

Runnymede Borough Council

STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

20 July 2021 at 7.30pm

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

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors D Anderson-Bassey (Vice-Chairman), L Gillham and M Kusneraitis

143 FIRE PRECAUTIONS

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

144 MINUTES

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

145 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L Gillham.

146 INTERNAL AUDIT SUMMARY INTERNAL CONTROLS ASSURANCE (SICA) REPORT 2021/2022

The Committee reviewed progress with the annual audit programme for 2021/2022.

Officers had given consideration to ways of working post lockdown, noting that a mixture of virtual, remote and face to face methods was the preferred model with only a 5% chance of a full return to pre-Covid, on-site delivery methods.

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 Procurement, Main Accounting and Commercial property, noting substantial assurance outcomes for the latter two service areas. A further audit on the Depot was the subject of a separate report on the agenda having received a limited assurance outcome, with one priority 1 recommendation. The planned audit for the Runnymede Travel Initiative had been cancelled, but should a service resume it would be reinstated.

In terms of progress against the plan, the Committee noted that fieldwork was in progress for Risk Management, Data Quality, Customer Services, and Sheltered Centres/Accommodation, whilst audits concerning HR Absence Management and Communications had been postponed, and which it was agreed would be monitored. A further audit on Key Revenue Controls had been brought forward from 2020/2021 and was due to commence in August 2021.

Members were advised that the briefings produced by TIAA, as described in the report, could be circulated on request.

147 INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT FOR OUTSTANDING RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee reviewed outstanding recommendations on a number of audits. Since the last meeting, 5 recommendations had been implemented, leaving just 3 still to be completed by auditees. Whilst the Committee noted revised implementation dates where relevant, it was considered important not to let these continue to be re-negotiated without an explanation being provided.

Members were pleased to see some progress with the completion of Data Protection and Safeguarding e-learning (this would be checked prior to the next scheduled meeting in September) and that privacy notices were nearing completion ready for when the Council's new website was due to go live.

148 **INTERNAL AUDIT ASSURANCE REPORT – DEPOT**

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

The audit covered health and safety, risk assessments, various performance, monitoring and control issues, including complaints handling, and value for money. TIAA had identified good practice with regard to service delivery being maintained fully throughout the Covid pandemic which was to be commended.

Officers explained that the audit outcome had been concluded as limited mainly owing to the delay between recommendations made in 2018 and still remaining outstanding as at July 2021. Notwithstanding, Members appreciated, there had been a change in staffing in that time and challenges presented by a lack of resources and a continuously demanding workload.

Officers asserted that they consulted staff regularly about change and service delivery and the rationale for the various ways in which the refuse and recycling rounds were organised and reviewed to account for more waste being collected, vehicular access issues and the need to have a balanced workload for the crews which did not exceed their 37 hours per week contracted hours, operating on a task and finish basis.

Officers stated that with regard to the recruitment freeze, implementing the actions presented unique challenges, particularly as the Depot currently had ¼ of its office staff as vacant positions or in the context of the work involved since the original report of 2018 the true figure was closer to 50% of the staff who should manage and supervise the day to day operations.

The Committee reviewed the management comments in the report, noting that a feasibility study with regard to the Depot's physical layout would be submitted to a future meeting of the Environment and Sustainability Committee. Improvements at the Depot were subject to funding being available as identified in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, but currently on hold, owing to the Council's financial position.

Officers confirmed that consideration of a separate risk register which TIAA had identified as a priority 1 recommendation was subject to the outcome of a comprehensive audit of health and safety arrangements generally at the Depot which had been completed and was ready for the next level of scrutiny. It was noted that an updated Procedures Manual covering DSO operations was completed in November 2020.

With regard to the acknowledged back log of training, once restrictions were fully lifted, this could be resumed; Covid had presented a number of practical issues, and it was stated that recruitment and retention was difficult, especially HGV drivers, whose particular skill sets were sought in an area of relatively low unemployment, resulting in more agency staff than was ideal, and on occasions, Supervisors having to step in to keep the service going, as a high proportion of the refuse loaders could not drive. However, despite daily challenges, the DSO Manager commended his staff for their hard work across the Depot and supported by the administrative staff at the Depot.

The Committee also wished to thank the Depot staff for their loyalty and commitment to one of the Council's most high profile services and looked forward to the risk register being finalised.

149 **COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS – QUARTER 1 2021/2022**

The Committee reviewed the 36 complaints and 19 compliments recorded centrally for Quarter 1 of 2021/2022 from 1 April to the end of June 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 8 complaints had been upheld or partly so, which Members considered was very positive in the context of the overall number of complaints which was relatively low.

Members noted a brief explanation of the types of complaint and their outcome. In terms of lessons learned Officers had identified the importance of being consistent in approach and ensuring that residents understood Council policies and why they were in place, whether for practical or legislative purposes.

Officers explained that there were 11 complaints that hadn't been resolved. Relevant Managers had been sent a reminder so that the register could be updated accordingly.

Members were pleased that staff had received more compliments than complaints, with many of the same teams appearing again from Community Development and it was positive to see a number of DSO staff getting praise from residents.

Officers reported that the only ward based pattern emerging in Quarter 1 were incidents of anti-social behaviour or complaints arising from the results of it in Addlestone North.

In terms of Equalities the protected characteristics of disability and race have been engaged but there was no evidence to suggest any discrimination occurring.

Since the last meeting, the Ombudsman had rephrased the way in which it likes public authorities to sign post people to their services if they are unhappy with how a complaint had been handled. The complaints policy and wording on the Council's website had been amended to reflect this.

The Committee was invited to supply Officers with any questions for the Ombudsman who was holding a webinar on complaint handling to accompany the issue of their annual reports to local authorities which would be reported to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee in September 2021.

150 COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS - LEAGUE TABLES

At the Committee's request Officers had undertaken some research into the merits of producing league tables for complaints and compliments. This involved a look at other councils and organisations. Officers had not found another council that published league tables. There were other types of organisation that did produce league tables but generally they were bodies such as the Police, utility companies or the consumer and/or regulatory led organisations that looked at their performance.

Members reviewed some of the advantages in league tables, which were around the core themes of measuring satisfaction, highlighting bad practice from which improvements could be made and preventing other issues of the same nature happening again. Officers reported that there was some support for league tables expressed by the Corporate Head of Housing in terms of transparency and accountability – which the Committee agreed were valid points and as a service with tenants and contractors this was important. However, it was noted that Housing received regular reports on complaints monitoring and it was agreed that duplication should be avoided.

Members noted where statutory reporting and investigations were required, particularly in Environmental Health, but that there was no legal requirement to report. Ombudsman outcomes were part of the Council's corporate performance indicators.

Members agreed that league tables had to have meaning and context, and concurred with the Officers' view that it would take a disproportionate amount of time to decide on meaningful categories both for complaints and compliments and considered it was more productive to highlight good practice that can be shared across the Council to improve service standards. The point was also made that if the Council produced league tables it would be doing so in isolation and that it might be of more benefit in the London boroughs. The Committee reviewed complaints and compliments at every meeting, noting it used only to be an annual exercise and with all agendas and Minutes for the last six years available on the Council's website, this was thought sufficient to demonstrate that the Council took these issues seriously and that complaint handling was an important role in which Members took a keen interest.

The Committee was also guided by matters issued by the Information Commissioner around data protection and potentially prejudicing legal proceedings but it was also relevant to consider some other things. For example, Safer Runnymede produced comprehensive data, and an assessment of Freedom of Information requests for the last two years showed that most enquiries relating to complaints were about statistics to do with noise complaints rather than the complaints themselves.

An issue was raised with regard to Housing and the role of the Housing Regulator and Officers agreed to provide those Members with further details which had been reported to the Housing Committee.

It was agreed not to produce league tables, but that the situation would be kept under review should there be a demand in the future.

RESOLVED that –

The Council does not publish a league table of complaints and compliments, but this be kept under review

151 BDO STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS

The Committee noted the annual BDO external audit report for the year ending 31 March 2020, which was almost completed.

Officers reported that no matters had come to their attention that necessitated modification of BDO's audit opinion on the Council's financial statements, which it was anticipated would be an unqualified outcome.

BDO highlighted two changes to their risk assessment, both as a result of Covid. These were an escalation of the risk relating to non-collection of receivables from normal to significant and a new risk identified around going concern reflecting the impact of Covid on the Council's finances. Implementation of the IFRS16 had been delayed to 2022/2022 so was no longer a material risk of misstatement.

The Committee was advised that an emphasis of matter was anticipated to be included in the audit opinion in respect of the valuation of land and buildings due to the material uncertainty included in the valuation report by the Council's valuer. A detailed note outlining the uncertainty was included in the financial statements accordingly.

BDO had not yet concluded their work on the Council's value for money arrangements and the Committee would receive a further report regarding this in due course.

The Committee's attention was drawn to the Executive Summary with regard to Final materiality, Material misstatements, Unadjusted audit differences and the Audit scope. These revealed BDO's group materiality level was set at £1.4m as a result of lower gross expenditure on the previous reporting period. In terms of misstatements, the value of other land and buildings had been overstated by £1.6m in the draft accounts due to a missed indexation adjustment for some operational properties including Egham Orbit. The group property, plant and equipment balance was overstated by £533,000 and the financial statements had been corrected accordingly. Although there were four unadjusted audit differences, there would be no impact on the general fund balance. The objective to ensure that BDO had obtained the required level of assurance across the components of the Group in accordance with ISA (UK) 600 had been achieved.

Members were pleased that BDO were content with the Council's financial reporting arrangements and asked for some clarification and detail with regard to debtors, which Officers confirmed were a mixture of individuals and businesses. It was noted that whilst repayment options could be phased it was a statutory duty to recover taxation related debts. The Council had also assisted local businesses by way of grants in the region of £20m, passported on the Government's behalf.

Officers provided a brief update on the Egham Gateway project which Members were assured was doing reasonably well in terms of lettings and completion.

BDO were thanked for their report and looked forward to a final report and for 2020/2021 in due course.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 8.41 pm)