudsman where necessary. He pointed out that if you put aside two or three complaints that had taken an especially long time to respond to, the average response was within target. A process had been developed by Customer Relations whereby a trigger causes the Head of Service to be informed prior to the response time reaching 28 days. The process was put in place after a particularly poor response time last year. However, this did not prevent the 98-day response referred to in the Ombudsman's letter.
- The Committee was particularly concerned at the reluctance to accept the Ombudsman's findings in respect of certain special educational needs complaints. The Customer Relations Manager explained the complexity of SEN cases and offered to bring back further information. Members were interested to understand if officers felt that the Ombudsman had overstepped his mark or if the Ombudsman had identified a gap in service.
- In response to a query about how many officers had taken up training by the Ombudsman's office, the Customer Relations Manager informed the Committee that about 45 had gone through the advanced investigations training and 30 had gone through other training with the Ombudsman.
- The Committee agreed that it was important that the Chairman of the Standards Committee meet with the Ombudsman to discuss the letter and the changing relationship between the Ombudsman and Standards Committees.

- In response to a query, the Customer Relations Manager informed the Committee that the Ombudsman's letter goes to the County Council Management Team (Chief Executive and Directors), Heads of Service and Customer Relations Managers. The Committee were interested to understand if CCMT had done anything with the information in the letter.

Further Information to be Provided:

- The Customer Relations Manager to provide an update on the revising of the Services for Families charging policy.

Select Committee Next Steps:

- To receive a further report on issues with regard to special educational needs complaints at the next meeting. The Committee requested a service officer attend with the Customer Relations Manager.
- Chairman to meet with the Ombudsman.
- Chairman to write to the Chief Executive to enquire as to his actions following receipt of the Ombudsman's letter.

31/08 STANDARDS AND ETHICS AWARD [Item 7]

Declarations of Interest:

There were no declarations of interest.

Officers present:

Ann Charlton (Monitoring Officer/Head of Legal Services)

Key Points Raised During the Discussion:

- There was concern at the bureaucracy involved in entering for the award.
- Members felt that the criteria for success could be viewed as the Committee's agenda for the upcoming year, with an aim of entering for the award in 2010. The emphasis from building towards entering the award next year could be used to link Standards training into the induction for incoming Members after the local elections in 2009.
- Some Members expressed a view that the Committee could learn from entering this year and that there would be kudos for the Council if the Committee was shortlisted. They argued that Councils across the country were struggling with the Standards agenda and that Surrey County Council was unlikely to be behind nationally.
- It was pointed out that the Committee could probably learn from the award this year without entering and that entering for the award would take significant officer time.
- In order to identify and address any areas of weakness, the Committee should meet with other key individuals in the Council to discuss the way forward.

It was Resolved:

Not to enter the Standards and Ethics Award at the 2009 LGC Awards.

Select Committee Next Steps:

- To hold a workshop with Group leaders, the Chief Executive and Directors on the way forward for Standards Committee and the standards agenda within the Council.

32/08 LOCAL ASSESSMENT OF ALLEGATIONS OF MISCONDUCT BY A MEMBER: PROGRESS [Item 8]

Declarations of Interest:

There were no declarations of interest.

Officers present:

Ann Charlton (Monitoring Officer/Head of Legal Services)

Key Points Raised During the Discussion:

- Initial Assessment Sub-Committee B had assessed its first complaint about a number of Members. Written summaries on those complaints were being prepared and would be publicly available.

33/08 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS [Item 8]

The next meeting of the Committee will be on 3 November 2008 at 10.00am.

Future meetings will be on:

Monday 2 February 2009

Friday 17 April 2009

Friday 3 July 2009

Friday 2 October 2009

Monday 30 November 2009

Monday 15 February 2010

Monday 12 April 2010

[Meeting ended: 11.25am]

Chairman