Runnymede Borough Council

Standards and Audit Committee

Tuesday, 18 July 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present:	Councillors J Hulley (Chairman), M Cressey (Vice-Chairman), A Balkan (In place of S Walsh), S Jenkins, J Mavi, M Singh, S Whyte, S Williams and J Wilson.
Members of the Committee absent:	Councillor S Dennett.

16 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 24 May 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

17 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Dennett.

18 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

19 **External Audit Update**

A verbal update from the Council's external auditors, BDO LLP, was noted.

The Committee was informed that in line with the previously reported expectations, finalising the audit of the 2019/2020 financial statement of accounts was still in progress.

It was confirmed that the outstanding work was still regarding the Council's acquisition of investment assets which it was estimated would take between 4 and 6 weeks to complete with final sign off for the accounts taking a little longer.

Members expressed their disappointment with this news. It was agreed that if further slippage was likely beyond the anticipated October 2023 completion date for the 2019/2020 External Audit, the Committee would be advised prior to the next scheduled meeting in October.

The DLUHC had, that afternoon, issued proposals with regard to the future conduct of external audits and posed options to simplify and streamline the process as well as how best to deal with the backlog that a significant number of other local authorities were experiencing. Officers would be in a position to present details of the proposals and any new regulations and guidance subsequently issued with regard to completion of External Audits to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee in October. It was anticipated that the audit code of practice would be updated in December 2023.

The Committee was informed that it was unlikely that the audits for 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 could be produced in tandem, they would have to be done sequentially to comply with the existing auditing standards. BDO stated that they had resources in place to start the 2020/2021 audit in the early part of 2024 and intended to complete both of the remaining audits, for 2021/22 and 2022/23, during 2025. However, this was subject to the emerging guidance. Whilst accepting this, Members were concerned about public perception and uncertainty caused by the continued delay.

It was noted that as the acquisitions in question still appeared in the opening and closing balances for 2022/2023; that any issues, if there were any, would still be reported and the responsibility for giving an opinion on Value for Money and Financial Sustainability remained relevant.

The Committee did not want to entertain the prospect of qualified audits; particularly if the Council had provided all sufficient and appropriate information requested by the external auditors in line with the guidance on disclaimers. Officers would work closely with the external auditors to meet the necessary deadlines.

Officers from BDO were asked to provide a written report (rather than a verbal update) in advance for future meetings, if at all possible. This would enable Members to consider questions to ask in advance of the meeting.

RBC Officers confirmed that the statutory notice regarding the closure of the 2022/2023 statement of accounts had been issued, noting that only 30% of local authorities had met the publication deadline. The return to the pre-covid deadline of the end of May had not been achieved owing to a number of challenges. For Runnymede, there were three issues to be resolved before the draft accounts for 2022/23 could be published. These were: a minor accounting adjustment between the Housing Revenue Account and General Fund which needed to be resolved, updating for the transfers to reserves as recommended to a recent meeting of the Corporate Management Committee, and the Group accounts, which brought together all the accounts of the Council's subsidiary companies, comments on which were awaited from the Companies' accountants CSL. Officers were confident these would all be resolved shortly so that a draft statement could be published at the end of August 2023.

Officers were thanked for their update which was duly noted.

20 Internal Audit Summary Internal Controls (SICA) Report 2023/24

The Committee noted the Internal Audit Summary Internal Controls (SICA) report produced by TIAA.

Officers reported good and positive progress with the audit programme. Two further audits had been finalised since the last meeting. These were for Housing Allocations and Homelessness and Key Revenues Controls. Two ICT audits had been given reasonable assurance and the 7 priority 2 recommendations were noted, most of which had already been implemented. This completed the audit programme for 2021/2022, leaving just one ICT related audit to sign off the programme for 2022/2023 which would be reported to the next meeting. In terms of the 2023/2024 programme, TIAA would soon have draft reports for Corporate Governance and Housing Repair and Maintenance and would shortly be commencing audits on Recruitment, Data Quality and the follow up Depot audit. Procurement and Contracts was delayed until November whilst new staff settled in.

Officers confirmed that although there was one root cause indicator (Control Compliance) which indicated risk, this was only based on one audit and would be monitored in consultation with the Assistant Chief Executive/Section 151 Officer. It was noted that Client Briefing Notes on Procurement and Fraud could be made available on request.

Officers confirmed that a previous action to include prioritisation of audits in the programme had been implemented and would be included in the next SICA report for the next scheduled meeting in October 2023.

TIAA were thanked for the report which was duly noted.

21 Internal Audit Progress Report on Outstanding Recommendations

The Committee received for information an update on outstanding recommendations from previous audits. Again, good progress had been made; 6 having been implemented leaving just 2 outstanding.

The Assistant Chief Executive/Section 151 Officer was asked to confirm with the Corporate Head of Housing whether the implementation date of 31 July 2023 would be met with regard to the Independent Retirement Living audit recommendation.

The Corporate Head of Law and Governance was confident that the recommendation regarding Information Governance could be completed by the end of August. This covered compliance with Data Protection, control and management of Information across the organisation. Timely completion depended on Officers from other Business Centres updating their records and reporting back accordingly. It was noted that 23 out of the 26 Information Asset Registers had been completed.

TIAA were thanked for the report which was duly noted.

22 Complaints and Compliments Quarter 1 2023/24

The Committee noted statistics with regard to complaints and compliments recording in the corporate registers for this purpose for Quarter 1 of 2023/2024.

Officers reported a spike in complaints (38) mainly across areas of Environmental Services. As a front-line, high-profile service, this was not unusual in itself and Officers had made very good progress in reducing the backlog that had built up over the reporting period and return to a more representative picture.

Members asked what the causes were of these complaints and it was confirmed that the majority were service requests that had escalated. However, communications were improving and more information was being added to the website, including a new ‘report it’ function for Grounds Maintenance which also had a link to the County Council’s website to report Highways and other matters under their remit as opposed to the Borough Council. Customer Services had also devised a new logging system for complaints made over the telephone so these now have a complete audit trail.

Officers provided an update to the written report that of the 38 complaints, 15 were upheld, 6 partly upheld, 5 not upheld and a further 3 were in progress. Where complaints were partly upheld it was mainly due to a delay in communicating with the customer. In many cases the work had been done but there had been a failure to close the loop to update the corporate records.

The backlog of 23 complaints outstanding had been reduced to 9 following a meeting with relevant staff and a subsequent a re-allocation of named Officers dealing with those complaints now with access to the Corporate registers. It was reported that some of the overdue complaints were not with the Depot or Green Spaces; one was with Assets, another a Housing contractor and another Tenancy Management.

The Committee was advised that it was planned to move forward with a new central database (CRM) hosted by Customer Services and Officers would be working closely with them with access to that database in order to keep records accurate and up to date.

As with the current system in Customer Services, managed via Jadu software which managed the Council’s external website, a chaser to the relevant staff would be automatically generated a few days before a complaint hit the response deadline of ten working days instead of being done manually.

The Committee noted that whilst the Council did not have a corporate complaints team the role was largely spread across departments with a network of Officers co-ordinating responses with access to the corporate register.

With regard to compliments, there were 18 at the time of writing the report; the same person in Housing received 2 compliments along with other colleagues who had helped re-house people. Members were pleased to note that a compliment which came in after writing the report was for Grounds Maintenance with some positive feedback about St Jude's Cemetery.

Officers had actioned the request made at the last meeting to publicise compliments on the Council's social media platforms via Communications. This had started from June onwards, but only publishing where individuals had given their explicit consent.
This meant that for the next reporting period (July – September), if people had given consent they could be included in the public part of the agenda and anonymised where they had not or there were no named individuals. Members were content with the proposal to in future send certificates out as and when they occurred to avoid a delay and streamline the process by asking for their consent regarding social media publication when the certificates were issued on behalf of the Committee.

Officers were asked to consider providing more detail on complaints received where possible to identify trends and where lessons could be learned. However, it was explained that Officers were reliant on the level of detail provided by other departments and whether this could be presented in such a way that individuals would not be identifiable. Nevertheless, Officers would attempt to do this to assist the Committee in appreciating the types of issues that arose and any underlying causes which Corporate Heads could report.

Officers were thanked for their report which was duly noted.

23 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

By resolution of the Committee, for the reasons set out in the agenda, the press and public were excluded from the remainder of the meeting during the consideration of the remaining matters under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as set out in Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

24 **Exempt Appendix A to item 8**

The contents of the exempt appendix and an update given at the meeting were noted.

Officers confirmed that they would send certificates to recipients of compliments in Quarter 1 2023/2024.

The Committee was content with the proposal to streamline the process and make it more timely. To do this, certificates would be issued as and when they were registered on the Corporate Register instead of waiting until the end of the quarter and when sending them to relevant staff they would at the same time be asked for their consent to publish their name(s) where applicable. This would fit in with the publicising of compliments on social media where any necessary consents had been obtained.

It was noted that if the compliments would then be in the public domain it would not be necessary to present this in an exempt appendix unless consent had not been obtained.

(The meeting ended at 8.24 pm.) Chairman