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STANDARDS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 29 September 2010

<u>Present:</u>	Brian Cummings (Chair)	
	Councillors	
	C Blakeley	C Meaden
	A Bridson	L Rowlands
	WJ Davies	R Wilkins
	K Hayes	P Williams
	AER Jones	
<u>Independent Members</u>	Ken Harrison (Vice-Chair)	Alex Nuttall Stella Elliott

7 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to consider whether they had personal or prejudicial interests in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state what they were. No such declarations were made.

8 MINUTES

The Director of Law, HR and Asset Management, submitted the minutes of the meeting held on 21 June, 2010.

Resolved –

That the minutes be received.

9 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The term of office of the Vice-Chair, Mr Ken Harrison, was due to expire on 31 October, 2010 and the Committee was requested to make a recommendation to Council on the appointment of a Vice-Chair for a four year period commencing on 1 November, 2010.

Resolved – That this Committee recommend to Council that Mr Ken Harrison be appointed Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee for a four year period commencing on 1 November, 2010.

10 **PROPOSED ABOLITION OF STANDARDS FOR ENGLAND**

The Committee received a letter from Standards for England drawing attention to the provisions in the government's Decentralisation and Localism Bill to abolish the Standards Board regime. There would be a period of consultation before final abolition but this was too late to inform preparations for the Annual Assembly of Standards Committees, and this event was therefore cancelled.

Resolved – That the contents of the letter be noted.

11 **USE OF RECORDING MEDIA AT MEETINGS AND IN COUNCIL MEETINGS**

Further to minute 3 (21/6/2010) June 2010), the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management, presented a report which set out the current practices of neighbouring Councils in respect of recording meetings (Appendix A), and proposed a Standing Order and/or a Protocol on the use of recording media in Council buildings, during Council meetings (Appendix B). It also recommended that decisions on recording media other than during meetings should be delegated to the Chief Executive in consultation with Group Leaders to be determined based on the merits of the request and that there would be no filming/recording/photography at any time in Council buildings if a request had not been made and permission given.

There was a general discussion during which members expressed their reservations regarding the proposed use of regulatory procedures to control the use of recording media in council buildings, having regard to the need for transparency in the way in which the council conducts its business and also continue to allow photography at weddings and other social functions held in the town hall.

It was moved by Councillor Blakeley and seconded by Councillor Rowlands that:

“ The Committee recommends the following:

(a) that the use of recording media within meetings open to the public be unregulated and welcomed, as part of the Council's drive to engage more residents in the workings of the council;

(b) rejects any controls over the use of social media at such meetings and congratulates staff on the creation of Council profiles on Twitter and Facebook;

(c) recommends to Cabinet that all requests for filming rights for broadcasters and producers be managed by the Corporate Marketing Department;

(d) instructs the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management, to enforce all current legal restrictions, including the use of photography at the counting of ballots.

:

It was moved as an amendment by Councillor Jones and seconded by Councillor Williams that:

“ That this matter be referred to a future meeting to allow a much wider discussion involving all members of the council before a decision is made.”

The amendment was put and carried (9:3)

The motion, as amended, was put and carried (12:0)

Resolved (12:0)- That this matter be referred to a future meeting to allow a much wider discussion involving all members of the council before a decision is made.

12 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN - ANNUAL LETTER AND CURRENT PERFORMANCE**

The Director of Finance submitted and reported upon the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter (Appendix 1) detailing the following statistical information:

- Total number of contacts received by the Advice Team and the proportion referred to the Investigative Team
- Complaint decisions reached in the reporting period, which include contacts received in the previous year and so do not correspond directly to the number referred to the Investigative Team in the same year
- Response times which are measured on the amount of time (in calendar days) the Council takes to respond to 'first enquiries' made in the reporting period

For the period 1 April 2010 to 31 August 2010 the Council had resolved 23 contacts (out of a total of 29 received), recorded through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. These were split between preliminary requests for information, full investigations and follow-up enquiries (to a preliminary request or full investigation). Standard response times were 28 calendar days (14 calendar days for schools appeals), unless the LGO set a specific target date for response.

On average contacts were responded to within 11.7 calendar days, which currently represented a significant improvement to the previous reporting period. Analysis of the LGO contacts that took longer than the standard response time of 28 days showed three responses in excess of 80 days, two Adult Social Service replies and one from Housing Benefits. These reflected the level of detail requested by the LGO and the overall complexity of the cases requiring significant resources to investigate fully.

The LGO had noted the positive response from the Council to a number of procedural recommendations from her office, even where maladministration causing injustice was not identified. This was an indication of the willingness to learn from complaints which was having a positive effect on complaint outcomes and informing organisational learning.

Resolved – That the Committee note the contents of this report.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS, PROCESSES AND PERFORMANCE

The Director of Finance presented a report outlining the way in which Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were currently processed within the Council.

Jane Corrin, Information Manager, explained that details of requests received were recorded on a central spreadsheet and then monitored, with any follow up emails to officers being produced by the Information Manager. The details from the spreadsheet were used to report performance on FOI processing as both an internal performance indicator to the Finance management team and also to the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Improvements to this system were being pursued to establish the feasibility of utilising the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM), to log and process FOI requests. The early indications were that some issues regarding the complexity and range of FOI requests did not fit easily with CRM but a proposed solution to support logging, assignment and performance monitoring of FOI requests had been provided.

She responded to questions from members concerning benchmarking and performance comparisons with neighbouring authorities, the cost of pursuing FOI requests, and difficulties experienced by their constituents navigating the Council's new website which could impact on FOI requests.

On a motion by Councillor Blakeley seconded by Councillor Jones it was:-

Resolved – That:

- (1) Jane Corrin be thanked for her presentation and that the report be noted.
- (2) A further report be requested for a future meeting to include comparative data with other local authorities, and the categorisation of requests.