

Runnymede Borough CouncilSTANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE21 September 2021 at 7.30pm

Members of the Committee Present: Councillors J Sohi (Chairman), M Adams, J Broadhead
R Edis, L Gillham, N King, M Kusneraitis and J Wilson

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors A Alderson and J Olorenshaw

221 Fire Precautions

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

222 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

The Group mentioned below had notified the Chief Executive of its wish that the change listed below be made to the membership of the Committee. The change was for a fixed period ending on the day after the meeting and thereafter the Councillor removed would be reappointed.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Remove</u>	<u>Appoint instead</u>
Conservative	Councillor D Anderson-Bassey	Councillor J Wilson

The Chief Executive had given effect to the change to Committee membership in accordance with section 16(2) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

223 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 20 July 2021 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

224 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Alderson and J Olorenshaw.

225 Summary Internal Controls Assurance (SICA) Report 2021/2022

The Committee noted progress with audits from the 2020/2021 programme, none had as yet been completed for 2021/2022. Three audits had been completed since the last meeting of the Committee for Procurement, Main Accounting and Commercial Property. Procurement had been given 5 recommendations, one of which was rated as priority 2. This was that buying managers should be reminded of the need to comply with the Council's Contract Standing Orders. TIAA reported some friction in this area between Procurement and some senior managers. TIAA observed that whilst rules had to be followed they should also meet client need.

In terms of 'root cause indicators' although it was still in the early stages of being assessed, Control Compliance appeared to be moving in a positive downwards direction.

Progress was being made with audits in the 2021/2022 plan. There was fieldwork in progress for Risk Management, Data Quality, Business Continuity, Customer Services, and Sheltered Centres/Accommodation. A draft report had been provided to Managers on Housing Health and Safety. Members were advised that a further 6 audits had been postponed at the request of the relevant managers; including Freedom of Information, Planning Enforcement and HR absence management. The Committee noted that the Runnymede Travel Initiative had been dropped from the plan until such time as a school transport was re-introduced.

Other work included a survey of TIAA's clients with regard to remote meetings of Audit Committees which concluded that 'post lockdown' virtual meetings were considered to be effective in terms of attendance, efficiency and engagement. It was confirmed that the Government was reviewing its earlier decision not to allow virtual meetings so this was useful feedback from TIAA.

Members were advised that the briefings produced by TIAA, as described in the report, could be circulated on request. One of the briefings required urgent action; this was with regard to NCSC (National Cyber Security Centre) Device Security Guidance to organisations recommending a 'health check' to demonstrate the holistic management of connected IT devices met current best practice. Another briefing advised that the Action Fraud Reporting Service would be replaced in April 2022 and was currently being tendered for by the City of London Police, further details would be available in due course.

226 **Internal Audit Progress Report for Outstanding Recommendations 2021/2022**

The Committee reviewed progress with the implementation of 4 outstanding recommendations made by TIAA with regard to GDPR Preparedness, Internal Communications, and Safeguarding.

Members were advised that GDPR checks on contracts and agreements had been delayed owing to Covid. However, no data protection issues had been discovered so far and work was due to be completed by the end of December 2021.

With regard to Internal Communications the Strategy review and preparation of guidance for staff on internal communications had not yet been undertaken owing to changes in staff and being diverted to the Covid response. However, a new staff intranet had gone live. This too had a new target date of 31 December 2021.

Members discussed the outstanding work to formally identify roles and responsibilities for departmental Safeguarding representatives. The Corporate Head of Community Development had been tasked with producing a Handbook for staff which was due for completion by the end of September 2021, subject to approval by the Council's Senior Leadership Team. During the debate, Officers were asked to request the Council's Corporate Leadership Team to remind staff of the need to complete all mandatory on-line training by the relevant deadlines and to ask HR to provide a list of mandatory training. Members felt that they would benefit from having access to the e-learning platform for councillors for the safeguarding course (and other courses). The Head of HR would be asked to arrange this. Officers were also asked to consider undertaking an assessment of councillor training needs to assist them in their role. Some Members gave examples of how training in safeguarding especially would be welcomed.

227 Verbal Report from the Section 151 Officer on the BDO Annual Statement for 2019/2020

The Assistant Chief Executive, in his capacity as the Council's Section 151 Officer, reported that BDO had not yet produced their final statement for 2019/2020. There were three outstanding areas; 'value for money conclusion', largely focussing on sustainability, completion of an internal review process on the Prior Period Adjustment in the Council's financial statements and completion of BDO's post balance sheet review processes. In addition, a new area had been identified as the need for an IT specialist to review BDO's work on the Council's IT systems. However, Officers questioned this because the Council's Digital Services had undergone significant changes in the last 18 months.

The Committee was very disappointed that BDO had not finished their final statement for 2019/2020 and did not support their request to renegotiate their fee upwards by a significant sum, as reported. It was acknowledged that a number of Councils were in the same position. Officers in Financial Services were thanked for their assistance to BDO who it was hoped would be in a position to present the final statement to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee in November 2021. Officers had been advised that the 2020/2021 audit was due to start after the 2019/2020 was signed off with a view to everything being completed by the end of the calendar year.

228 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Report 2020/2021

The Committee considered the annual report on matters dealt with by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman for the year ending 31 March 2021.

Officers advised that a separate register was kept for Ombudsman cases and it now included cases dealt with by the Housing Ombudsman, although Officers in Housing dealt with the day to day correspondence.

Members were advised that during the first 'lockdown' in March 2020, the Ombudsman suspended investigations but resumed again in June 2020 and were now more or less back to normal.

Officers confirmed that the Ombudsman had formalised its approach to complaints that were deemed out of time and the Council's website had been updated accordingly. Members agreed this increased transparency for residents and staff.

As in previous years, the Council received the Ombudsman's annual letter and headline statistics for Runnymede in July as appended to the report. Members noted a breakdown of complaints received and dealt with, including ward based statistics, which was consistent with the previous year, and comparative data with neighbours across Surrey was reviewed. Officers directed the Committee to the Ombudsman's website where anonymised decision notices could be viewed.

The Committee noted the general national message from the Ombudsman to 'get the basics right' in order to avoid complaints. For example, managing expectations through the pandemic and if adjustments were made to policies to communicate this clearly. Officers reported that the Ombudsman intended to publish a more detailed 'themes' focus report on complaints during Covid in due course.

The Ombudsman's report acknowledged the external pressures on local government and difficult decisions that had to be made with finite resources.

Officers stated that the Council had a statutory duty to report how many complaints had been upheld and for the year ending 31 March 2021 it was 1 out of 2 detailed investigations, with a total of 10 formal approaches to the Ombudsman, 8 of which were closed and not upheld. This was considered to be a very good result in the context of the Ombudsman receiving a total of 11,830 complaints and enquiries nationally which was an upward trend, as was the percentage of cases being upheld at 67%.

Officers also confirmed that it was statutorily required to notify the relevant Committee and residents if the Council became the subject of a public interest report. Members were pleased that to date, no such reports had been issued by the Ombudsman and only one improvement notice had been served on the Council since 2018. This concerned a recent decision on a Planning Enforcement case. Members expressed their disappointment with the circumstances of this where Officers had done all they could to resolve a complaint speedily.

Officers explained the process for dealing with the Ombudsman, often within tight timescales to produce the information requested. Members thanked Officers across the authority for ensuring a minimal number of Ombudsman complaints.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 8.15 pm)