

Public Document Pack

Minutes of the meeting of the **STANDARDS COMMITTEE** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Wednesday, 25 June 2014 at 10.00 am.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor B W Butcher

Councillors: M A Russell
L A Keen
K Mills
C J Smith
J M Smith

Also Present: Mr B P S Dowley (Independent Person)

Officers: Corporate Complaints and Resilience Officer
Democratic Support Officer

1 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S C Manion.

2 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that there were no substitute members appointed.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 December 2013 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5 COMPLAINTS REPORT

The Committee received the report of the Director of Governance on formal complaints received by the Council that had been investigated by the Corporate Services Team.

The Corporate Complaints and Resilience Officer (CCRO) advised that, since it was some time since the last meeting, all complaints received up to the end of March had been included in the report which in future would cover the quarterly period. Nine complaints had been investigated at stage two of the Council's complaints process since the last meeting. In respect of Complaint No VAL005, Members were advised that there had been maladministration but no injustice had been caused as the correct procedure had eventually been followed. Whilst no compensation was payable, an apology had been issued. It was confirmed that Officers were now aware that sealed bids should be sought in relation to the sale of all Council-owned properties. The CCRO reported that four complaints had been referred to the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO). There had been no finding of fault on three of these, whilst the fourth had not been investigated as it was a matter for the courts.

Referring to Appendix D of the report, the Committee was advised that Council Tax complaints had more than doubled when compared with the 2012/13 financial year. However, this was due to the fact that some Council Tax complaints received at that time had been dealt with directly by EK Services and had not been forwarded to Corporate Services for logging on to the complaints database. A significant number of complaints had also been generated by Council Tax changes introduced in 2013/14. Environmental Health complaints had also doubled. However, these were spread evenly over the range of services offered by Environmental Health and no trend was identifiable. The dramatic reduction in Waste Services complaints was probably due to the fact that residents had become accustomed to the new recycling bins introduced the previous year.

Councillor L A Keen raised concerns that there was only a generic telephone number for Council Tax enquiries. This meant that residents could not telephone Officers direct which often resulted in customers having to repeat information several times. She understood that the problem might be exacerbated by the fact that EK Services staff were not allowed to make or receive telephone calls when working from home. The Chairman advised that he had attended a meeting two months previously where similar concerns had been raised and EK Services had undertaken to investigate the matter. The CCRO advised that this would be raised with the Council's EK Services Client Officer.

In response to Councillor M A Russell, the CCRO advised that Complaint No ENV031 had initially been reported to Environmental Protection in November 2011. Although it had been hoped to complete the proposed remedial work by the end of March 2014, this had not proved possible and the Council was working with all parties to have the works completed as soon as possible. The CCRO advised that enquiries were being made by the LGO, and the Committee would be updated at the next meeting.

In response to Councillor Keen, the CCRO explained that the exchange of complaints information between EK Services and the Council was now very good, and all EK Services' complaints had been included in Appendix C of the report, including those dealt with at stage one by EK Services (e.g. Council Tax and Benefits). At the request of Councillor Keen, there was agreement that the information in Appendix C would, in future, be grouped by complaint type rather than ward, although ward information would be retained.

- RESOLVED:
- (a) That the Corporate Complaints and Resilience Officer be tasked to follow up concerns raised over EK Services' generic number for Council Tax enquiries.
 - (b) That the information in Appendix C of the complaints report will, in future, be grouped by complaint type rather than ward.
 - (c) That the complaints report be noted and the actions taken endorsed.

The meeting ended at 10.30 am.