

Runnymede Borough Council

STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

26 January 2021 at 7.30pm on MS Teams

Members of the Committee Present: Councillors M Nuti (Chairman), J Sohi (Vice-Chairman), M Adams, D Anderson-Bassey, B Clarke, M Cressey, M Harnden, M Kusneraitis and J Wilson

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor R Edis

Councillor J Olorenshaw and Mr M Litvak (Independent Person) also attended.

416 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 24 November 2020 were confirmed as a correct record, which would be signed when the Chairman was physically able to.

417 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R Edis.

418 UPDATE ON EXTERNAL AUDIT AND FEES

The Committee received for information a verbal report given by the Council's external auditors, BDO.

BDO reported that they had not yet finalised the report on auditing the Council's accounts for 2020/2021, but hoped to do by the end of February 2021. Working remotely had caused difficulties for the team who were currently testing some aspects of Housing Benefits and had not yet concluded their 'value for money' opinion on the Council's Use of Resources.

BDO discussed with the Committee why they had made an application to Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) for an additional £38,000 to their current fee of £34,000 per annum. They explained that when they bid for the tender, it was a parcel of different audits for a number of bodies, including the Council, but were unaware of the Council's size of property portfolio and balance sheet, nor how complex it was. Officers considered that full information had been provided to PSAA but could only speculate that BDO had not received it in order to be fully informed. It was noted that the Council's financial position would make agreeing to the request a difficult decision that if approved by PSAA would necessitate a supplementary revenue estimate to be agreed by a meeting of the full Council in due course, as no contingency provisions had been made. Officers would keep the Committee updated.

Officers were asked about the potential for streamlining the process to reduce costs but this was not possible as it was governed by the audit Code of Practice. Representations had been made to CIPFA on this subject. Members requested that Officers look at the Council's Procurement and bidding processes to avoid the unfortunate circumstances that both the Council and BDO were now in. BDO confirmed that about 50% of their other clients who comprised a mixture of bodies in terms of size and complexity were in the same position with regard to renegotiating

the fees, but for a variety of reasons. A link to the PSAA website would be provided to the Committee to whom there was no recourse for the way in which the original bidding process had been organised.

Officers agreed that compared with other Councils the current fee was very low but did not concur with the figure now being requested by BDO. It was hoped that the issue could be resolved amicably and that the statement of accounts for 2020/2021 would be reported to the Corporate Management Committee shortly.

419 **INTERNAL AUDIT SUMMARY INTERNAL CONTROLS ASSURANCE (SICA) REPORT 2020/2021**

The Committee reviewed progress with the annual audit programme for 2020/2021.

Members were advised that since the last meeting a number of audits had been completed and/or reached a final draft being issued. These included Commercial Property, Commercial Rents and Communications.

TIAA to report in full, two, maybe three, probable 'limited assurance' audits (if completed in time) to the next meeting of the Committee in May 2021. These concerned the DSO, Housing Health and Safety and Housing Repairs and Maintenance. A number of other audits were marked as 'fieldwork in progress' and TIAA were content with their work so far.

Members reviewed completed audits where priority 2 recommendations had been issued. These were for Communications, which contained detailed management comments appreciated by the Committee, ICT Network Security, and Community Transport. With regard to the ICT Network Security audit, the completed action regarding firewalls would be marked complete, instead of 'to be followed up'.

Business Continuity was scheduled to commence on 1 March 2021. Therefore, Corporate Heads, that had not already done so, would be instructed to complete their Business Continuity Plans in readiness.

The proposed audit of Project Management Tools and Procurement had been put back to Quarter 1 of 2021/2022, owing to a number of Officers being diverted to the Covid response. The Committee was content with this rationale.

420 **INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT FOR OUTSTANDING RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee reviewed outstanding recommendations on a number of audits. Since the last meeting, 3 recommendations had been implemented and a further 6 were still to be completed by auditees and revised implementation dates were noted.

These were mainly due to the Covid 19 pandemic preventing Officers from addressing the issues raised owing to a lack of resources. The Committee noted TIAA's comments with regard to internal controls, the responsibility for which rested with the relevant Corporate Heads who were relied on to provide the auditors with full access to their accounting records and transactions.

Members noted that revised target dates had also been agreed in respect of the DSO, and various ICT audits, 9 in total. Whilst the Committee did not seek to change these it was agreed that any future requests by Officers for delay or deferral of audits

to be firstly reviewed by the Committee, instead of being agreed with Officers and then reported to the Committee.

421 **AUDIT STRATEGY AND ANNUAL AUDIT PLAN 2021/2022**

The Committee's approval was sought for the Annual Audit Plan for 2021/2022. The plan had been drawn up with an assessment of the risks on a spectrum balanced with internal and external factors, taking on board the different service areas and their place in the organisation and the weight of risks attached to each activity in terms of how in depth and how frequently audits should take place.

A detailed programme of risk, rationale and scope for each planned audit was considered by Members amounting to 178 days, although TIAA was taking steps to reduce this to the agreed 175 number of days. The main areas to be audited in 2021/2022 were Corporate Services, Financial and Resources, ICT Audits, and operational audits on Law and Governance, Planning and Enforcement, Housing and Community Development.

TIAA was thanked for their work and Members were pleased to approve the plan accordingly.

RESOLVED that –

the Annual Audit Plan for 2021/2022 be approved

422 **ADOPTION OF A NEW RUNNYMEDE CODE OF CONDUCT**

The Committee's approval was sought to recommend that the Council adopted a new Model Code of Conduct with effect from May 2021 when the Council's revised Constitution was due to be adopted.

Members recalled that at their meeting in July 2020 a response to a draft new Code of Conduct for elected Members was approved for submission to the Local Government Association (LGA). The LGA had prepared the new draft Code as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The Committee noted the background to the introduction of a new Code and how it compared with the existing Code of Conduct. Officers confirmed that its main advantage was to bring more clarity as to when the Code applied, giving some clear examples of the types of behaviour that was expected and not expected of elected Members. It was agreed that more consistency and a uniform approach was positive.

Members were advised that Officers would need to produce separate documentation on the procedure for dealing with sensitive interests and granting dispensations as these were not included in the new model Code.

Officers clarified that the Code was not one which could be applied retrospectively. The new code would only apply to breaches which took place after its adoption.

The Committee supported adoption of the Code, noting the legal obligation to do so, but was disappointed that the new Code had not, despite requests from most local authorities, included any strong sanctions for breaches of the Code. Members felt this was a lost opportunity; this view was shared by the Council's Independent Person who also attended the meeting. However, some Members queried whether

sanctions were necessary as they considered Councillors should be able to resolve any differences amicably without recourse to a formal procedure.

Officers would make the necessary amendments to the Constitution and related papers such as the Declarations of Interest forms completed by elected and co-opted Members. Officers would need to produce separate documentation on the procedure for dealing with sensitive interests and granting dispensations as these were not included in the new model Code.

RECOMMEND that -

Runnymede Borough Council adopts a new Member Code of Conduct, with effect from 20 May 2021, when the new Constitution of the Council comes into operation.

423 **COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS – QUARTER 3 2020/2021**

The Committee reviewed the 27 complaints and 31 compliments recorded centrally for Quarter 3 of 2020/2021 from October to the end of December 2020. These were presented in the detail and format as requested by Members to give them a sound overview of feedback from residents and the wider community in Runnymede.

Officers reported that it was not unusual to receive a fairly high number of complaints over the autumn and winter period but it was encouraging that most complaints were not upheld. The Committee noted an increase in the number of people disagreeing with policies and procedures and with reference to the complaints to the DSO, acknowledged the difficulties experienced by people in houses of multiple occupation and flats accessing the full range of recycling opportunities. There were more reports of contaminated waste where different households were sharing communal facilities which Officers were pro-actively looking into and also working to reduce the small backlog of overdue complaints which stood at 5.

Officers advised that Housing also attracted 10 complaints mainly from Council tenants and people making homelessness applications. In this and other areas there had arisen some minor issues which highlighted training needs and improvements to software. Other residents made complaints about anti-social behaviour, but to resolve these matters Officers required solid evidence from the complainant.

Members discussed the need for timely communications with residents. With more people at home including working from home and home schooling their children, it was more likely that being more stressed by the current 'lockdown' restrictions they would be disrupted by neighbours, contractors undertaking planned works, refuse collection and similar which they would not normally be aware of. This was an issue that Members thought could fall within the remit of the Health and Wellbeing Member Working Party and asked for this to be taken forward. Some lessons learned were noted in the narrative and Members thought it would be useful to reinstate a separate section for this into future reports.

The Committee was pleased with the 31 compliments received in Quarter 3, which was only slightly fewer than in Quarter 2. Officers reported that 20 were for Environmental Services (19 for the DSO) and the others were shared between Community Development, Community Services Customer Services and Housing; the full details of which staff and teams were listed in Exempt Appendix 1 to the report and Officers confirmed that emails to the teams and individuals on behalf of the Committee would be sent after the meeting.

Officers were commended for their response to the Covid pandemic, with a special mention for the Assistant Head of Green Space, who with volunteers and colleagues from the DSO had recently cleared snow at the centres being used for vaccinations in the borough.

Members noted the limited available equalities related information and that since the last meeting an Equality Impact Screening assessment had been undertaken and approved by the Council's Equalities Group.

Officers were thanked for their report.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 9.11 pm)