

Runnymede Borough Council

Standards and Audit Committee

Tuesday, 24 September 2024 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors S Jenkins (Chair), M Singh (Vice-Chair), J Furey, T Gates (In place of P Gahir), T Gracey, G Moudgil, M Nuti, M Smith (In place of R King) and S Whyte.

Members of the Committee absent: Councillor M D Cressey.

25 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

Councillor T Gates substituted for Councillor P Gahir and Councillor M Smith substituted for Councillor R King.

26 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 July 2024 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

27 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor M D Cressey.

28 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

29 Local Audit Reset and Recovery Guidance and Progress update

The Committee was provided with an update on External Audit matters including the reset and recovery arrangements for local audit within the local government sector and the position of Runnymede regarding outstanding audit work.

Members were informed that in order to tackle the backlog of external audit opinions a new initial backstop date of 13 December 2024 had been announced by the Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for financial years up to and including 2022/23. For subsequent years the following dates were noted:

- 31 March 2024: 28 February 2025
- 31 March 2025: 27 February 2026
- 31 March 2026: 31 January 2027
- 31 March 2027: 30 November 2027
- 31 March 2028: 30 November 2028

Subject to parliamentary approval, the date by which local bodies should publish their draft (unaudited) accounts would be reverting back to 30 June each year from 2024/25 through to 2027/28.

The Committee was advised that the National Audit Office had very recently published a comprehensive set of Local Audit Reset and Recovery Implementation Guidance (LARRIGs). Officers were familiarising themselves with it and had set out in the agenda report a summary of each of the 5 sets of guidance and the key points were also noted.

These concerned requirements of auditors and the various scenarios of issuing an audit opinion. Members' attention was drawn to LARRIG 3, in particular the distinction between a 'disclaimer' of opinion, a 'qualified' opinion and an 'adverse' opinion.

Officers reported that BDO had been in touch on the day of the meeting and had stated that the earliest they might be in position to provide their outstanding audit opinions was now late November 2024. The Committee requested that Officers from BDO and Grant Thornton attend the next meeting with a progress report on meeting the back stop dates and any outstanding matters which might prevent BDO from issuing their 2019/20 audit opinion and Value for Money Statement.

The Committee was very disappointed that despite BDO's stated intention to issue disclaimed opinions for 2020/21 – 2022/23 and not commence any audit work for these years, audit fees for these years would still be payable and were anticipated to be higher than wished for. Therefore, Officers were asked to continue discussions with BDO and with the PSAA regarding fees for all outstanding years including the outcome of their determination of the 2018 fee variation request.

Officers confirmed that owing to Asset Management software errors they had been unable to meet the deadline to produce the statement of accounts for Grant Thornton, who were then unable to conduct audit fieldwork in line with the originally planned timescale. The latest back stop date for the 2023/24 audit was 28 February 2025 and the associated risk implications of not meeting that date were noted. Officers were unable to guarantee this would not happen but were working hard to avoid it. It was also acknowledged that the wider picture of difficulties in recruiting auditors across the sector was an important contributory factor. The Committee was pleased that Grant Thornton's Officers were engaging well with the Council and with the handover from BDO, noting the key deliverables timetable. Officers agreed to provide an update with finalising the Statement of Accounts for 2023/24.

The report was duly noted.

30 **Internal Audit Progress Report August 2024**

The Committee reviewed progress with SIAP's programme of audits for 2024/25. This comprised the status of 'live' internal audit reports, an update on progress against the annual audit plan, a summary of internal audit performance, planning and resourcing issues, and a summary of any significant issues that had an impact on the Chief Internal Auditor's annual opinion. These demonstrated compliance with Public Sector Internal Audit Standards.

It was confirmed that SIAP had completed fieldwork for all the planned audits in Quarter 2. In terms of Quarter 1, the Climate Change audit had reached the draft report stage to be reviewed by the relevant Corporate Heads. Two further audits on Disabled Facility Grants and Information Governance were very close to being complete.

Officers agreed to confirm which business centres had not yet provided details of their Data Quality 'cribsheet' to complete that outstanding recommendation and Officers would also inform the Committee what the outstanding recommendations were from the 'legacy' audits by TIAA in respect of Payroll. In respect of Meals at Home a process for embedding existing manual DBS renewal checks into 'My View' was awaited from HR for that overdue action to be closed and for three people to complete some mandatory training for the other open action, which it was anticipated would happen very soon as reported by the relevant Corporate Head.

Officers were thanked for their report which was duly noted.

31 **Local Government Ombudsman Annual report**

The Committee noted the annual Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's (the Ombudsman) letter which was appended to the report and the summary of statistics for the borough and neighbouring authorities.

The Ombudsman had provided commentary on performance generally across public authorities with an emphasis on service improvement and urged adoption of their complaint handling code (which the Council had already done) and then set out the Council's performance for the year ending 31 March 2024 which the Committee was content with and compared well with others.

Members were advised that the report fulfilled the Council's legal requirement to report cases that had been upheld by the Ombudsman in an anonymised way. Officers advised that one case was upheld, which was a housing case and provided a summary of that case, explaining why through no fault of Officers it was deemed to have been 'settled' late by the Ombudsman. Officers confirmed that compensation had been paid in that case.

The Committee reviewed some case examples and service improvements that had been issued elsewhere and Members were pleased that Runnymede had not received any service improvement notices during the year.

Officers highlighted that the new complaint handling code adopted earlier in the year had resulted in improved processes, which in turn could mean an increase in complaints to the Ombudsman with more signposting taking place. However, the Ombudsman had given the Council re-assurance that they would engage with Officers at an early stage to avoid automatically proceeding to an investigation.

Officers reported that they had updated the guidance to staff who dealt with complaints lodged with the Ombudsman which was available on the staff home pages.

Officers were thanked for their report which was duly noted.

32 **Review of the unreasonable complainant behaviour protocol**

The Committee's approval was sought for an updated policy for managing unreasonable actions by people making complaints about the Council.

Officers explained that this review completed the overall updating of complaint handling and was also an opportunity to advise Members on progress with the actions arising from the 'debate not hate' motion at the meeting of the full Council in April 2024. Councillors were encouraged to report any incidents to the Monitoring Officer and they could be signposted to sources of assistance if necessary. As requested by the Chair of the Committee Members had been circulated separately the risk assessment for evening meetings which was noted.

Members were informed that for those actions specifically directed to the Standards and Audit Committee Officers had, in consultation with the Council's Corporate Leadership Team, conducted an extensive review of the 'unreasonable complainant behaviour protocol,' retitled it and re-drafted the policy in line with guidance from the Ombudsman, a version of the policy showing tracked changes was presented for transparency.

The only substantive departure from the Ombudsman's policy was to include the list of actions that a complainant might engage in that could be considered, without just cause to be unreasonable. This was in response to feedback during the re-drafting stage that Officers found this useful to quote from when writing to someone who was unnecessarily

persistent. Some Members objected to one of the examples on the list regarding questioning historic decisions that could not be changed (for example Planning Permission), which they felt was too vague and lacked specific context, so it was removed, noting that the list of examples was not exhaustive.

One Member felt that the Council should not need to have the policy, noting that it was rarely invoked. However, it was generally accepted that it was necessary and recommended to have the policy. Officers stressed that new communications from individuals who might have been subject to the policy were dealt with on a case by case basis. It was noted that the policy could also be applied in cases where people's actions were unreasonable but they fell outside the main complaints policy.

The Committee was advised that a full equality impact assessment had been conducted in consultation with the Council's Equalities Group and Members approved the policy as amended at the meeting accordingly.

Resolved that –

the revised policy, as amended at the meeting, for dealing with people who act unreasonably in respect of their complaints, be approved

33 **Q2 2024/25 Corporate Risk Profile and report**

The Committee was invited to review the latest version of the Council's risk profile for Quarter 2 of 2024/25 using high level data extracted from the risk management system following review by risk owners across the organisation in August.

Officers advised that there were currently 268 risks identified taken from service, project and contract risk assessments, categorised against the 13 risk areas. Risk movement was noted including 19 new risks and 11 that had been archived. There were 18 'significant' risks, scoring above 15 (7%). Full details were appended to the report.

In respect of the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) this listed 34 risks which were a subset of all risks scoring above the threshold which had a corporate impact, 20 of these were classed as 'significant', scoring above 15.

Additional information was provided in respect of emergency planning and climate change. There were 22 risks identified as emergency planning risks from across the organisation that included those generic risks facing the organisation as a whole as well as service-specific emergency planning risks. Officers reported that two of these were scored as 'significant'. The Committee noted that some risks were 'tagged' so that whilst appearing in the relevant business centre they were also flagged as risks in terms of emergency planning. For example flooding at the Council's Depot. In respect of climate change, 28 risks were identified, of which three were scored as 'significant' including one which was also identified as an emergency planning risk. Similarly, these were also reported as part of the CRR.

Members recalled from the previous risk profile report that corporately Officers reviewed the post-mitigation score for the risk profile, i.e. the probability and impact that a risk might happen after steps had been taken to mitigate as this was the residual risk that the organisation was exposed to and carried. The risk matrix was also noted.

Officers confirmed that risk trend was calculated by the movement in post-mitigation risk score since the last snapshot extract was taken in March 2024. It was noted that there were 35 risks with an upwards change in risk score post-mitigation. However, 30 of these were due to the change required by internal audit which was that if the action plan had not been delivered the score pre- and post- mitigation must be the same. Officers would

continue to monitor risk trend over the next period to ensure that action plans were progressed and risk mitigation put in place. Members noted that five were reporting a true increase in post-mitigation score, as either the risk probability or impact had increased. Two of these were reporting post-mitigation scores above the threshold as detailed in the report.

Officers reported that since their last report, improvements to the data held in the system had been made by adding data tags to provide a mechanism to pull out risks associated with emergency planning and climate change from across the system. It was agreed that risks associated with compliance, (Health and Safety), legislation or regulatory compliance, should be tagged in order to inform a section in the next scheduled report to the Committee in May 2025.

As part of continuous improvement of the risk management system Officers planned to attend department management meetings to gather feedback and ideas for future enhancements from risk owners. This would also support closing an action arising from the self-assessment against Best Value.

Officers were asked to confirm whether a Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (CRVA) had been completed.

Officers were also asked to circulate to the Committee the further update from the Corporate Head of Community Services regarding Meals at Home, noting the document was commercially sensitive.

The contents of the Exempt Appendix to the report were noted and any future impact on service delivery would be brought to Members' attention.

Officers were thanked for their comprehensive report providing Members with assurance that risk management was a dynamic process, being actively managed.

34 **Complaints and Compliments Quarter 1 2024/25**

The Committee noted for information the data regarding complaints and compliments from the first quarter of 2024/25 covering the period April to June 2024.

Members were advised that Jadu connect had gone live in the last week of June and the report reflected some of the detail that would be presented in future reports regarding the number and nature of complaints at stages 1 and 2.

Officers summarised the data with a breakdown by business centre and ward for both complaints and compliments. There had been 46 entries for complaints, of which 23 had been upheld or partly so and 15 compliments recorded corporately. In addition, 9 complaints were changed to 'service requests' which made their resolution more prompt.

Officers reported that jadu was working well and had been updated following the Ombudsman's training courses to record where reasonable adjustments had been made to help resolve someone's complaint. This could for example be sending a response in a different format or meeting with the complainant if that made it easier to accommodate a person with a disability. Officers would do that as a matter of course but the system now recorded the fact.

The exempt appendix was noted which gave details of compliments to individuals and teams to whom certificates had been sent on behalf of the Committee.

Officers were asked to provide some comparative data with the previous year in the next scheduled report to the Committee in November 2024.

The report was duly noted.

35 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

Resolved that –

the press and public be excluded from the meeting during discussion of the exempt Appendix to item 33 under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the reports in question would be likely to involve disclosure of exempt information of the description specified in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

(The meeting ended at 9.27 pm.)

Chair