

Runnymede Borough CouncilStandards and Audit CommitteeTuesday, 21 November 2023 at 7.30 pm

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

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors S Walsh and J Wilson.

In attendance: Councillors L Gillham.

35 **Notification of Changes to Committee Membership**

To record that Councillor J Wilson was substituted by Councillor A Balkan.

36 **Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 October 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

37 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Walsh.

38 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor M Singh withdrew from the meeting for item 13 on the agenda, concerning the provision of Internal Audit.

39 **Summary Internal Controls Assurance (SICA) Report**

The Committee noted the most recent Summary Internal Controls Assurance Report produced by TIAA. The meeting was attended by a new Audit Director, Labi Agbaje, and thanks were extended to Chris Harris for his time working with the Council over many years.

Members were advised that three audits had been completed since the last meeting, and the full reports were included, two in the supplementary agenda and the other as a separate item on the agenda.

The completed audits were for HR Recruitment, Housing Repairs and Maintenance and Corporate Governance, none of which had resulted in any recommendations being made.

Three audits were in progress for Data Quality, the follow up audit on the Depot and Meals at Home. In addition audits on Safeguarding and Commercial Property were expected to commence very shortly.

The report was duly noted.

40 **Internal Audit Progress Report for Outstanding Recommendations**

The Committee noted progress with outstanding recommendations from previous audits.

Members were advised that at the time of writing the report 2 recommendations had been implemented since the last meeting. However, it was confirmed that the Depot had now implemented their outstanding recommendations with regard to Data Protection and Information Governance, as had Digital Services and Development Control.

Officers stated that the exercise to review the Corporate Retention and Disposal Schedule was a much bigger task involving every business centre reviewing all their records and then reporting back to the Information Governance Officer. A revised target date of 31 January 2024 had been agreed.

The report was duly noted.

41 **Internal Audit Assurance Review of Governance**

The Committee was asked to note TIAA's full audit on Corporate Governance.

As this audit had involved gathering the thoughts of a selection of Councillors it was of particular interest to the Committee.

Officers reported that the result of the audit was a Substantial Assurance, and that the documentation of the Corporate Governance process and policies were found to be effective and efficient and reflected the current process as the Council's Constitution had been recently updated. No recommendations were made for service improvement.

Officers highlighted areas of good practice. For example, the existence of the Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee, an appointed Monitoring Officer and training related to Corporate Governance.

Members noted that the scope of the audit involved a review of the Constitution and Standing Orders, an examination of the reporting framework and decision making as well as an assessment of its openness and transparency, and record keeping.

The Committee discussed some of the comments made by the Councillors approached by TIAA in their section on 'other findings' and the responses made by the Monitoring Officer.

There was some disappointment that web-streaming had been put on hold as it was thought this would contribute to openness and transparency, as would longer and more detailed Minutes of meetings. Other Members felt that decision making would be assisted by earlier sight of agenda reports and fewer late items. The management response had indicated that webstreaming was currently not financially feasible, and that meetings in person were accessible by the disabled. It was questioned whether the public would be interested in webstreamed meetings. With regard to Minutes it was re-iterated that the Minutes were a summary of the proceedings rather than a verbatim record. The Minutes were the official public record whereas a recording was not.

Officers considered that the facility to defer an item rather than make a decision was an option open to Members but that an element of risk was possible if the decision was time critical with resource implications.

Some Members considered that the feedback from Councillors had not been given due weight and that only asking a sample of 8 out of 41 with only 4 responding was disappointing. It was agreed that when future audits were conducted which involved surveying Councillors TIAA should invite all Councillors to contribute and that in future audits TIAA were asked to include a statement about their independence to demonstrate their fairness and transparency.

In response to queries about where information was located, as currently it appeared in different places, Officers were asked to consider running another training session for Councillors on where information could be accessed across Teams/Modern.Gov/Intranet/Extranet/Website.

The Committee was also encouraged to raise concerns, issues and suggestions through the relevant Member Working Parties such as the Service Reviews and Constitution.

The report was duly noted.

42 **Risk Appetite Statement 2023 - 2024**

The Committee was asked to review the draft Risk Appetite Statement and statements for each category of risk and make a recommendation for their approval by full Council in December 2023.

Officers confirmed that a report regarding the Risk Register would be submitted to the next scheduled meeting in January 2024.

The Committee was invited to 'workshop' the 13 categories of risk and the proposed appetite rating and narrative for each. Officers confirmed that the Government's Orange Book: Management of Risk – Principles and Concepts had been used to identify the risk categories and definitions.

The next step prior to submitting the report for the Committee's consideration was to evaluate each risk and the degree of caution or openness thereto by canvassing the Council's Corporate and Senior Leadership Teams and Service Chairs. There were five categories where a consensus between the two groups had been reached. These were in respect of Strategy, Governance, Legal and Security, where a 'cautious' position had been agreed, and Operations where an 'open' approach had been supported. However, in the remaining eight categories no consensus had been reached. These were Property, Financial, Commercial, People, Technology, Data and Information Management, Project/Programme and Reputational risk. Officers reported that Member consultees had tended to be more 'open' to risk, whereas Officers had tended to be more on the 'cautious' side. The exception to this was in respect of Data and Information Management where the Officer cohort was more 'open'.

Members were advised that risk levels were on a continuum, and that as they would be reviewed annually there was also flexibility to change in response to circumstances where the Council sat in relation to its attitude and appetite for risk.

Members carefully debated each risk category and were asked to choose which level of risk appetite to recommend for approval by full Council. The results were as set out below:

Risk Category	Outcome
Strategy	Cautious
Governance	Cautious
Operations	Open
Legal	Cautious
Property	Cautious
Financial	Cautious
Commercial	No consensus on Cautious or Open
People	Open
Technology	Open
Data and Information Management	Cautious
Security	Cautious

Project/Programme	Cautious
Reputational	Cautious

Members found some risk categories to generate more debate, but generally the Committee erred on the side of caution in the current climate, but with the option of welcoming innovation where appropriate, particularly in the field of People and Technology.

Members were unable to decide whether to opt for Cautious or Open for Commercial risks but were moving towards Cautious to Open.

In the reference to full Council, Officers agreed to reword the boxes relating to Governance and Financial and include broader examples to assist Members' decision making.

Recommend to full Council on 7 December 2023 that –

the overarching Risk Appetite Statement for 2025/25 and supporting risk appetite statements for each risk category be agreed

43 **Ombudsman Joint Complaint Handling Code - Consultation**

The Committee's approval was sought to submit a response to the Local Government Ombudsman's public consultation on a new joint complaint handling code for the Local Government and Housing Ombudsmen which closed on 23 November 2023.

Officers reported that the reason for making a new statutory code was to encourage councils to resolve complaints as soon as possible so that people did not feel the need to escalate them to the Ombudsman.

The code was attached to the report and Officers considered that it gave a clear way forward of future expectations and requirements.

Officers advised that for the first time there would be a statutory definition of complaints and service requests. These were wider definitions and would capture more interactions with the public. Officers confirmed that it was likely that many things that were treated as complaints would in future be classed as service requests. Councillor Enquiries would also be included in the data to be recorded.

Members acknowledged that the Council's corporate complaints policy would have to be amended in some ways to meet the new code and Officers had drafted answers into the new annual self assessment as if it were in place now to illustrate some of the things Officers across business centres would need to do subject to the new code not being changed post consultation.

Members noted that colleagues in Housing had responded to similar questions for social landlords and had highlighted the need for clear guidance and examples to help local authorities comply with the new code.

Members were informed that Equalities considerations played an important part of the new code including the anticipation of making adjustments to help those who need them to resolve their complaint.

When the new code is issued Officers assured the Committee that business centres would continue the process of complying with the more formal framework including the use of template letters for consistency across the Council. This was also something being looked at by Officers leading the corporate service review of complaints who would assess the potential resource implications. It was confirmed that additional resources if necessary,

would have to be funded by the Council.

Officers advised there was a significant amount of work to be done should the new code be approved. As a small authority, with no complaints team this would have operational implications across the Council, and especially for those directly involved with dealing with complaints and those making preparations for the enhanced reporting requirements.

The Committee welcomed the benefits of having the new code and approved the draft response to the consultation, noting that if it was approved it would be statutory from 1 April 2024 and guidance would be issued to help ensure compliance with it by 1 April 2025.

Resolved that –

the corporate response to the Ombudsman’s consultation on a new joint complaint handling code for the Local Government and Social Care and Housing Ombudsmen be approved

44 **Complaints and Compliments Quarter 2 2023/24**

The Committee noted the statistics for complaints and compliments for Quarter 2 of 2023/24.

The Committee was advised that the corporate registers recorded 54 complaints and 29 compliments for the period July to September 2023. Officers reported an upturn in housing related complaints, although only six of them were upheld and remedies were made to systems and training. With regard to the contractors satisfactory steps had been taken to improve the situation.

Members were advised that in anticipation of the new code described in the previous report, Officers had stopped using the term ‘partly upheld’. Therefore, where any element of a complaint was upheld, it counted as upheld. However, as suggested by the new code, a column had been added to the corporate register so that a breakdown could be provided to explain which elements were upheld.

Officers confirmed that in respect of the ward breakdown, Egham Hythe and Chertsey St Ann’s got slightly more complaints, mainly regarding housing and grounds maintenance. It was the case that ward related to where residents lived, not necessarily where the complaint was about.

Officers were asked to provide some details of and confirm progress with resolution of the complaints assigned to Assets and Regeneration.

In respect of compliments, Officers advised that as Environmental Services attracted the most complaints they also got the most compliments which was mainly attributable to the new grounds maintenance service turning things around and a few notable individuals and crews in refuse and recycling.

The exempt appendix was noted. Officers had hoped to move this information into the public part of the agenda but this was not possible. The Committee was disappointed that the majority of staff when asked had not wanted their names in the public domain.

Officers reported that since the last meeting the scoping element of the service review of complaints has almost been signed off and good progress was being made.

Officers were thanked for their report which was duly noted.

45 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

Resolved that –

the press and public be excluded from the meeting during discussion of the following report under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the report in question would be likely to involve disclosure exempt information of the description specified in paragraphs 1 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

46 **Exempt Appendix 'A' to Complaints and Compliments Quarter 2 2023/24**

The Contents of the Exempt Appendix were noted and Officers confirmed that certificates to staff receiving compliments were now sent out on a weekly basis.

47 **Future Provision of Internal Audit Services**

The Committee's approval was sought to recommend a proposed way forward for the provision of the Council's Internal Audit service.

Officers reported that a number of options had been considered but that the one being recommended represented the best value for money and resilience in terms of resourcing.

Before the formal meeting of the Standards and Audit Committee, Members attended an informal on-line briefing from the organisation mentioned in the report. This had been arranged at short notice at the request of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee because the organisation was unable to attend in person.

Unfortunately, there was insufficient time to receive the full presentation nor an opportunity for all the Committee to ask questions regarding the proposal, a number of which would have been addressed to the organisation. Therefore, the Committee did not consider it possible to recommend that the proposal be approved by Corporate Management Committee which was meeting later that week.

Officers would prepare a reference for Corporate Management Committee and report verbally on the debate given the lack of time between the two meetings.

Officers agreed to arrange a special meeting of Standards and Audit Committee as a matter of urgency and invite the organisation mentioned in the report to give a presentation and answer any questions that Members had with regard to the proposal.

The Committee would then be able to make a recommendation to the meeting of Corporate Management Committee in December which would still allow time for arrangements to be put in place before the current contract expired.

Recommend to Corporate Management Committee that -

the decision to enter into a partnership with the organisation named in the report be deferred to allow Members of the Standards and Audit Committee to hold a special meeting to receive a presentation from the Head of that organisation to enable the Standards and Audit Committee to fully understand the proposal and make a measured recommendation to Corporate Management Committee on 14 December 2023.

(The meeting ended at 10.32 pm.)

Chairman