

Runnymede Borough Council

Standards and Audit Committee

Tuesday, 23 January 2024 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Hulley (Chair), M D Cressey (Vice-Chair), D Clarke (In place of J Mavi), S Dennett, C Howorth (In place of J Wilson), S Jenkins, M Singh, S Whyte and S Williams.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor S Walsh.

53 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

Councillor D Clarke substituted for Councillor J Mavi and Councillor C Howorth substituted for Councillor J Wilson.

54 Minutes

The Minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 21 November 2023 and 4 December 2023 were confirmed and signed as correct records.

Members sought an update on two matters referred to in those Minutes. Officers confirmed that the draft Statement of Accounts for 2022/2023 would be published on the Council’s website in the next few days following the meeting. With regard to the alleged breach of the Code of Conduct by an elected Member, Officers confirmed that an external investigation was imminent as instructions to the appointed Officer had been issued earlier in the day.

The Chairman reminded Members that an additional meeting of the Committee had been recently arranged for 19 March 2024 primarily to discuss the latest position with regard to external and internal audit matters. Officers from TIAA, SIAP, Grant Thornton and BDO would be invited by the Assistant Chief Executive/Section 151 Officer to attend. [subsequent to the meeting an additional item was requested under standing order 27 by Councillors Jenkins and Williams regarding contract management]

Officers advised that when the Council’s new External Auditors turned their attention to the 2023/2024 audit they would potentially be required to audit both the opening and closing balances and would be able to give a full opinion on the accounts. With regard to BDO, the outgoing auditors, Officers were unable to confirm what might be contained in any ‘disclaimer opinion’ that may be issued, as much would depend on guidance from central government following confirmation of the proposed backstop date of 30 September 2024, a consultation on which had just been issued.

55 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Walsh.

56 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

57 **Summary Internal Controls Assurance (SICA) Report, Depot Assurance report and Outstanding recommendations**

The Committee noted a suite of reports from TIAA, the Council's Internal Auditors, including a full follow up Depot audit, progress on the current audit plan, details of recommendations arising from ICT related follow up audits and an audit review of Data Quality, the latter as set out in the supplementary agenda papers.

The Committee was pleased to see the full audit reports for the Depot and Data Quality and reviewed their contents with interest.

Members noted that the Depot had attained a 'substantial' evaluation, with two priority 3 recommendations which the Committee was assured were in hand. These were to incorporate review dates in various policies and procedures and to provide refresher training on fire safety and COHH and COSH assessments.

A query was raised with regard to the possible replacement of fuel sources at the Depot, a report on which had been delayed, but which was now being considered by the Climate Change Working Party, before a forthcoming report to the Environment and Sustainability Committee in March. Officers were asked to provide Members of the Committee with the Fuel Tank Assessment Report and a copy of the Depot's individual Risk Register. [subsequently it was decided by the Council's Corporate Leadership Team not to circulate the Fuel Tank Inspection Report as the issues therein would be covered by the upcoming HVO report to Environment and Sustainability Committee.]

In respect of Data Quality, TIAA had found 'reasonable assurance', stating that the system of internal controls were adequate and operating effectively. However, two improvements had been identified as priority 2 recommendations. These were that specific business centre policies and procedures needed to demonstrate compliance with the Data Quality Standard, with appropriate documentation and training for all staff in Data Protection should incorporate relevant aspects of Data Quality. Both these had been accepted and plans were underway to implement them being co-ordinated by the Council's Data Protection and Information Governance Officers.

Whilst Members acknowledged that the Council's Data Protection Policy was up to date in terms of content and availability, Officers were asked to check it for conformity with the Council's corporate format/style guide.

In terms of progress with the audit plan for 2023/24; Members noted that there were 7 audits in progress or about to commence. These were for Procurement/Contracts, Commercial Property, Community Grants, Key Revenues Controls, Main Accounting and Risk Management. Safeguarding had been excluded. Members requested that an audit on Data Protection be added to the audit plan and the results brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

TIAA confirmed that it was their intention to present the Annual Assurance Report to the meeting of the Committee in either March or May 2024 and apologised for its delay.

Officers from TIAA and RBC were thanked for their efforts and at there being having no outstanding recommendations from completed audits.

58 **Risk Report for Quarter 3 2023/24**

The Committee's approval was sought for a risk management dashboard, which set out the Council's identified risk profile data to assist with risk reporting.

Members were advised this was the third report in a series related to the Council's Risk

Management Framework, following the Council's adoption of Risk Appetite Statements for 2024/25, to which the Committee had made a significant contribution in determining risk appetite rationale and outcomes.

Officers reported that the Council's Project Management Team had built a risk management dashboard as part of the corporate reporting system to communicate the risk portfolio to the Committee every six months. The aim was to keep Members informed of the Council's highest priority risks and mitigation in place as set out in the corporate risk register. The risk register had brought together in one database all the Council's risks across the organisation. This would give Risk Owners full access to risk related information and documents. In addition it allowed the Information Governance Officer Group the ability to, amongst other things, easily analyse information and review action plans. The register also incorporated the National Risk Register published by central government in August 2023.

The Committee was advised that the Council had identified 277 risks which had all been fed into the database to be categorised against the thirteen risk categories, previously approved. A risk matrix scored each risk in terms of likelihood and impact to give an overall score which would prioritise each in terms of mitigation that was needed to give a post mitigation score. Those above a post mitigation score of 15 of which there were currently 27 risks were classed as significant risks which could then be closely monitored and managed through the action plans.

The Committee agreed that the dashboard was user friendly and transparent; and that it would become an invaluable tool to manage risk across the organisation and sat nicely alongside the other governance functions of the Committee. The Committee looked forward to receiving reports every six months, agreeing this was a sensible timeframe in which to operate.

Although it was intended as a summary and high level view of the Council's risk management programme, Officers were asked to review the 'dashboard' headings to better capture the descriptions and context of identified risks.

Officers were congratulated for their work on this important area, and which assisted the Council to meet the requirements of the non-statutory Best Value Notice.

Resolved that –

- i) the risk profile of the Council as at 8 December 2023 including the most significant risk categories be noted; and**
- ii) the data fields, format and layout of the proposed risk dashboard, be approved, subject to the minor additions requested as set out above.**

59 Complaints and Compliments Quarter 3 2023/24

The Committee noted the review of Complaints and Compliments for Quarter 3 of 2023/24.

Members recalled the new definitions of complaints and service requests. Officers advised that although the Council's internal policy definitions had not yet been officially changed, pending confirmation of the new joint handling code, Officers were working towards these informally. As a result, Officers reported slightly fewer complaints for Quarter 3 as a significant number of enquiries were now being processed as service requests.

A brief overview of Housing and Environmental Services was provided, these being the two services with which most people had contact, and therefore continued to have more complaints although both were on a downward trend.

Because Environmental Services had such a wide remit, Members appreciated a breakdown of issues between the different departments. It was noted that with service improvements being made now that Grounds Maintenance was back in-house, the number of complaints had reduced compared with the previous year.

Members were informed that the themes in Housing tallied with those reported to the recent meeting of the Housing Committee on the tenant satisfaction survey. In Quarter 3, a breakdown of the complaints was that 6 related to repairs and maintenance, 3 of these involving the contractor, 5 had neighbourhood disputes involved, 3 were about staff, one service charges and the remaining was a system error which has been corrected.

Members noted that in quarter 3 it was fairly even between the number of complaints upheld or not. Officers reported that lessons learned included in some areas a need to work on communication with residents and make sure systems were in place to help people understand and navigate the Council's policies and procedures.

The Committee also noted a summary of compliments with reference to the exempt appendix.

Officers confirmed that since the last meeting of the Committee, the team looking at processes in Digital Services had made some progress and weekly update meetings with colleagues from other business centres were being held to move the project forward towards the creation of a first version of the CRM build solution. Officers had also started looking at guidance and identifying key stakeholders in consultation with the Corporate and Senior Leadership teams as well as colleagues in Information Governance to make sure the new systems and processes were GDPR compliant. This would include a Privacy Impact Assessment Screening with the assistance of the Council's Data Protection Officer.

Officers continued to monitor equalities information where disclosed. The Committee was pleased there was no evidence to date to suggest anyone had been discriminated against because of holding any of the protected characteristics.

The Committee discussed the process of dealing with persistent and often repetitive complainants, including their correspondence to Councillors. It was agreed that a balance had to be struck between allowing individuals to make legitimate complaints whilst being dissuaded from raising the same issue repeatedly. Care had to be taken not to cut off communication with someone if they had a valid concern to raise on a different subject. Officers were asked to review the Council's unreasonable complainant behaviour protocol and consider the appropriate level of sanction for complainants meeting the criteria of 'vexatious', including the use of Community Protection Notices if appropriate and proportionate on a case by case basis.

Officers were thanked for their report which was duly noted.

60 **Best Value Notice**

The Committee noted the receipt of a non-statutory Best Value Notice issued by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities received by the Council in December 2023.

As required, Officers had published the notice on the Council's website, and it was being reported to Corporate Management, this Committee and full Council.

Members noted the recommendations set out in the notice and that the Council was drawing up a draft action plan to comply with it. .

Members commented on the fact that the Council had, before the notice was issued, already developed a Risk Appetite Statement, and Risk Management Framework with the substantial input of the Committee, in its recommendations to full Council.

Officers were asked to prepare a paper for the consideration of the Constitution Member Working Party on the frequency of meetings (with a view to increasing) and remit of the Standards and Audit Committee in terms of increasing the level of scrutiny on commercial assets, financial details of major decisions and make appropriate recommendations to Corporate Management Committee when it reviews the Constitution.

Officers were also asked to consider the appropriate arena and level of scrutiny with regard to RBCI/RBCS which was a separate legal entity and matters relating to reporting on investment performance and expected returns.

Officers advised that in taking ownership of responding to the Notice there should be clarity in the role of different committees and their interaction with each other. The Committee was however asked to bear in mind the remit of the Committee and that certain matters including the Council's special purpose vehicles fell more within the realm of Corporate Management Committee.

Some Members observed that the Council had on the strength of its investments, which had yielded £11.2m of net income from its investment property portfolio, provided residents with valued services which it might not otherwise have been able to without that commercial income.

It was agreed that the Council should continue reviewing income and expenditure with a view to formulating a clear plan to make savings; the delivery of savings would be reported to Members as set out in the process previously agreed by full Council,. Officers confirmed that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, which would be submitted to the Council in February 2024, included a range of measures to address on-going financial sustainability.

61 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

Resolved that –

the press and public be excluded from the remainder of 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 paragraph 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

62 **Exempt Appendix 'A' to item 7 Complaints and Compliments Quarter 3 2023/24**

The contents of the exempt appendix were noted and individuals thanked for their contribution.

(The meeting ended at 9.18 pm.)

Chair