



City of Westminster

# Minutes

Meeting:

**Standards Committee**

Date of meeting:

**6.30pm on Monday 15 February 2010, Westminster  
City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP**

Attendees:

**Councillors:**

**Michael Brahams, DL  
Ruth Bush  
Rupert D'Cruz  
Tim Mitchell  
Alastair Moss  
Steve Summers**

**Independent Members:**

**Lord Richard Best, OBE  
The Very Rev John Hall  
Lord Dennis Stevenson, CBE**

Apologies:

**Elizabeth Peace, CBE  
Councillor Robert Davies, DL  
Councillor Angela Hooper, DL, CBE**

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## **1. WELCOME**

- 1.1 The Chairman welcomed everyone present in particular Alison Kelly, the Audit Commission's National Lead, Governance and Accountability and the City Council's Chief Executive, Mike More.

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **3. MINUTES**

The Chairman, with the assent of the Members present, signed the minutes of the meeting held on 27 October 2009 as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

## **4. ETHICAL GOVERNANCE AUDIT – FOLLOW-UP (see report of the Head of Legal Services)**

- 4.1 The Chairman thanked Alison Kelly for her work associated with the follow-up audit and asked Peter Large, Head of Legal Services, to introduce his report.
- 4.2 Mr Large explained that the audit was a follow-up to the original audit which had been conducted in 2005. The audit had considered the progress made by the Council against the recommendations made in the original audit findings.
- 4.3 Alison Kelly introduced her findings and explained that the follow-up audit had been fairly light touch and consisted of only 5 audit days. The findings had been based on a detailed questionnaire completed by the Monitoring Officer, a survey of Members and Senior Officers. Interviews had also been held with the Chief Executive, leading Members, the Chairman of the Standards Committee and Members of the Standards Committee.
- 4.4 Councillor Bush, who was one of those interviewed as part of the Audit, commented that in her view the survey questions were poor and led to far too many "don't know" replies, which, in some cases, made the findings worthless. It was noted that the questionnaire was a standard one not specific to the City Council and had been designed with help from Standards for England.
- 4.5 Councillor Steve Summers expressed concern about bullying of officers by members of the public. Peter Large explained that in some extreme cases it had been necessary to take legal action to prevent this from taking place.
- 4.6 The Chairman felt that at the initial audit Members felt disengaged with, the still at that time fairly new Executive arrangements and had not come to terms with the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee process.

- 4.7 Councillor Alastair Moss said that the Council's Planning and Licensing Committee decision processes were the subject of rigorous review, including at times by way of judicial review. He felt sure that residents would raise concerns if there were particular problems relating to ethical governance and these did not arise.
- 4.8 Councillor Mitchell felt that it was always likely that there would be an element of tension between Members and Officers.
- 4.9 The Chief Executive addressed the Committee. He welcomed the opportunity which the audit gave to review some of the Council's governance arrangements. He stressed that high ethical standards was a matter not only for the Standards Committee but for all senior Managers and Councillors. He welcomed the emerging advisory role of the Standards Committee. He noted that the Audit found no evidence of mistrust and that the decision making processes of the Council were open and transparent. The Council's Officers were clear that they served the Council as a whole not just the executive or the Majority Party. He added that he held monthly meetings with the Leader of the Opposition.
- 4.10 Alison Kelly took the Committee through her findings. She challenged the Committee Members to check how easy it was to find details of the Standards Committee hearings on the Council's website. She mentioned that the role of the Council's Monitoring Officer was not as well known within the Council as it is at some others and perhaps this should be addressed.
- 4.11 Lady Kelly also referred to the knowledge of the Council contractors in relation to Whistleblowing which still needed to be addressed which had been highlighted by the outcome of some mystery calling she had recently undertaken.
- 4.12 Lord Best and Lord Stevenson spoke of the need for some improvements in particular to the way that Ethical Governance issues are communicated both internally and externally. They noted, however, that the audit was based on a small sample but that there was room for improvement but this was not just a matter for the Standards Committee.
- 4.13 Lord Stevenson asked that the Communications plan be brought back to the Committee.
- 4.14 The Chief Executive stressed that he didn't see the audit findings as negative at all. It was a case that there were no serious problems, a recognition that progress had been made and highlighted areas on which further improvements could be made.
- 4.15 The Chairman thanked Alison Kelly for attending and presenting her findings. He asked Peter Large to introduce the draft action plan in response which was set out in Appendix 3 of the report.

- 4.16 Peter Large explained the reasons for the suggested actions which was based on the premise that the recommendations were well founded. He stressed the point also made by the Chief Executive that the responsibility for high ethical standards was not solely the province of the Standards Committee.

**RESOLVED:** (1) That the actions as set out in Appendix 3 of the report arising from the follow-up audit be endorsed including inviting the Leader to a meeting of the Committee annually and the best practice of up to 4 other authorities as set out in items 7 and 8 of the draft Action Plan.

(2) That the Communications Plan be submitted to a future meeting.

**Other Business:** Councillor Ruth Bush asked that Officers report to a future meeting on the issue of declaring interests again when the relevant item is reached as well as at the start of each meeting.

## 5. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting ended at 7.43pm.

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**CHAIRMAN**

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**DATE**