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STANDARDS COMMITTEE
26 FEBRUARY 2015
7.15pm

PRESENT:

Councillors: Peter McCabe (Chair), David Williams (Vice-Chair), John Dehaney, Mary-Jane Jeanes, Philip Jones, Ian Munn, Tobin Byers

Co-opted members:

Sophie Bowen, Nigel Brotherton, Beverley Huie

Independent Person:

Derek Prior

Also present: Paul Evans (Assistant Director, Corporate Governance), Hilary Gullen (Democratic Services)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Cllr Michael Bull

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

None

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

Agreed

4 APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSONS AND INDEPENDENT NON-VOTING CO-OPTED MEMBERS (Agenda Item 4)

Paul Evans introduced the report, explaining the different roles of the independent persons (primarily to consider complaints against members) and the co-opted members.

Co-opted committee members serve two terms only and two end their second term in July 2015.

Paul Evans explained the roles could be combined and that there was real value in that.

Paul Evans suggested the establishment of an interview panel of three members to make recommendations to Council by July.

In response to councillors' questions, Paul Evans explained that advertisements would be placed in newspapers to encourage a wide application. Co-optees were excluded from applying, but the existing independent persons could re-apply.

Paul Evans also explained that in law the council does not have to have a Standards Committee, because it has two independent persons.

Resolved:

A: to appoint an interview panel comprising one councillor from each political group to interview and recommend to council the appointment of two independent persons to serve for a period of three years from 12 July 2015,

B: to combine the role of the independent person and the independent non-voting co-opted members so that the two independent person appointment from 12 July 2015 will also become co-opted members of the Standards Committee and

C: to review this arrangement in February 2016 and to take a view on whether it still requires a third co-opted member.

D: to allow the panel to be determined by groups through the normal channels

5 REGULATION OF INVESTIGATORY POWERS ACT (Agenda Item 5)

Paul Evans introduced this item, and said that there had been one covert surveillance authorised, but that this had not taken place due to staff shortages. There had been no requests for CCTV footage and no applications turned down.

In response to councillors' questions, Paul Evans said he would get back to members with more detail about why the covert surveillance had not taken place. Paul Evans would also seek comparative data from the London Borough of Richmond regarding tobacco and firework prosecutions.

Resolved:

Members noted the purposes for which investigations had been authorised under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) 2000.

6 COMPLAINTS AGAINST MEMBERS (Agenda Item 6)

Paul Evans gave a verbal report, that no further complaints had been received since October. In October there had been two complaints that had been dealt with, with the independent persons. Both of the complainants sought to take further, external action and were given advice about the ombudsman, but no further contact had been received. Paul Evans noted the low level of complaints at Merton and said the independent persons had only been called in six times since 2011.

7 WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda Item 7)

Paul Evans introduced this item and stated that the Chair had requested that the council's whistle-blowing arrangements were looked into in the light of the Mid-Staffordshire NHS foundation Trust enquiry recommendations. Paul Evans also said that there would be a review of the description of members' interests and code of conduct with one or two audit recommendations to consider, and whether declarations of trustee positions of organisations in the borough should be declared.

Peter McCabe further explained his concern regarding protection of whistle-blowers, so that people who see wrong being done have an environment where legitimate concerns can be raised with protection.

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