

Runnymede Borough Council

STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

26 May 2021 at 7.30pm

Members of the Committee Present: Councillors J Sohi (Chairman), M Adams (Vice-Chairman)  
A Alderson, J Broadhead, R Edis, N King, L Gillham and  
J Olorenshaw.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors D Anderson-Bassey and M Kusneraitis

**22. FIRE PRECAUTIONS**

The Chairman read the procedures to be followed in the event of fire or other emergency.

**23. MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 26 January 2021 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**24. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D Anderson-Bassey and M Kusneraitis.

**25. 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 Housing Health and Safety and Housing Repair and Maintenance and Income 'Cash and Bank which had also been issued with some priority 1 and 2 recommendations. In this regard Officers advised that work was being undertaken to become 'cashless' in the future, noting that car parks income was the only service where cash was used now and the paying in machine at main Reception was no longer needed which would produce a saving of approximately £5,000 per annum.

There were three audits in progress; these were Procurement, Main Accounting and the Depot. It was anticipated that the Depot audit would be reported to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee in July 2021 and the relevant Corporate Head would be invited given that it would be a limited assurance outcome.

Business Continuity and Absence Management and Planning Enforcement were scheduled to be completed in 2021/2022.

**26. INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT FOR OUTSTANDING RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Committee reviewed outstanding recommendations on a number of audits. Since the last meeting, 13 recommendations had been implemented and a further 14 were still to be completed by auditees and revised implementation dates were noted.

Members discussed Mandatory Training for Data Protection and Safeguarding and the importance of ensuring staff did the associated e-learning in a timely manner. Officers would discuss with line managers how to enforce these requirements, noting that 27% of staff had not yet completed Data Protection and reminders for both sets of training had been sent to relevant staff. It was suggested that the appraisals were an appropriate forum to discuss these matters with staff.

**27. INTERNAL AUDIT ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021**

The Committee noted the Annual Report from TIAA for 2020/2021.

Members were pleased to note the Head of Internal Audit's Opinion that he was satisfied sufficient work had been undertaken to result in a positive conclusion on the Council's affairs, with adequate and effective management, control and governance processes in place to manage the Council's achievement of its objectives. TIAA had conducted 21 reviews; of those available, 9 were substantial, 8 were reasonable and one was limited. In terms of recommendations for the year, 1 urgent recommendation had been made (Housing Health and Safety), 22 important and 23 routine. Despite Covid, TIAA had successfully completed the year's plan and Members thanked the Head of Internal Audit and his staff for their work.

**28. INTERNAL AUDIT ASSURANCE REPORT – HOUSING – MANAGING HEALTH AND SAFETY**

The Committee noted an audit which had been issued as 'limited' assurance. In such circumstances Members were presented with the full report and recommendations and were addressed by the relevant Corporate Head and other Officers.

The aim of the review was to assess the control measures in place to ensure compliance with both statutory and regulatory health and safety requirements and best practice. Sample checks were included in respect of health and safety inspections regarding fire, gas, electricity, water, asbestos and lifts. TIAA had found that there were limited policies in place with no overarching Health and Safety Compliance Policy.

At the time of the audit 61% of properties had an up to date electrical inspection certificate and 49% had a valid asbestos survey with a significant amount of Fire Risk Assessments outstanding. The audit had pre-dated the new Corporate Head of Housing and Compliance Manager, both of whom confirmed that the situation had improved significantly since the Housing Regulator's report in 2019. A new Health and Safety compliance software package was now in place and, since her appointment in March 2021, the Compliance Manager had made a good start on building up the evidence base that had been lacking.

TIAA were keen to stress that the audit had not found that work wasn't being done, more a case that record keeping was in need of attention. Evidence of good practice had been identified with regard to water hygiene testing, lift inspections, Fire Risk Assessments and Gas Safety Certificates.

The Committee studied the detailed findings, noting there were 9 action points arising from the audit, all of which had been accepted by Managers and were in the process of being implemented. For example, following a comprehensive review, a new Health and Safety Policy was due to be considered by the Housing Committee at its next meeting in June 2021 and a training matrix was being developed to ensure staff were appropriately qualified. In addition, a series of comprehensive spreadsheets and other documentation was being created to provide the necessary evidence of compliance and appropriate monitoring arrangements.

TIAA confirmed that a follow up audit would be conducted after 12 – 18 months and Officers were confident that the outcome would be much more positive.

29. **ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT 2020/2021**

The Committee's approval was sought to recommend to Corporate Management Committee the Annual Governance Statement for 2020/2021. The Statement took the usual format as in previous years, set within the Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government'. Officers confirmed that the Covid pandemic had changed how the Council operated in a number of ways which would be reflected in the Statement for 2021/2022.

The Committee was advised that as was the case with a number of local authorities, although the Statement for 2020/2021, the 2019/2020 statement had still not been signed off. Officers confirmed that as soon as it had been completed, an email would be sent to all Members.

Officers drew several parts of the Statement to the attention of the Committee. For example, the appointment of a member of the Accountancy team as the Finance Director of RBCS instead of the Assistant Chief Executive. With regard to governance controls, Officers confirmed that the third party declarations made by Councillors had been received from all but one of the former Councillors, but this was expected imminently.

During the year the Council had been tasked with the distribution of approximately £14m in grants to local legitimate businesses as a result of Covid. This grant money could not be carried forward beyond the end of June 2021. Covid had also given rise to increased fraud attempts and phone scams.

Members reviewed the action plan attached to the Statement which covered partnership working, Business Continuity Planning and Commercial property Rents. These were all on-going issues which were monitored closely, mainly through the Corporate Management Committee, although the important role of Standards and Audit was also noted.

**RESOLVED that –**

**Corporate Management Committee be asked to recommend that the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council approve the Annual Governance Statement.**

30. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETHICAL STANDARDS – BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS – UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION**

The Committee received for information an update on how the Council was implementing the 15 best practice recommendations arising from the report issued by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in January 2019.

Members recalled that the most recent recommendation to be implemented was the introduction of a new Model Code of Conduct, adopted by the full Council in April 2021. This included a number of the other recommendations; for example, new provisions on bullying and harassment, a requirement on Councillors to comply with investigations about their conduct which were now subject to a public interest test included in the Council's Constitution. In place was an annual review of the Code of Conduct which was readily available to all parties. Related to the Code were gifts and hospitality. This procedure had been updated and was now available on the Council's website, appearing under each Councillor's profile which also included their declarations of interest. In this regard, Officers agreed to issue a reminder to all Councillors about the requirements for registering gifts and hospitality which now included a declaration of such that were not accepted. TIAA confirmed that an audit of gifts and hospitality arrangements was usually undertaken every three years.

The Committee was advised that owing to Covid the appointment of two Independent Persons had not yet been completed; plans were in hand to advertise when it was safe to conduct interviews face to face. The role of the Independent Persons was to be consulted when allegations were made in respect of a Councillor's conduct; specifically, to assess whether an allegation merited formal investigation or should be dismissed. With regard to such matters the Council had implemented the best practice recommendations to publish decisions made about conduct and to provide the public with straightforward and accessible guidance on how to make a complaint about a Councillor or co-opted Member. In addition, when the Council's new website went live, Officers were looking to create an interactive form to assist the public in making a complaint to the Monitoring Officer or his Deputy. Another recommendation regarding investigations was the provision to appoint another Monitoring Officer should a conflict of interest arise which was in place should the need arise.

The remaining recommendations related to other business of the Council. Members were advised that with regard to RBCI, RBCS and the RBC Heat Company, the recommendation had partly been complied with. Commercial Services had confirmed they would be content to publish their board agendas and minutes and annual reports in an accessible place subject to the redaction of commercially sensitive information.

The last recommendation had been complied with. Officers confirmed that the Chief Executive and other key senior staff met the Political Group Leaders every 4 weeks and Service Committee Chairmen on a monthly basis.

Officers were thanked for the detailed report and the Committee was content with all the progress that had been made.

### **31. COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS – QUARTER 4 2020/2021**

The Committee reviewed the 45 complaints and 54 compliments recorded centrally for Quarter 4 of 2020/2021 from 1 January to the end of March 2021. 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 23 complaints had been upheld or partly so, and some had been about the same issues which had now been rectified concerning software provided by third parties to the Council. This highlighted the importance of retaining control, particularly when it reflected on the public's perception of the Council as being the responsible party.

The Committee was advised that for the year the Council recorded a total of 118 complaints and 184 compliments. Of the 118 complaints, 43 were upheld or partly so with most being resolved satisfactorily without the need for the resident to progress their complaint to stage 2 and only a very small number approaching the Local Government Ombudsman.

Officers reported that careful scrutinising of complaints had taken place. This revealed that often issues arose as complaints which were then re-routed as service requests. The importance of Service requests was noted, because if not responded to they could become complaints which could have been avoided.

The Committee noted on-going work with Digital Services to make the new website less prone to people using the general complaints form when there was a more direct route to have their issue resolved, such as missed bins, abandoned vehicles and anti-social behaviour.

Members were informed that It was often the case, especially with Housing, that residents would lodge a complaint instead of or as well as going through the agreed appeal stages. However, lodging a complaint did not bypass the process and residents were advised to following the procedures, based in legislation and local policy which then align to the decisions made at each stage.

The Committee reviewed the 'lessons learned', noting that, in future, obtaining this sort of information would rely on being able to see the original complaints. This was being investigated in connection with the new website.

Members were pleased with the high number of compliments with some of the same individuals appearing on numerous occasions as set out in the Exempt Appendix. Reading the register entries, the importance of accurate and historic record keeping was highlighted. Officers confirmed that congratulations to individuals receiving compliments on behalf of the Committee was carried out after each meeting of the Committee.

In terms of Equalities the protected characteristics of age and disability were engaged, but there was no evidence to suggest any discrimination occurring.

At a previous meeting Officers were asked to research the possibility of publishing a league table of complaints and compliments. It was hoped to report findings to the next meeting of the Committee on 20 July 2021.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 8.35 pm)