

Runnymede Borough Council

STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

23 November 2021 at 7.30pm

Members of the Committee Present: Councillors J Sohi (Chairman), M Adams, J Broadhead  
L Gillham, C Howorth, N King and J Olorenshaw

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors A Alderson, R Edis and M Kusneraitis

**294 Fire Precautions**

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

**295 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 C Howorth

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.

**296 Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 22 September 2021 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**297 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Alderson and M Kusneraitis.

**298 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of Interest.

**299 Summary Internal Controls Assurance (SICA) Report 2021/2022**

The Committee noted progress with audits from the 2020/2021 programme. One audit had been completed as a follow up on the previous one regarding Housing Health and Safety. This was a 'reasonable' outcome with 3 priority 3, and 1 operational recommendations being made. Members were asked to note that this audit had given rise to an issue of Governance Framework but was not yet a cause for concern as only based on one audit.

TIAA had surveyed clients about the effectiveness of remote meetings, finding them to be a positive step. The Committee was advised that the Council had not lobbied

central Government about a return to remote meetings and that the Local Government Association sought evidence to justify a review. There were two schools of thought about virtual meetings. Firstly, that in person meetings demonstrated openness and visibility but on the other hand, with modern technology, webcasting made meetings more accessible to a wider audience. Members requested that feedback be given to the Local Government Association about the benefits of remote meetings, with a call to support primary legislation to facilitate this.

Members were concerned by the number of audits that some senior managers had requested be deferred to Quarter 4 of 2021/2022. It was considered that the pandemic might be unjustifiably cited as a reason to delay being audited in some cases, and the situation would be monitored.

The Committee was advised that any of the briefing notes issued by TIAA could be made available on request. One concerned VM Ware Vulnerabilities and Officers confirmed that this had been addressed in September when the notification was issued.

### 300 **Internal Audit Progress Report for Outstanding Recommendations 2021/2022**

The Committee reviewed progress with the implementation of six outstanding recommendations made by TIAA. Three concerned the Depot, where owing to other priorities, Officers had been unable to make any progress. Officers confirmed that other Depot matters, specifically the recruitment and retention of HGV drivers and a proposed change to working patterns to accompany a route optimisation programme were being addressed by the Environment and Sustainability Committee.

In respect of Housing Health and Safety, policies were coming forward which was pleasing, and the other two concerned Safeguarding. Members were disappointed that the Safeguarding recommendations had not been actioned. Officers confirmed that these were now being addressed as a priority by the Corporate Head who had assumed responsibility for that area following the departure of the previous Corporate Head. It was understood that an 'awayday' for the Council's Senior Leadership Team was soon to take place, at which such matters would be raised. Members queried the scope of the Safeguarding audit. This was confirmed as having the following three strands; roles and responsibilities, process where safeguarding concerns related to the conduct of Councillors and staff and their interaction with residents and policies and procedures for safe working practices, for example lone working.

Training for new Councillors was discussed in this regard and Officers agreed to consider the topic of personal safety being delivered by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Surrey Police and/or a similar organisation as part of the Induction programme. Officers would also check whether an email on the subject from Surrey Police could be disclosed to Councillors.

### 301 **Process for the Appointment of External Auditors 2023-2024**

The Committee's approval was sought to recommend that the Council took advantage of the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA), national framework scheme to procure and appoint external auditors for 2023/2024 when the current provider's contract reached the end of its term. The new contract would be for the period 2023/2024 to 2027/2028.

Officers advised that the audit landscape had changed since the last appointment, and the sector faced a number of challenges, brought to light in the Kingman Review commissioned by central Government, which amongst other things recommended the establishment of a new audit regulator, ARGA, to improve audit quality and performance.

There were a number of advantages to using the PSAA route which would make the process less onerous and had a better guarantee of appointing an appropriately registered, experienced and qualified auditor to fulfil its statutory obligations when auditing the Council's Statement of Accounts. This option, as opposed to conducting a local procurement exercise, would also ensure the appointed auditors, of which there were currently nine potential companies for local authorities, were suitably independent and would minimise costs by pooling resources on behalf of participating authorities. Bidders would be required to meet quality standards as stipulated by the PSAA and put forward realistic prices tailored to the authority they chose to bid for under the framework.

The PSAA would commence the formal procurement exercise in early February 2022 and expected to award contracts in August 2022 and then consult with local authorities on the appointment of auditors so that appointments could be made by the statutory deadline of 31 December 2022.

Officers confirmed that since the last report, unfortunately BDO had not yet finalised the accounts audit for 2019/2020. They had to be reviewed by a senior partner to conclude the value for money assessment. This being the case, the issue of the auditor's fee would need to be picked up by the new Assistant Chief Executive in order to conclude the 2019/2020 external audit of the Council's Statement of accounts and to report back to the Committee if any increase in fee was to be recommended for approval by Corporate Management Committee. Officers confirmed there was a full audit trail to evidence future discussions and with the PSAA should arbitration be necessary. In any event it was likely that the fee would be increased in future and could be backdated once a resolution was found.

The Committee fully agreed with the proposed way forward, noting the legal and resource implications.

**RECOMMEND to Full Council on 9 December 2021 that –**

**the Council wishes to opt in to the Public Sector Audit Appointments (PSAA) national auditor appointment scheme**

### 302 **Changes to the LGA Model Code of Conduct**

The Committee's approval was sought to recommend adoption of an amended Model Code of Conduct for elected Councillors and co-opted Members following an update from the Local Government Association (LGA).

The Committee recalled that the new Model Code of Conduct was adopted in April 2021, new declarations of interest forms had been produced and the website updated accordingly. However, in September 2021, the LGA wrote to local councils to advise some errors and omissions had been identified in the version the LGA had circulated in late 2020 which were duly noted, recognising that the Code was a living document.

Members reviewed the proposed changes, some of which were minor typos, others more significant, such as the move of unpaid directorships from the employment box to become an 'other registrable interest'. Members were advised that one matter was still outstanding which might necessitate re-adoption if a further amendment was needed once the LGA had clarified the matter of whether ordinary membership of a body covered by 'other registrable interests' had to be declared or not.

The Committee agreed that rather than ask Councillors to complete a new form, Officers would make the necessary changes and bring them to Members' attention for their confirmation that the details were correctly recorded, subject to adoption of the updated code by full Council in December 2021.

At the same time as notifying local authorities about changes to the Model Code of Conduct, Monitoring Officers were asked for their opinion on how training should be delivered to elected Councillors about the Code. Officers had responded that a mixture of e-learning and 'train the trainer' were the preferred options, being cost effective and more likely to be attended.

With regard to reviewing the Code, Members agreed that it would be sensible to conduct such a review early in the new year so that any re-adoption could take place at the same time as that of the Council's Constitution.

Officers would as part of the review, survey Councillors, and report findings back to the LGA for their review, to include comments about the complications of multiple agencies' requirements to declare interests as discussed at the meeting.

Finally, Officers had confirmed that Runnymede had adopted the Model Code in full. Hence, for example, taking on board the substantive change to the wording with regard to how Members with an interest should proceed in matters of Executive decisions, for the sake of completeness although it did not apply to Runnymede which operated a Committee structure and decision making process.

**RECOMMEND to Full Council on 9 December 2021 that –**

- i) the revised model code of conduct be recommended for adoption; and**
- ii) approval is given to the Corporate Head of Law and Governance to amend as necessary the Declarations of Interest forms (paper and electronic versions), completed by elected Members and co-opted Members, to reflect the changes to the Model Code of Conduct**

**303 Complaints and Compliments Quarter 2, 2021/2022**

The Committee received for information a report summarising the 19 complaints and 30 compliments recorded centrally for Quarter 2 of 2021/2022.

Members were pleased at the level of compliments and the low number of complaints that had been upheld (8), noting that a number of those upheld had also involved contractors.

The Committee appreciated the section of the report on lessons that could be learned from some of the complaints that were upheld. For example, the importance

of having a deputy to deal with complaints, including outstanding issues in handover notes and to avoid delays, reviewing how complaints were routed, if not received directly by the relevant Officer. The importance of proper service level agreements with contractors was also noted.

Officers confirmed that the staff and teams who received compliments would be personally thanked via email on behalf of the Committee, as had become established practice.

The Committee reviewed the breakdown of results by Business Centre and Ward, with compliments there were a number from visitors to the borough about parks and open spaces and Chertsey Museum as well as those making enquiries about cemetery records.

Officers highlighted an update to the registers to allow for equalities issues to be easily identified and to encourage monitoring of this data, whilst complying with Data Protection legislation regarding 'special data.'

In closing the meeting, the Assistant Chief Executive, was thanked for his service to the Council as he would be retiring at the end of December 2021.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 8.30 pm)