

STANDARDS COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Standards Committee was held on 4 November 2015.

PRESENT: Councillors Culley, (Chair), Harvey, Lawton, (as substitute for Rostron), P Purvis, (as substitute for Dean), D Rooney and Taylor

PRESENT AS OBSERVERS: Councillor Coupe

OFFICERS: S Bonner, S Lightwing, N Sayer and K Whitmore

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Dean and Rostron.

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no Declarations of Interest at this point in the meeting.

1 REGISTERS OF INTERESTS - REGISTER OF GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY

The Head of Democratic Services presented a report to provide details of the Register of Gifts and Hospitality for Officers and Members.

The Council's Code of Conduct required Councillors and Co-opted Members to register their financial and other interests. The register of interests provided a record of the interests and activities which might influence a Member's view, and which might affect the way in which they carried out their public duties.

The Monitoring Officer was required to review the Register of Gifts and Hospitality for Officers and Members on a regular basis and report details of the entries to the Standards Committee. The Registers were available for inspection by the public during normal office opening hours.

Declarations entered into the Register of Gifts and Hospitality for the period April 2013 to August 2015 were attached at Appendices A (Members) and B (Officers).

ORDERED as follows:-

1. That the content of the report be noted.

2 COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS ANNUAL REPORT

A report of the Assistant Director, Organisation and Governance was presented to provide Standards Committee with a summary of the Corporate Complaints and Compliments Annual Report which provided statistical and performance information for the financial year 2014/2015 and an overview of the lessons learned.

It was agreed by the Leadership and Management Team on 27 August 2015 that a more detailed review of the current complaints process was to be carried out as part of the wider Democratic Services review in order to improve the customers' experience and align this with the Customer Strategy.

Complaints were a valuable source of information about the Council's Services, which could help identify recurring or underlying issues and potential improvements. The Council had undertaken a number of structural and staffing changes and the loss of experienced staff might influence the quality and timeliness of responses. This could greatly impact on the customers' experience with the Council which might then lead to further complaints and possible reputational loss.

The Assistant Director, Organisation and Governance, confirmed that complaints and compliments were monitored within the Council's Performance Framework and Balanced

Scorecard system.

The Corporate Complaints Manager provided a detailed overview of the complaints process and explained that the Council operated three processes for complaints which were: Corporate, Children's Services and Adults Services. The majority of complaints were handled at the first, informal stage, with around 10% of complaints being escalated to Stage 2. Whilst the number of complaints received had decreased in the last two years in both stages, the time taken to respond to complaints had increased.

A number of complaints had not been handled within the Council's own prescribed timescales - 10 days for Stage 1 and 25 days for Stage 2 complaints. In many cases this was due to a change in staffing structures, inexperience in handling complaints and managers not ensuring complaints were given appropriate priority.

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provided an annual report to each Council on the complaints they had received and investigated in relation to each authority. However, those statistics did not necessarily correlate to the numbers the Council held because of the different ways they were recorded. For example, some people might go direct to the LGO without exhausting the local complaints mechanisms first and therefore the LGO would signpost them to the Council but still recorded them in their statistics. However, those complainants might never contact the Council.

Middlesbrough compared well to other local authorities in the amount of complaints submitted to the LGO, however Middlesbrough also had the most complaints where fault was found and the complaint upheld. It was difficult to identify why this was the case as the nature and complexity of each individual complaint submitted against other authorities was not known. The loss of experienced investigating Stage 2 officers within the Council might be a contributory factor.

Whilst the number of upheld complaints were low, the only common themes were: ineffective interpretation of Council policy/legislation and poor information handling. The impact on the Council could be great as LGO could advise that the Council offers monetary compensation and makes its findings public, which could impact on the Council's reputation.

Compliments to the Council also formed an important part of customer feedback and should also help formulate best working practices and improve services. However, the low figures detailed could indicate that not all compliments were being recorded. It was difficult to ascertain why compliments had dropped between 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 without other intelligence gathering techniques, such as consultations.

It was highlighted by Members that the process for making a complaint and the information on the Council's website needed to be updated and simplified. In relation to telephone contact it was noted that the cost to the person making the complaint could be prohibitive if the phone call was lengthy.

ORDERED as follows:-

1. That the content of the report be noted.
2. The information regarding complaints on the Council's website would be reviewed and updated.

3 **UPDATE ON STANDARDS ISSUES - HEAD OF LEGAL SERVICES**

The Assistant Director, Organisation and Governance explained that the Head of Legal Services was unable to attend the meeting to present his report.

AGREED that this item was deferred.