

Runnymede Borough Council**Standards and Audit Committee****Tuesday, 20 September 2022 at 7.30 pm**

Members of the Committee present: Councillors M Nuti (Chairman), J Broadhead (Vice-Chairman), D Cotty, L Gillham, J Hulley, J Olorenshaw, S Ringham and S Williams.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors A Berardi and S Walsh.

196 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 25 May 2022 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

197 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors A Berardi and S Walsh.

198 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest to record.

199 Summary Internal Controls Assurance (SICA) Report 2021/2022 and 2022/2023

The Committee received for information, details of the progress against the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 audit programme.

From the 2021/2022 plan most audits had been completed, with 6 audits at draft stage, but which TIAA were confident would reach final report stage shortly.

Members were assured that the audits cancelled from the 2021/2022 plan would be picked in the current year's programme where good progress had already been made, with 8 audits at the fieldwork in progress stage, including HR Absence Management, Commercial Property, Commercial Rents, Housing Allocations and Homelessness, Governance (Gifts and Hospitality), Data Protection, Housing Health and Safety and Car Parking.

The Committee also reviewed priority 2 recommendations in respect of Planning Enforcement and Risk Management. The latest list of Client Briefing Notes was also brought to the Committee's attention, which could be circulated on request.

Members took the opportunity to enquire whether the Council's external auditors were in a position to sign off the 2019/2020 Statement of Accounts. Officers confirmed that owing to their resources, they were not. The Assistant Chief Executive reported that she would be following this up with BDOs Head of Public Sector Assurance.

TIAA's Officer confirmed that a number of the audits planned for 2022/2023 were being brought forward to ensure they did not fall behind with completing the programme. One issue TIAA had identified was the current staff turnover at the Council. For example if an Officer left who was responsible for implementing recommendations or who was the main contact for their audit, there was a delay in it being picked up by someone else.

Members were advised that an additional 6 days was required for the HR Absence Management Audit. The Committee thanked TIAA's Officers for their work.

200 Internal Audit Progress Report for Outstanding Recommendations

The Committee noted progress with the implementation of outstanding recommendations from previous audits.

Members learned that 6 further recommendations had been completed since the last meeting, 8 were outstanding still, 4 of them in relation to the Depot. Members were very keen to see some progress with the Depot given that the recommendations had been first made some years ago and were all important issues for this high risk operation. TIAA's Officers hoped for some engagement by senior management and anticipated submitting a report to the next meeting of the Committee. Members were cautioned that if no progress was made, the audit could again be of limited assurance. The difficulty of recruiting HGV drivers was noted. Officers advised that recent successful recruitment to key posts, physical improvements being made to the Depot and the forthcoming transfer of staff internally and through TUPE regarding grounds maintenance, some positive outcomes were expected. In addition, the appointment of a HR Business Partner with specific responsibility for the Depot (amongst other departments) and a Retention and Recruitment Manager within HR were both helpful.

The outstanding recommendations with regard to ICT and Procurement were being pursued.

201 Internal Audit Annual Assurance Report

TIAA's Officers presented their Annual Assurance Report for 2021/2022 with apologies for the delay in submission. This was due to various resourcing issues and engagement with auditees.

TIAA had referred in their annual audit opinion to the delay in 2019/2020 Statement of Accounts being signed off and the risk that presented to the Control Framework. However, it was stressed this was not a reflection on the accounts themselves but was owing to a lack of auditor staff resource in BDO. The recruitment and retention of auditors was a national problem, acknowledged by all parties.

TIAA reported a positive audit opinion, and satisfied that the Council's risk management control and governance arrangements were adequate to justify his opinion.

In 2021/2022, 184 audit days had been approved which converted to an actual of 158 days, owing to the cancellation of 5 audits and the audit on Housing Section 106 and CIL taking 10 days instead of the planned for 6 days. These produced 11 substantial assurance audits, and 9 of reasonable assurance. There were 14 important and 26 routine recommendations made during the year, and no urgent recommendations. There were 12 operational effectiveness opportunities identified.

In terms of Performance and Quality Assurance, only one of the targets had not attained 100%; this was the final report being issued within 10 working days of receipt, which was 95%.

Members noted a detailed breakdown of attainment for all the audits in the 2021/2022 plan.

The Committee thanked TIAA for their work over the year who in turn thanked Council staff for their input and co-operation.

202 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Report 2021/2022

The Committee noted receipt of the annual letter and review for the year ending 31 March 2022 from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The Committee agreed this was a positive report, with the Council comparing favourably and consistently with its peers in Surrey. A new column had been added regarding service improvement notices. A total of 8 complaints and enquiries had been made of the Ombudsman, plus 6 by the Housing Ombudsman. No complaints to the Ombudsman had been upheld, and one was upheld as a case of maladministration and injustice by the Housing Ombudsman. In this case Members noted that it had three strands, one of which was upheld and the Council asked to pay additional compensation to that already paid when being dealt with at Council level.

Officers confirmed that 9 decisions had been issued, as one was a complaint received by them in July 2020, but the notice was not published until April 2021. There were 6 Housing cases, and one each for Benefits/Tax, Environmental Services and Public Protection Regulation and Planning.

The Council's Link Officer with the Ombudsman within Democratic Services continued to have good assistance with Officers dealing with these enquiries and maintained a separate register to keep track on cases and check against the statistics issued by the Ombudsman.

The Committee was advised that the Ombudsman was working on a joint handling protocol with the Housing Ombudsman to introduce more consistency and a clear message for complainants.

In terms of general feedback nationwide, the Ombudsman reported an increasing number of Council who were late complying with recommendations. Runnymede was not amongst these, having achieved a 100% compliance rate.

It was confirmed that the Housing cases mainly concerned quality of the housing stock, in all but one case not upheld. The Committee noted that a compensation policy was being considered by the Housing Committee, acknowledging that this was a key risk. Understanding the nature of complaints was important, noting that case details (anonymised) were available on the Ombudsman's website and sent to relevant Officers.

Officers confirmed that the Council fulfilled its statutory duty under section 5(2) of the Local Government and Housing Act, by reporting on Ombudsman cases and outcomes, including if any public interest reports had been issued in respect of the Council. There had been none issued in the last nine years.

Officers were thanked for their report, reflecting the positive position of the Council.

203 **Complaints and Compliments Quarter 1 2022/2023**

The Committee noted the statistics and summarised information with regard to complaints and compliments from Quarter 1 2022/2023.

Officers reported 27 complaints and 24 compliments were included on the registers. 10 complaints had been upheld or partly so, 9 not upheld, 7 were overdue and 1 still in progress.

Although there had been 16 complaints about Housing which was higher than usual, those that were upheld (10) had been satisfactorily resolved.

Some complaints related to the delay in dealing with service requests. Customer Services had introduced a case management system to try and address this and included staff in Democratic Services so that the register was accurate and timely reminders could be issued. Members did note that resources were stretched with many conflicting priorities.

Members were pleased to learn that Housing had also received the highest number of compliments in Quarter 1, some of which were shared with the Home Improvement Agency

in Community Services, showing good collaborative working across departments for some of the more vulnerable members of the community.

Where individuals and teams were named in compliments the letters and certificates had been sent out in July when the report would have been considered by the Committee meeting that was cancelled. These had produced positive feedback from recipients.

In closing the meeting, the Chairman asked that the training slides from the session before the meeting took place be circulated to the Committee.

204 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

There was no discussion with regard to the Exempt Appendix to item 8

(The meeting ended at 8.25 pm.)

Chairman