



LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT

MINUTES OF THE TRADING STANDARDS JOINT ADVISORY BOARD Monday, 21 March 2011 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Jones (LB Brent) (Chair) and Councillors Baker (LB Brent), Ferry (LB Harrow) and Hashmi (LB Brent).

Apologies were received from: Councillors O'Dell (LB Harrow).

1. Election of Chair

RESOLVED:-

that Councillor Jones be elected as Chair for this meeting.

2. Declarations of personal and prejudicial interests

None declared.

3. Notes of the informal meeting held on 9 December 2010

RESOLVED:-

that the notes of the previous meeting held on 9 December 2010 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting, subject to the following addition:-

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Jones.

4. Matters arising

None.

5. Trading Standards Savings Review and Budget for 2011/12

Nagendar Bilon (Head of Trading Standards, Environment and Neighbourhood Services, London Borough of Brent) introduced the report which outlined savings proposals for Trading Standards and the likely budget for 2011-12. Both Brent and Harrow London boroughs (LBs) were seeking savings, with each council looking to reduce their Trading Standards budget by around £200,000 each per annum. Nagendar Bilon explained that Brent council had undergone a structure and staffing review initiated in 2009 which had identified that the proportion of staff in enabling and support functions was too high, whilst the proportion of staff in service delivery roles was too low. Subsequently, there had been a number of staff structure

changes and reductions in posts mainly focused on managerial and support posts. The next wave of the review would further reduce management capacity by more than 100 posts, including 30 in Environment and Neighbourhood Services and would have a significant impact on Trading Standards as part of the wider programme of cost reductions through Brent council's One Council programme.

Nagendar Bilon then drew Members' attention to the proposed new structure for Brent council's Environment and Protection unit as set out in appendix two of the report. This included the proposal to appoint a Head of Service for all services regulating business activity as opposed to a specific Trading Standards Head of Service and it was anticipated that this would generate around 50% savings, whilst it was also proposed to delete one of the three Assistant Head of Service posts generating a saving of £63,902 per annum. Members heard that moving the Trading Standards office to a main, municipal portfolio office would mean that a 0.25fte post would be released from the post of Laboratory and IT Manager, representing savings of £12,993 per annum. Nagendar Bilon advised that it was proposed that recognition of income derived from confiscations under the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) could be built into budgets and although identification of a particular sum is problematic due to the long lead time of such cases, it was proposed that £50,000 overall could be budgeted for 2011/12. It was hoped that income derived from POCA could be increased in future years and in order to achieve this, a review during the annual budget to assess what income is available would be undertaken, whilst a long term approach was needed to ensure that a contingency fund is in place to counteract the erratic nature of income from this source. Both councils were also considering deleting the posts of Consumer Advisor and the two vacant posts of Assistant Enforcement Officer. It was noted that full year savings would be achieved from any vacant posts, however other posts would be subject to notice periods of up to 12 weeks and be subject to redundancy costs. Members noted that Brent council was proposing overall savings of £210,452 and Harrow council £203,318.

Nagendar Bilon then highlighted future savings options, including submitting a detailed business plan to provide training to enable Accredited Financial Investigators to market these services to Brent and Harrow LBs and other local authorities. It was also being suggested that a staff member be trained in computer forensics to avoid the expense of external forensic examinations and finding another partner for the Consortium to share more costs through joint services. In addition, Brent and Harrow LBs could consider spearheading a North West London partnership to perform weights and measures functions which would further reduce costs.

During discussion, Councillor Ferry enquired whether changes in the organisation structure had been made with Trading Standards agreement and was this structure appropriate for Trading Standards to operate effectively. He queried what would the likely opinion be of other local authorities would be if they were offered to join the Consortium and would they approve of the structure. Councillor Ferry suggested that it would be desirable if Trading Standards continued to operate with independently. In respect of increased demand, Councillor Ferry commented that this could be accommodated by redeploying officers to an area experiencing higher demand irrespective of what LB employed them. He also suggested that there should be more opportunities for more cross borough working. Councillor Hashmi concurred that Trading Standards should continue to operate independently and

stated that the Board played an important role and needed to give appropriate advice and support so that it may make important decisions. He expressed concern that demand was growing whilst staff numbers were reducing. Councillor Hashmi noted the success of Trading Standards surgeries, such as the seatbelt use campaign and he enquired how effective it was compared to other local authorities. Councillor Dhamarajah enquired how confident officers were of maintaining standards in the face of staff reductions, particularly whilst some goods such as electric blankets which were below safety standards continued to be sold in shops.

The Chair commented that the Planning Service was also looking to generate income through the POCA and that it would be beneficial if both service areas were to share their expertise. She enquired when the new staffing structure would be in place and where evidence would now be stored and what options were currently being pursued in respect of partnership working. The Chair also suggested that some legal advice be provided concerning the structural and administrative arrangements at the next meeting of the Board.

In reply to the issues raised, Nagendar Bilon advised that the new staffing structure had been negotiated with Environment and Neighbourhood Services and Trading Standards would exist as a separate entity within the department and would comprise of both Brent and Harrow's Trading Standards teams. The main consideration was to whether the new Head of Service would be able to give due time to Trading Standards in view of the other areas of responsibility that the post would also hold. Members heard that if another local authority could be persuaded to join the Consortium, this would have the benefit of sharing costs further and there had been plenty of discussion with regard to making arrangements for shared services with an additional local authority. Discussions with Brent and Harrow legal departments were taking place with regard to the revised provisions for operating Trading Standards and an update would be made available at a future meeting. Nationally, Trading Standards performance in LBs Brent and Harrow was amongst the best, however it also faced the largest reduction in budget of any local authorities in London and this would result in a reduction of both the amount and variety of work carried out. Overall, the service was likely to become more reactive as opposed to proactive by nature. Nagendar Bilon advised that Trading Standards were conducting investigations on behalf of other service areas in LBs Brent and Harrow and it was also looking to sell its services to other local authorities. The issue of evidence storage had already been raised and as no storage space was available at Brent House, it was possible that private hire space may need to be pursued.

6. Trading Standards Work Plan for 2011/12

Nagendar Bilon updated Members on the draft work plan for Trading Standards in 2011/12 and advised that it would be subject to the staffing restructure, of which the results of the consultation would be announced after 22 April. It was certain that Trading Standards would have a reduced workforce for 2011/12 because of the need to make savings, however every effort would be made to protect frontline staff. However, the reduction of back office staff may mean frontline staff having to carry out more administrative functions too. Nagendar Bilon then drew Members' attention to the key priorities of the Consortium, which were consumer protection and business advice, underage sales, large scale cases involving consumer fraud and doorstep crime. A holistic approach would continue involving working in

partnership with colleagues of both councils and also other enforcement agencies whenever the opportunity arises. Working in partnership with regional Trading Standards groups would become increasingly important in the run up to the 2012 Olympics. Members noted the number of units of work planned for 2011/12 was smaller in previous years because of budget pressures. There would also be greater focus on inspecting high risk premises and visits to medium or low risk premises would not be undertaken unless they had been the subject of a complaint or part of a project that Trading Standards was undertaking. The Board noted the enforcement priorities as set out in the report.

During discussion, Councillor Hashmi enquired what steps were being taken in view of the extra Trading Standards activity as the Olympics approached and he stressed the importance of the role the Board should have with regard to this. The Chair asked whether Trading Standards would be liaising with the Health Safety and Licensing unit with regard to visiting premises and asked what objectives had been identified in respect of the Olympics.

In reply, Alpha Shah (Senior Enforcement Officer – Trading Standards, Environment and Neighbourhood Services) advised that discussion was already taking place about sharing a database with Health Safety and Licensing unit and it was intended to work more closely with this unit in future, which would be facilitated by the fact that both units would be located in the same office. Nagendar Bilon added that there was already a number of ways in which Trading Standards and Health Safety and Licensing units worked together. He informed the Board that Trading Standards would experience a huge increase in workload as the Olympics approached, not only because of Olympic events being held at Wembley but also because of transport hubs to take visitors to the Games, such as Stanmore tube station. Nagendar Bilon warned that overseas visitors in particular could be vulnerable to buying suspect goods or services, particularly those bought on the internet.

The Chair thanked officers for the presentation and requested that a report on what plans were being put together for the Olympics be put to a future meeting of the Board.

7. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the next meeting of the Trading Standards Joint Advisory Board would be agreed at the respective council meetings of Brent and Harrow in May 2011.

8. Any urgent business

There was none.

The meeting closed at 8.25 pm

L. JONES
Chair