

Runnymede Borough CouncilStandards and Audit CommitteeMonday, 4 December 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Hulley (Chairman), MD Cressey (Vice-Chairman), S Dennett, S Jenkins, J Mavi, M Singh, S Walsh and S Whyte.

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

In attendance: Councillor T Gates.

48 **Apologies for Absence**

To record apologies for absence from Councillors S Williams and J Wilson.

49 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor M Singh withdrew from the room during discussion of the item concerning the future provision of Internal Audit.

50 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

By Resolution of the Committee, the Press and Public were excluded from the meeting during discussion of both items on the agenda 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 paragraphs 1 and 3 of Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

51 **Provision of Internal Audit**

The Committee's approval was sought for a proposal as to how the Council's Internal Audit function should be provided.

The matter was discussed at the last meeting of the Committee in November, immediately prior to which some Members had attended a presentation with the preferred provider. However, the decision was deferred to allow more time for the Committee to formulate questions on the proposals, hence the special meeting being convened.

Officers advised that the current internal auditor's contract would shortly be expiring. The contract had been renewed a number of times and the Council's Procurement rules required a review.

The Committee had been very pleased with the current contractors; TIAA, with whom the Council had enjoyed a positive working relationship for a number of years. Good wishes were extended to the outgoing Audit Director.

The Committee reviewed a number of options; ranging from in-house provision to continuing with an outsourced arrangement. However, the recommended option was to enter into a partnership with another organisation with whom the majority of Surrey Local Authorities already worked.

The Committee was given the opportunity to ask questions of the recommended provider, mainly around some detailed operational matters, in order to satisfy themselves that the recommended option was the best for the Council.

The organisation named in the report was able to answer all the questions put to them about staffing levels, resilience and communications with clients. It was confirmed that regular meetings with the clients took place and they would be in a position to provide continuity and a dedicated strategic lead and Audit Manager.

The organisation confirmed they were fully compliant with industry standards with regard to conducting risk based audits and with the production and maintenance of an annual audit programme which optimised the finite number of days available to devote to each service area being audited.

The organisation was transparent about any shortcomings as identified by a recent External Quality Assessment, appended to the report, which they confirmed had been addressed. They conducted annual stakeholder satisfaction surveys from which valuable lessons were learned complemented by positive networking experience and sharing best practice across the local government board.

The Committee agreed that the proposal represented good value for money, resilience, and an opportunity to retain a satisfactory level of control with the Council's Section 151 Officer or suitable representative having a place on their stakeholder board. Members were also content with the references that had been provided as a supplementary agenda.

The Committee thanked Officers for their detailed report and the Organisation for attending the meeting at such short notice.

Recommend to Corporate Management Committee that –

- i) **with effect from 1 April 2024, the Council discharges its Internal Audit function under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972 to the County Council named in the report so that the Partnership named in the report can provide the Internal Audit Service for Runnymede Borough Council;**
- ii) **the Council's Section 151 and Monitoring Officers be authorised to enter into the Joint Working Agreement by way of a deed of accession with the aforementioned Partnership and undertake all necessary legal arrangements to do so; and**
- iii) **the Council's Section 151 Officer or nominated officer represents the Council's interests by becoming a voting member of the Partnership's Key Stakeholder Board.**

52 **Alleged Breach of the Runnymede Member Code of Conduct**

The Committee was asked to approve the Monitoring Officer's recommended way forward in respect of a complaint lodged against an elected Member of the Council.

Members were advised that it had been alleged that an elected Member of the Council had breached the Council's Code of Conduct through their alleged behaviour towards another person which had not yet been substantiated.

The report outlined the allegation and the circumstances of when and where it happened. Members were advised of the process to be followed, as set out in detail in the report, given that an informal resolution had not yet been reached.

As required, the Monitoring Officer had consulted the Independent Person appointed for the task. They had concurred with the Monitoring Officer that if an informal resolution was not possible, the matter should be referred for investigation by a third party unconnected

with the case.

It was confirmed that post investigation, the matter would return to them to hear formally should an informal resolution not be achieved. That typically was a panel of three but could be the full Committee subject to their availability.

Members noted the cost of engaging the services of an investigator and accepted that the process dictated this approach. Some other practical and procedural matters were discussed and all Members were invited to express their opinion on the proposed course of action.

The Monitoring Officer would keep the Committee informed.

Resolved that –

the appointment of a suitably qualified external investigator be authorised to conduct an investigation into an alleged breach of the Runnymede Member Code of Conduct by the Member identified in the report and prepare a report with conclusions for consideration by a Hearing Panel if appropriate

(The meeting ended at 9.00 pm.)

Chairman